

OCTOPUS ON



Octopus
on a
hill.

OCTOPUS ON

BRYAN KORN

NEWT JERSEY PUBLISHING

BROWNS MILLS, NJ



Octopus On
Bryan Korn
Newt Jersey Publishing
Copyright 2010, Bryan Korn
ISBN- Two.
First Printing

Contents

Part ones

Groundhog Day - 9

The Stargazer - 12

A Batman Musical - 15

Baby Sloth - 17

Chile Con Carne - 19

Rainbows End - 24

Halloween Costume Slumber Party Murder Mystery - 27

Part twos

Crab, Part One - 33

Dear Governer Christie, - 35

Metal Slug - 38

Transparancy Rule - 41

The Field - 43

The Train - 46

Wally and the Cave - 48

Crab, Part Two - 55

Googlie Rock - 56

Part trees

Baba Yaga - 61

Paul Dreaming - 64

Balloon - 82



Octopus on
the rebound.

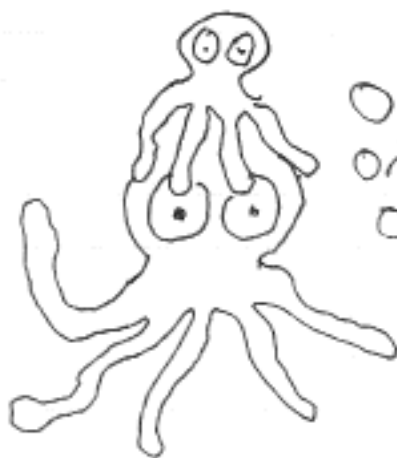
Preface

These are stories of all types. Man, that's a really big T. If you can, read them by a swimming pool. If there is no swimming pool around, stop reading this book because there are more important matters at hand. Find the Mayor's office, and talk to him about the importance of having a swimming pool in a community. Be persistent - large civic projects such as pools take years to raise funds for and then construct. But when it's finished, and you take a nice cool swim, you can grill hot dogs afterward. And that's what life is all about, really. Building a pool and eating hot dogs.

I'm not sure if these stories are closer to the pool or the hot dogs. Maybe somewhere inbetween. Somewhere between a pool and a hot dog.

Bryan.

PART ONES.



OCTOPUS
ON AN
OCTOPUS.

Groundhog Day

The Groundhog Day celebration was in full swing. The entire town had emptied into the square - which was packed with all manner of colorful coats and hats like a big bowl of breakfast cereal. I had just arrived - with all of the commotion, and the surge of out of towners visiting for the ceremony, I had kept the candy store open as long as I could. It was tough to shut my doors on the steady stream of bright eyed children coming through the front door, the bell hanging from the door frame constantly jingling. I tossed some chocolate bars to the few on their way in, and locked up - I, like all the citizens of Punxsutawny, won't miss the ceremony for anything.

I waved hello to Bill, the owner of the tool shop and his family, and tipped my hat to Larry, the auto mechanic. He had a new girl on his arm, a short blond with a wild Technicolor scarf. Oh that Larry. I made my way past the core of the crowd, where all of the townspeople who were prone to dancing were hopping up and down to bright little jig. The rotary club band was fighting with their old instruments and older lungs to throw the song over all the chattering people. I caught the glint of a french horn and gave Peter a wave - we played in the highschool band together.

I made my way to the front of the crowd just as the Grandmaster was beginning the opening remarks. His face shook as he proclaimed the prosperous year, and the new families of the community, and how well the high-

school basketball had done this season. Steam bellowed out of his mouth like a train engine, and he paced left and right on the stage with all the practiced movements of a minister. When he unrolled the proclamation and recited it, the crowd was completely silent, save for the rustling of a few coats. Not even Ms. Haddonfield's baby cried, and that baby could wail through a whole church service.

Finally the time came for the Grandmaster to bring the Groundhog out of his home - a thick cedar box, with a mesh window. He took a large key, and unlocked the front of the box. The air was sucked out of the crowd - not an individual blinked. I had waited the whole year for this moment - would the Groundhog see his shadow? There must be something compounding about suspense in a crowd. The weight of the silence seemed about ready knock us over.

The front of the box fell open, and the Groundhog stepped out. First his nose, twitching and searching left and right. Then his paw, feeling for the ground outside. He came completely out of the box, and looked about himself. He saw nothing.

We gasped a collective gasp. The Groundhog did not see his shadow.

We burned the Groundhog because it was a witch.

The crowd danced and sang while the fire burned out and the street lights came on.

I walked home, feeling warmer than I had all winter.

Only three hundred and sixty four more days till the next Groundhog Day. I couldn't wait.

The Stargazer

When I found him, I thought the grasshopper would find his way out of the observatory. Instead, he learned how to use the telescope. I would come in, late in the evenings after my shift at Lockheed, and he would be there. I would open the door slowly and peek in. For a second I could see him – a speck on the end of the little viewing lens. The pale moonlight trickled down the side of the telescope and the grasshoppers wings glimmered. I would throw open the door, and like a bolt of lightning he would blur into the air and be lost. I didn't know where he jumped to, where he lived. But I wanted to find out.

It was a Sunday night in September. The sporadic cold would rush in from the opening of the dome, swirl around in the room, and just as quick be gone. I had decided to spend the night at the observatory. But I had no intention of going anywhere near the telescope. I was there to watch the grasshopper. I was convinced he was studying the celestial bodies, and I intended to see how he went about doing it. So I sat still in the corner, reading a book as the sun went down. The light in the room changed from yellow to orange to pink until the white moonlight came and cooled the room and washed out all the color.

I began my vigil. Hours passed where I saw nothing but the slow movement of the stars in the opening of the dome. I wondered if he knew I was there, or if I was going mad. Frustration gave way to defeat which gave way to the rolling slope to sleep. But then, with my eyes

half open, I saw him – that thin lightning bolt flash in the air, then the speck, twitching into place on the end of the lens opening.

He sat there for along moment, hanging over the lens. He was looking in, I was convinced of that. The moon was full that night. He would have a spectacular view. I could not help but recall the urgency, wonder, smallness that I experienced in my early days of stargazing in my backyard with my red Tasco telescope. I must have looked something like this.

Then, the grasshopper crawled off the lens edge, up to the barrel of the telescope. He began to walk up, towards the opening of the dome. He looked like he was walking on a moon beam, slowly plodding up the silvery shaft of light. He was tiny, but impossible to miss against the brightness. He continued up, up until he reached the edge of the dome, and then past the opening out onto the edge of the telescope.

He stood on that edge, above the giant lens, and looked out at the full moon. Out at the stars. The grasshopper stared in the face of the infinite reaches of space, dwarfed by the massive moon and the sea of stars. That night I thought to myself – here is the most beautiful thing I have, and will ever see in my life.

And I have seen the universe.

The invaders came a week later. The observatories were among the first things they bombed.

Sometimes I have a hard time recalling the old days. It is moods and colors in bits and pieces in my mind.

But that grasshopper I remember so clearly. How he
glowed.

A Batman Musical

(Batman stands vigilant over Gotham City, at the edge of the rooftop on the tallest skyscraper. He has with him his guitar, which we will come to know as robin.)

BATMAN:

I stand vigilant over Gotham, and witness the cold fingers of crime and madness twitch in the night.

(He coughs.)

Excuse me. The Gotham air is damp. But don't worry Mom and Dad. My lungs are hardened. Was the air always this thick Dad? You could cut it with a knife. But then I would hunt you down. Ha, just kidding. I got this city on lockdown. Streets and street lamps. Alleyways and dust-ers. I've seen the inside of every private hell in this city. I've seen where it sleeps. I've seen where it breeds. I look down from this height, and see it all. Like a blanket. Like a blanket of sight. But it's not a warm blanket. It's a cold blanket. An unforgiving blanket. A blanket pieced together with blood. With pain. With barely heard cries in the night. So I guess that makes it more of a quilt. Gotham is a quilt. Gotham is sick, Mom and Dad. It moans every morning as the sun shines its harsh light into the dark crevasses. It cries out every evening as the warmth slips away. And very few hear it's cries. But I hear. I cannot silence them. It follows me to sleep. I hear it during dinner. I hear it during dessert. If I eat a snack - it's there. Gotham has few allies. And Gotham's allies have few allies. But don't worry - I'm not lonely. I have this sky and the swooping bats. I have these solid bricks - bricks that stood long before me and

bricks that will stand long after me. You built this building, Dad. It's a good building. It's got character. Sometimes there's birds up here. I named one Mincy, after the cat, Mom. I have Robin -

(He picks up his guitar and sits down.)

Trusty old Robin. It's not easy getting him up here, but it's always worth it. Seen a lot, haven't we old buddy? Remember when I used to clobber the Riddler? "Riddle me this!" I said.

(He plucks a few notes.)

"Riddle me this."

And I got you guys. I look up at those stars, and how they last forever. And I know you'll always be listening. -- Well, they don't last forever. But, still. I'm not so lonely.

(Batman goes into a song. He sings about how he's not lonely, how he doesn't need people. He fishes the song and stares out into the darkness. He makes like he is going to say something, but instead resumes his vigil.)

Baby Sloth

He spent the entire day looking at videos of baby sloths. Well, maybe not the entire day because there are only so many baby sloth videos on YouTube, and other websites that specialize in cute baby animal content. But it was at least three hours. By the end of the afternoon his back had a crook and his eyes were bleary and his hand felt like it was greasy from the plastic of the mouse for some reason.

He stretched, and opened the shades to let in the last bit of daylight. It was orange, and made him realize how dusty the room was. Little particles floated in the strips of light, and into his nose. He felt like sneezing but didn't.

He felt like eating, but didn't.

He felt like sleeping, but didn't.

He felt like maybe throwing on a movie but his eyes hurt.

He felt like playing some music, but his hands felt greasy.

So he laid down on the floor and looked up. The ceiling fan spun consistently. He found that if he followed it with his eyes, in a quick tight circle, it seemed like it would spin slower. His eyes grew wide. His arms began to move slowly, to grope at the air between him and the fan. His feet came up off the carpet, as his legs kicked upward like he was riding a really rusty bike. He rocked gently, back and forth on the carpet, and everything fell into place. He was a baby sloth, and everything in the world moving

around him was not a baby sloth. His eyes bulged, and his limbs moved slowly through space.

His wife came home later that night. She sat on the couch, watching him. She wondered why he's got everything figured out, and she still has no idea what to do with her life. She watched the dust bits drift in the lamp light, and cried into her jacket.

Chile Con Carne

It was that darn Tex-Mex place the that did it. Suzie always says to me ‘Bob why you gonna order that Chile con Carne you know it gives you the bubble-gut.’ and it does. But confound it if it don’t taste good enough for it to be worth it. But that’s the last time. Steering clear of that place for sure. Because, I’ve read stuff about people eating certain things that don’t agree with them, and that making them see things. And not just psychedelic sort of things like mushrooms, but different thats that have gone bad, or have a bunch of acid in them. I remember Owen Carl telling me about seeing some moving table after eating the pineapple boat at Sugarfoot’s. But Owens a drinker, so that could be it too. I’ve never, but some people get real drunk and they see things. Eyes become too screwball to tell it straight and you start to see like dancing tables or flashing lights or some such nonsense.

But that Chile con Carne must not have sat with me at all. I mean, I felt fine right after, maybe a little bit of rumbling but thats nothing new. But it was crowded in there – a Saturday after a pay day and real loud and I was pretty sure I had just seen Dave the head of zoning come in with his family. I would rather let him and his wife and boys alone, then give him the opportunity to come over and pester me. I asked for the check, and as always Linda had to use the restroom before we go. Why she won’t go while we are waiting for the check is beyond me. That’s

women for you. And she will take herself half an hour. So I said, I'd rather not sit in there alone, the place was kind of getting stuffy. When you're mayor you have to try and avoid these situations because folks'll rope you into all sorts of stuff. Get you liquored up than make you promise a park or drive-in theater or something. So I stepped out, to enjoy some fresh air. And the night was crystal – the moon was full the night before, but there was nothing but the stars. Tiny bit of clouds to the east. It was real serene. Cars were pulling in and people were jumping out so I walked out a bit more toward the road, and sat down at the edge of the parking lot. I remember distinctly there was a coyote across the road. He looked at me like we were doing the same thing. He cocked his head, looked up a bit, then disappeared back into the desert behind the road. And that's when I saw the thing.

It was silent, I couldn't hear anything but a little bit of wind at my ears and the hum of voices in the restaurant. It came up from behind me, and I didn't notice it until it had gotten past me some, made it's way somewhere out over the desert. And there it hung for a good ten seconds – three bright blue balls of light like the points of a triangle. They rotated slowly, like a lazy sort of windmill. Now like I said thats a powerful Chile they serve at that place, and I'm a man prone to indigestion. Looking in at all that empty space from the edge of the desert, that too is something that will have you seeing things from time to time. But when I saw those spinning lights, they looked so real – it's hard for something that bright to seem anything

otherwise. But the lights started moving again, this time in my direction. Strangest thing, the closer they got, the more small, sharp they got, until instead of three bright blue fuzzy lights they were a blinding sort of pinprick like a star up close and they were right above me. That must have been the point where the indigestion really hit me because everything went really bright, and I must have blacked out. Like when you stand up too fast sometimes, thats what must have happened. I'm going to have to Charlie down at the health department – I want to know where this place gets it's meat. Because I had the craziest dreams after that, fever dreams from the food sickness. I'm sure it was because I saw that wacky light hallucination, but I dreamed I was on a space ship with little green men. Yes, it's hilarious, but that's what I dreamed. They were pale green, like a Shamrock Shake, and had these really gangly, awkward limbs that seemed to sway in all the wrong ways. They laid me down on a table, that was real comfortable and padded with this gel like toothpaste. The room was real clean, lots of blacks and grays. Really flat though, nothing shiny. It was relaxing in a weird way. They ran some machine over me, like a cat scan. Where this dream came from, I have no idea. I did watch that Mars Attacks movie last month. But they dressed me in some nice clothes, sat me down in a lounge sort of room, and we all just sort of hung out. Drank some strange tea. They spoke funny, in a real stilted, disaffected sort of way. They were friendly enough though.

This is where the dream got strange. After some

real nice conversation – they were particularly interested in the education system in our county – they ushered me through a really long hallway, more like a tube actually. We walked out into a big city under a bubble. I could look up at the stars, and a few planets that were unfamiliar. They set me up in an apartment complex next to a park. It had a good view of all the different trees and waterfalls, and even some lobster-like animals that scurried around like squirrels. They got me a job at a swimming pool down the street. Apparently I'm a darn good swimmer, compared to these guys. They are kind of goofy, physically I mean. Made some good money, bought myself some cool gadgets. Couldn't get a permit for a ray-gun though. At the pool I met a really nice green girl. She was pretty in a way that I couldn't quite put my finger on. We dated for about three months, and were getting along real well. She moved in with me, and a few months later we got married. She was a great girl – simple, but the kind of girl you could talk the night away with. We had three children, raised two of them good, but one was a delinquent. He ended up in the army so it's alright though. We grew old together by that park, and I loved her as much as anyone in this universe has ever been loved. One day, after a period of weak health, she passed away. All of the kids were there, and she went really peacefully. We sat in the living room, through most of the night – not sleeping, just being together. I finally drifted to sleep.

And that was the end of the dream. I woke up on the curb in that parking lot with my wife walking towards

me, swinging her purse that funny way she does when shes a little irritated. By then my stomach was feeling alright, but I was still sort of reeling. I drove home and didn't say much. I though about telling my wife about the Chile induced visions, but decided against it. She would make a big deal out of it, which makes sense – you can't have the mayor going around saying he got high on tainted chile and saw a UFO. But I still think a lot about it. Especially at night, in bed. Laying there just doesn't feel the same any more. I've eaten that chile every Friday since then, just to see if there is still something wrong with it. It's a good meal, and I like sitting out in the parking lot while my wife is in the bathroom. I never saw that Coyote again, but it's still nice just looking out.

Rainbows End

The hole in the backyard of the old house would fill with water every time it rained. A big brown puddle, that's what it looked like. Blake Paisley would cut through that backyard on his way home, and was prone to jumping into puddles - a compulsion that had gotten him into a bit of trouble before. One day, hurrying home in the pouring rain, Blake was for a split second lost in the euphoria of finding a new puddle in the midst of an otherwise crummy day. His heart must have skipped as he leapt into the air and came down with both sneakers together into the water. He was never seen again.

Nobody knew how far down it went - you could drop a rock down it and not hear a sound. It just gobbled it up. As a matter of fact, in so far as anyone remembers, the hole has claimed a frisbee, three baseballs, two footballs (one Nerf), one RC car, and of course Blake Paisley. But it wasn't a bottomless pit - if that were the case then the proper authorities could be called in to categorize it and deal with it accordingly. Easy. But no - a half a day of steady spring showers and it would fill right up. It had to have a bottom. But then, where was it? And where were all the things going?

Then one April day, April 24th specifically, it began pouring a rain like nobody in town had ever seen before. It was like a solid wall of water descended over the houses, swallowing up all the air. Stores were closed, people stayed

home. The streets filled with water. Kids tried to race tin-foil boats from their front porches as parents nervously watched the water rise. It rained all through the night and into the next day.

And it was that morning that things started to rise out of the hole. They bubbled up one after the other - baseballs, footballs, something resembling a raccoon, an old fashioned lawn mower. Then came the skeletons. They spilled out over the lip of the hole, caked in mud like it was flesh. A pile of tangled bones began to form around the hole. It grew taller and taller, and fell over. The water washed the mud away, and the bones began to stick out bleached white in the pouring rain.

The next morning, the sun came out. A crowd formed in the street. Everyone in the neighborhood came out to see the big rainbow that cut a wide swath across the sky. In fact, somebody pointed out, the rainbow seemed to end in their neighborhood. Everybody got really excited - nobody sees a rainbow and doesn't wonder who's neighborhood it ends in.

So they ran up the street, and over a block, and up another street. Finally, they saw that the big beam of light lead to right behind the old house. Around back, they saw the most surprising thing - the rainbow came down and hit right next to the pile of bones. Right into the hole. The bones had been bleached white by the water and the morning sunshine. They reflected all the colors of the rainbow so beautifully. Reds and purples and greens danced on the peoples faces as they followed the rainbow

down into the darkness with their eyes. They were so close to seeing where it lead - at the bottom of that hole was the deepest secret left on the earth; what is at the end of the rainbow.

So they did the only sensible thing - they jumped down into the hole, after the rainbow, one by one.

The town remained empty for a few weeks, before new families moved into the houses. It was just too nice of a neighborhood to be so empty, the new neighbors thought. They wondered why anyone would leave such a place.

They noticed that the hole in the backyard of the old house would fill with water every time it rained. They thought it was the most curious thing.

Halloween Costume Slumber Party Murder Mystery

The first guest arrived at the Halloween Costume Slumber Party at seven. He found Mr. Host's mansion much as you would, three left turns, a wavy road, a zig zaggy road, one road that doesn't seem to want to make up it's mind, and a final sharp turn left, or, directly under the full moon on the last day of October. He also found it spooky as all get out. Slanting ceiling, paint peeling, shingles spilling into the lawn overgrown, the porch stairs moan and the iron gate's got more rust than a really rusty thing.

Mr. Heebiji, the first guest, was welcomed by Mr. Host. He took Mr. Heebiji's coat, then apologized and gave it back. There were no hard feelings. The house was glowing like a jack-o-lantern with orange lights in every corner and bats hanging from the ceiling. But it's okay because they were paper bats. The rest of the guests arrived one after another, as guests tend to arrive, and each brought something to share - Mr. Meow looked like a cat and had a bowl of milk maid caramel chews. Ms. Daisy bought a vase of petunias, and was a convincing mermaid. At least the top half was - and that was as far as anyone got. Mr. Murderer brought in a dead deer (with great effort). He came as a teddy bear. Ms. Terrious came as herself, and brought with her a general air of mystery. Mr. Sadly was done up as a zombie, and had a box of microwave pop-

corn. Butter blasted, of course.

They sat in the parlor and unwrapped the chews and chewed and chatted and Mr. Host began to explain the evening - "Tonight it is Halloween, and I hope for you all to be spooked, shiver at some point, get a creepy crawly feeling, high on candy, crash, high on conversation, crash again, and then feel awkward about the sleeping arrangements. But don't get so scared that you leave. I am extremely lonely. So, so very lonely." The guests all cheered, yaaaaaay. Except for Mr. Sadly who by that point had been murdered, and Left in the foyer, with a very large bump on his head. Ahhhhhhhh! Everybody screamed and "Calm down!" Mr. Host implored and "Meow" Mr. Meow meowed because he was quite possibly a cat. In costume yes, but also in the fact that he was a cat. Mr. Meow is a cat. But nobody knows.

Mr. Heebiji was a sad clown in real life, Ms. Daisy a kindergarten teacher, Mr. Murderer worked in retail, and Ms. Teerious was something hard to pronounce. Mr. Host decided not to let the murder be a wet blanket, so he covered the body with a sheet. They went right to passing the bowl of brains around! Ewwwww.. And then the eyeballs! Double ewwwww! And then a bowl of Chex mix! Aghhhh! Ms. Daisy passed out. Mr. Meow licked her face until she came to. Then they played truth or dare, and the first was Mr. Heebiji. He asked "Truth or dare." and Ms. Daisy said "Truth, of course." and he asked "Did you murder Mr. Sadly?" and Ms. Daisy said "No! - I win! I win!" "You do not. Ms. Daisy, you clearly do not

understand the game.” Mr. Host said. But they kept playing and everyone said truth and every one said they didn’t murder Mr. Sadly. The big question on everybody’s mind was - whodunit? And they began to watch their backs, and three episodes of the Twilight Zone. They went on to play spooky twister, which is regular twister but with costumes. There was fake blood and Mr. Meow won. He is surprisingly limber. On to the den to tell spooky stories!

Mr. Host couldn’t find his flashlight and you can’t tell a spooky story without a flashlight so they split up to find it. Ms. Daisy and Mr. Meow searched the attic together, and almost kissed, but got spooked when a rat scurried by. Mr. Meow chased the rat. Ms. Teerious found the flashlight in the kitchen, and Mr. Host found that Mr. Heebiji had been murdered. He was in the kitchen with a sizeable butter knife in his heart and a sizable heart from his butter. Everyone freaked out. So they told spooky stories. Ms. Daisy shone the light on her face from below and told a story about a crab in a wicker basket. Ms. Teerious just shone the light on her face and that was enough. Mr. Murderer started to tell his crab story, but decided against it and told one about a man murdering another man with a butter knife. It was vaguely familiar.

The police came, and Mr. Host put a hand full of candy in each of their bags. They were very happy. Everybody ate candy then! Mr. Host wheeled out a barrow of candy. A whole barrow full! And they grabbed and they crunched and they unwrapped and they munched and licked their fingers and Mr. Meow licked his paws, and

they would move their hands to their faces like a machine and there was blue candy and red candy and yellow candy and sweet sour salty bitter candy and even a spicy candy, what's up with that? Mountains of candy! Streams of candy! Fjords of candy! They would forget to unwrap some candy, but it didn't matter because they were eating and eating and eating. Butter fingers, milky ways, take five, blow pop, tootsie of the pop and roll variety, milk duds, milk bones, starburst, skittles, sweet tarts, kitty cat, pixi sticks, jolly ranchers, roast beef, bazooka Joe bubble gum, thumb tacks, gummy bears, jelly beans, whoppers, Mr. Meow.

They finished the candy and couldn't keep the world from spinning so they spun themselves on the floor and flailed their limbs like wacky octopuses and they felt like they were dying. Then they all vomited rainbow candy colors on each other and it was beautiful. And it pooled around them and they splashed in it and felt more at home then they ever had in their entire lives. They woke up three hours later and Mr. Meow was gone. Murdered, of course. Then they had a pillow fight. But it got too rough and feelings were hurt. Then Mr. Sadly came and played spooky Scrabble with everyone, which is like Scrabble only spooky. But Mr. Sadly was dead! Ahhhhhh. He must be a zombie for real.

So Mr. Sadly chased everyone through a hallway with a bunch of doors and they opened and closed and opened again, and Shaggy and Scooby found the spooky old kitchen and made a big sandwich but Scooby ate it

before shaggy could and then the ghost ate the second sandwich Shaggy made. Then Mr. Sadly caught up to Ms. Daisy and ate her. Oh no! I liked that character.

After that, Zombified Mr. Sadly solved the mystery. It turns out that everyone present had stock in Mr. Host's offshore drilling company, which was going under. Water, that is, because that's where fish are. So Mr. Host hosted the party for Mr. Meow's birthday, disguising it as a Halloween party so that he could tell the spooky story he has been working on about a crab. Mr. Heebijibi was murdered by pirates. Ms. Teerious was murdered by a giant squid. The giant squid came uninvited, but everyone enjoyed it's company. Mr. Meow was mistaken for furry cat flavored candy, and was eaten to death. Ms. Daisy was mistaken for candy flavored people and was eaten to death. Mr. Host married the giant squid and they lived together for thirty years, and put three adopted squid children through college.

But the big question was - who murdered Mr. Sadly, and turned him into a zombie? Was it Mr. Murderer? No, he was too busy murdering the family next door. If you can keep a deep dark secret - I did. I murdered Mr. Sadly. With my fists. Because it was Halloween. And Halloween Costume Slumber Party Murder Mystery sounds awesome as a title. But he's dead now. And I have to live with that for the rest of my life. I miss Mr. meow. Because he was a kitty cat.

PART TWOS.



Crab, part one

A crab lived in a sea cave and every morning, when the tide came out revealing the sandy bottom of the cave, he would hop down from his wet stone ledge and crawl out into the light. He lived each day for these hours where the sandy floor of the cave was exposed, and he would eat on the beach and splash in the water like a giddy little school girl crab. But he knew that each day he would have to take his land bridge back to his cave before the water flowed back in, stranding him on his cliff once again. But it was not so much a stranding, because the cliff was his home, and he had perched there in the hollow darkness for his entire life listening to the tiny echo of his little crab legs tapping the stone.

One day the crab met another crab on the beach and they really hit it off and became best friends in a few hours and dug holes and scuttered about eating flotsam and what not together. Our crab lost track of time and by the time he remembered that his time was limited, the water was creeping up into his cave. He tried his best to beat it, but got trapped in the surf half way through. It pushed him back and forth back and forth and he could nothing but paw at the floor every once in a while. He tumbled around under water all night, only getting tossed to the surface once in great while, to get a breath. He swirled around, didn't know up from down and a minute from and hour, and he was constantly on the brink of suffocation. It was the most terrifying night of his life. He many times wanted the water to throw him back up to his ledge,

and he would promise never to leave the cave again.

Finally morning came, and the tide went out, leaving the crap collapsed in a spindly ball on the edge of the shore. He woke up to find his friend crab there. Who had stayed through the night, watching the crab through the moonlight tumble in the surf. The friend brought the crab food, and help him to his legs. The crab nurtured the other crab back to life. So finally the time of day came where the crab had to go back to his cliff before the surf made it impossible to return. Instead, he decided to stay with his new crab friend. That night he realizing that home is not so much a cliff where sleep, as it is wherever the crab you love is. From then on he slept under the moonlight with her, curled together like a pile of little bones.

Dear Governor Christie,

Dear Governor Christie,

The destruction of beaver dams on the Rancocas River must stop. They build their houses just like us, and work hard so they should be able to live in them. My teacher Ms. Lyle says that for every beaver dam destroyed six to fifteen beavers are left homeless. I hope you will obey these letters from my class and maintain the beaver dams.

How are you? I visited the capital building last month but you were not there. Do you live there, like the president lives in the white house? That would be really neat. Suzie, a girl in my class has a house like that. She invited the class there for her birthday. We are not friends, but it was fun. When is your birthday? Maybe our class can make you a card. We make Christmas Cards for soldiers in the Middle East. I made a pop up one but it didn't pop up very good. You must get a lot of letters. That's nice. I got letters from my pen pal for a while. But the only letters I get now are from school. If you can keep a secret, I hide those ones because they have my report card inside. My grades are not bad, but my mom wants me to have all S's. That means 'Satisfactory'. My pen pal Carl lived in Alaska, which is the 50th and northernmost state. He was really weird. All the other kid's pen pals would ask them their favorite TV show and talk about cool stuff. Carl was weird though. He would send drawings of stick figures killing each other. They weren't even that good. Ms. Lyle

took them away and we stopped writing pen pal letters. Now we write letters to you. I guess that makes you our new pen pal. Just don't send any weird pictures!

Firstly, beavers are an essential part of this balanced ecosystem. Spiders are an important because they eat bugs. Beavers eat trees, and build houses with them. Without beavers, there would be too many trees and not enough beaver houses. We can't let that happen.

Secondly, the dams that beavers build change the water routs naturally. For millions of years, the Rancocas river has been diverted by beavers. Why stop now?

Lastly, the houses flooded by the beaver dams are built too close to the river anyway. It's their fault if they don't take beavers into consideration. The world is big enough for beaver and people houses. There is a beaver dam down the street from me. It's behind Johnny Testa's house and we go back there sometimes to see if the beaver is out. I saw him once doing a backstroke. We throw food at it, and one day Phil Morse has a canoe and we are going to see it up close. I might try to go inside. I can fit, I think. When you were my age, did you ever canoe? If not you should try it. It looks really cool.

In conclusion, beavers are an important New Jersey resource and must be treated with respect. They are essential for the economy, were building houses before us, and it is not their fault they cause floods. So please stop the destruction of Rancocas beaver dams. Write back whenever you can. I know you're busy. If I'm ever back at the capital, I will say hello, and maybe you can show me

around.

Sincerely,
Cody Freman

P.S. - Did you know that the beaver is the national animal of Canada? My family went up to Canada a few years ago on vacation. I didn't see one beaver. Maybe the beaver should be the national animal of New Jersey instead! Canada was nice though. We stayed in a real log cabin. But it had air conditioning and a TV, so it wasn't like an Abe Lincoln cabin. We saw a bear in the woods, so we went to a hotel. I guess my dad is scared of bears! They are big though. They should be the state animal of Canada, not California. I could never imagine a bear on a beach. It's really hard to write two pages, like my teacher said. This is the longest letter I've ever written. There's fifteen kids in my class, not counting James Corgis who's never here. Two pages per person. $2 \times 15 = 30$. You're getting 30 pages from my class. That's like a book! I hope it's a good one.

Sincerely,
Cody Freeman

Metal Slug

Ralph would bring a quarter with him every time his parents took him to the Vincentown Diner. His mom would usually get fed up with something or other by mid-week, and usher him and his father into the car for a dishes free dinner. The food there was awful – at least Ralph thought so. The grilled cheese was thin, and the pickles were far from crisp. They didn't snap – who wants a pickle that doesn't snap? Ralph looked forward to his dinners there anyway, because it meant a chance to play Metal Slug. Metal slug was only the coolest arcade game ever. Ralph would leave his order with his parents to relay to the big hairy waiter, and sink his quarter into the game. It made the most satisfying tumbling sound. He would grab the joystick and his chin would slowly drift from his top lip. If he could only see how much he looked like his dad, when he fell asleep in his chair with his head tilted back. But he couldn't, because he was busy throwing the joystick and mashing the buttons with all the desperation and fear-of-God of a real soldier. Or at least what he imagined a real soldier would think if he were playing Metal Slug.

A single quarter was all he could ever come up with, and it was good for three lives. Ralph would shoot and slash and jump his way up the the helicopters on level two - the ones that drop the bombs and have the swivel guns – but there those merciless helicopters would Rob him of all of his carefully preserved lives, and send him

to the “Continue?” countdown. He would slam the butt of his hand on the Plexiglas, and vow to send those copters back to the pinko-commie-hell they came from. Next week. Then he would return to his mother and father, and eat his sad grilled cheese and failure pickle. When he left he hung his head, avoiding shameful eye contact with the machine. There were no hard feelings though – Ralph and the machine developed something resembling an affair. They met once a week in a sleazy diner, and in these evenings Ralph was able to relax, and be entirely himself. Ralph had only two friends at school, both of whom weren’t aware of the friendship, and it is safe to say he enjoyed it very little. One day, as he was looking for a seat, he dropped his lunch on the cafeteria floor. All the children laughed, because meat loaf on linoleum is a very funny thing. Ralph, of course took it to heart. Metal Slug wouldn’t laugh him. It would accept his failure, and offer him another timed. A timed offer, but an offer none the less.

One cloudy Wednesday night, Ralph arrived at the Diner and found Metal Slug gone. There was a bright square on the carpet where it once stood. He rushed ahead of his parents, and asked the big hairy waiter where the machine had gone.

“The man who owns the ACME downtown bought it. He loves Metal Slug, and he’s rich as crap.” He grumbled

That night, as Ralph pushed the grilled cheese around with the pickle, he hatched a plan. No man was

going to take Metal Slug away from him, no matter how many ACMEs he owns. The next he boarded his school bus, but got off at the ACME. He had never before questioned why the school bus stopped at the ACME. He walked in, his chest out, his stomach in, his shoulders squared, and his lunch box swing. He interrogated a cashier, who was clearly stoned. He interrogated a shift manager, who was clearly also stoned. He worked his way up the faculty chain until he found a sober man – the store manager. The manager, after some arm twisting, told the boy the owner lived a half an hour away, in a large house on a dirt hill. The boy asked if the manager would drive him there, and the manager complied – he had nothing better to do.

Ralph was dropped off at the top of the hill. Ralph wondered why the hill was dirt. He knocked. Some footsteps later, a man answered. He looked to be rather grown up, and rather roly-poly. Ralph told the man there was something wrong with the front of his house. The man stepped out. Ralph rushed in and locked the door. He rushed through the massive house, filled with all sorts of nostalgic brick-a-brack. It seems that this man has been collecting anything and everything he could dredge out of his memory. Ralph thought this was sad, in a way he was only beginning to understand. He found Metal Slug, and after a loving, unceremonious reunion, plunked a quarter in and began playing. The man knocked for a while, then gave up and bought another house, and began to fill it again.

Transparency Rule

It was a Friday when Ridgecrest elementary school sent the letters home – a single white sheet and a few simple lines – announcing the new transparency rule. Due to a wave of recent school violence, and a growing issue with small animals making their way into classrooms, the school decided that all “carrying pouches” – backpacks, purses, gym bags, pencil cases – had to be made out of clear plastic from now on. This was a growing trend in our nation’s schools, and it caused a great surge in the clear-plastic-stuff industry.

That Monday, after the students entered the school with their newly purchased clear bags shimmying in the morning sun, very little school work was done. The children were much more interested in what their friends and classmates carried around with them every day. All day long kids peered though the garbled plastic during class, followed the items with their eyes, took long glances in hallways, bumped into things. The industrial strength flurescent lights made the contents of each bag very clear. Jimmy had a brown bag mushed under his books with something greasy seeping through. He was largely avoided. Sarah had a Barbie in her bag, that was missing half of it’s dry tangly locks. In sixth grade, Barbies were passae, so all the girls snickered. Bob had a pair of underwear, and James had a single Hulk hand. When they asked him what it was for, he said “To SMASH!” Frankie

had harmonica, Paul had half a deck of Uno cards and some change floating around for bets. Jackie had a can of Slim Fast, and Rob had a bag of Halloween/Christmas/Easter candy. Steven had a copy of Rolling Stone with a racy cover. Scott had a copy of Maxim with a racier cover. Andy had a tooth brush, a GI Joe, two jacks but no ball, a golf pencil, a pamphlet on northeastern wildlife, three nickels, an old cheese stick, three twist ties bent to look like a man, a skateboard, and a tree, one notebook, and a revolver. When the police asked him why he brought the revolver to school the day it implemented the transparency rule, he simply replied,

“I’ve been transparent my whole life.”

The Field

EXT. GRASS FIELD - DAY

A sod farm. Its a couple of acres of flat land, like any other farm. Except instead of vegetables or wheat, it's just a big wide field of grass. It's a deep, bright green, and keenly mowed. It's perfect. Beautiful.

A single scare crow sags on his pole in the middle of the field.

The field backs up to a highway. Three kids stand on the shoulder, looking out at the field.

There's GRAM, awkward tall. ANT, awkward small. And TOMMY, just about the right size. They are all around twelve.

ANT

"He's so menacing."

GRAM

"I'd say a hundred yards. That's a hundred yards."

TOMMY

"I don't know. I don't think I wanna do it any more."

GRAM

"A hundred and fifty. Seven."

ANT

"Dude, you got to do it. That was a long freaking walk."

TOMMY

"I'll do it."

Tommy looks out at the farm house at the other end of the field. The metal windmill next to it creaks.

GRAM

“We can walk back. It’s alright.”

Tommy lets that sink in for a moment. Fuck that. He takes off across the field.

He sprints, firing on all cylinders. The green grass is a blur under him. He just keeps running and running. Ant and Gram watch in wonder. Tommy’s not even half way.

He starts to lose his breath. His legs and arms swing more wildly. He stumbles, almost goes head over heels. Finally, he slows down to a jog, then a full stop.

The scarecrow is no more than ten yards away. From afar it was creepy, but up close its pretty freaking terrifying. It’s all patched rags, bulging and bloated. It’s head, a burlap sack, slumps down over its shoulders. If it has a face, we can’t see it.

A STRAW HAT is mashed onto the top of it’s head.

Tommy approaches, taking slow deliberate steps.

A gust of wind makes the scarecrow sway slightly.

Tommy stops for a moment, but continues.

Gram and Ant hold their breath.

ANT

“It’s totally going to murder him.”

He gets right to the foot of the it. He can look up finally to see it’s face - It’s a mess of stitches and buttons, smiling a wry, devious smile. They stare face to face for a long moment.

Tommy jumps up and grabs at the hat. He doesn’t get a hold. He jumps up again, no dice. One more try - he leaps up and grabs it hard, pulling it down, but

IT'S ATTACHED TO THE HEAD - and the whole thing comes falling down on ontop of him. He struggles under it, finally freeing himself. He manages to yank the hat off in the process.

He stands with the hat, breathing heavy. The button eyes stare up at him.

FARMER

"Hey!"

The FARMER is running toward Tommy. There's a rifle in his hand.

Tommy panics, and runs with the hat. He runs and runs and doesn't look back.

He meets up with Ant and Gram, and they run off together.

The farmer reaches the scarecrow. HE POINTS THE RIFLE AT IT, AND WAITS. AND WAITS.

The scarecrow stays crumpled on the grass. The farmer nudges it with the rifle.

INT. TOMMY'S SHED - DAY

The shed has been converted into a clubhouse. It has anything a twelve year old boy could drag in there.

Whatever that means.

The Train

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS - DAY

Two kids, DARREN (10) and RALPH (11) stand next to train tracks. Their toes are pointing to the tracks, just a few feet away. They are surrounded by thick woods on both sides.

They are completely silent, solemn.

We hear the distinct RUMBLE of an approaching train. They instantly stand up straight as a rail, replant their feet.

It gets louder, and LOUDER - the train can't be more than ten feet away. Suddenly -

A COMMUTER TRAIN GOES SCREAMING PAST THEM - a great wind tears at their hair and clothes. Their faces are no more than a foot from the stream of metal flying past.

And just as fast as it came, it's gone. They fall backwards, and begin yelling and laughing.

DARREN

"You flinched!"

RALPH

"Bull fucking shit! You were like three inches farther back than I was."

DARREN

"I was right up there. Don't lie."

RALPH

"I'm tired."

DARREN

“Then go take a nap, little baby.”

RALPH

“I think I will.”

Ralph gets up and leaves. Darren follows, with a strange face.

Wally and the Cave

Alright so here I'm going to tell you this story, and it's a pretty darn good one, at least I think so, and I didn't make any of it up. Swear to God. It was about a month ago, a little more maybe. And a Tuesday, or some stupid week day because me and Shaun and Wally were all snoring our asses off in Ms. Lyle's class. Snoring ain't so bad 'cause my brother says six grade is bullshit anyway. And it was math too. Then again my brother says everything is bullshit, and usually gets smacked for it. Well actually, Shaun wasn't, snoring that is, which I noticed, amidst my snoring, and thought was particular because out of anybody Shaun will doze from arithmetic all the way until lunch and sometimes through lunch. He don't never bring a lunch anyway. He was sitting on some secret, you could tell, because he was squirming like he had to pee but you know he didn't 'cause when he does he loves to raise his hand and say "Mrs. Lyle I got to pee so bad" or something and all the kids laugh. It's usually pretty funny. But sure enough come lunch time he rushes up to Wally and me, because we usually sit together and give Shaun a little bit of food like an apple or something 'cause my mom don't believe that I don't like apples. Like I would lie about something stupid like that. But yeah, so Shaun comes sits down and leans in real close, eyes all buggin' wide and says,

"You guys we gotta sneak out today, I got the crazy-

est thing to show you. You'll never believe."

I replied, "Shit Shaun, we snuck out Tuesday for the craziest thing. And if the craziest thing is a bullfrog –"

"That wasn't even there." Wally interrupted.

I continued "If the craziest thing is some nonsense like an imaginary bull frog I'm not gonna –"

"It wasn't imaginary! Fucking thing was three feet wide. Probably hopped over a goddamn tree to the next state over. But this ain't nothing like that it's ten times better."

"A thirty foot bullfrog?" Said Wally.

"Shut the hell up Wally." Shaun replied. "Now when they ring the bell, we're gonna make the slip, alright?" We agreed. This was something of a ritual for us, slipping out of class to go see some fishin' creek or haunted bridge. We usually couldn't go right after school because Shaun always had to go home for something, and Wally ain't allowed out much after dark. He tells me it's cause he's a werewolf, but I know that's bullshit. Littlest werewolf I've ever seen. Anyway, we didn't put up much a fight about it, because Ms. Lyle could care less how many kids were sleepin' and how many were missing on a count of here being on drugs all the time. At least that's what I hear. It's probably bullshit though. But we never got in trouble 'bout it. The leaving that is. So the lunch bell rang, and we slipped into the hall all casual like; we got it down to a science. Moved through a the crowd of snot nosed fourth graders shufflin' back to shapes and colors class, or what ever they learn – times tables or something, and to the

door.

“Hey guys where ya goin’?” Shit, it was bleedin’ nose Bobby, coming from the nurse with a bloody tissue pluggin’ his nose like a, I don’t know, bloody nose plug. This kid would bleed to death if this school ever ran out of tissues. Swear to God. He always seemed like he wanted to sneak out with us, and one time we took him to see this big-ass tiger skull or some shit but we had to turn back half way, he was lookin’ like he got shot in the face. Kid was annoying anyway. Never took a joke.

“We’re goin’ to find the kid that punched you in the nose.” I said

“Nobody punched me in the nose...” He said

“Then we’re goin’ to find a kid to punch you in the nose. Now go back to class and wait.” Shaun said. Like I said, never took a joke. So anyway, we slipped out of the door and started, and Shaun started leading us back into the woods, on this path we would take sometimes to a nice little creek. Wally was looking a little nervous, cause he can’t really swim, and last time we were at the creek he had a bit of a scare. But I don’t know, Wally always looked a little nervous since he got here last year. I guess its on a count of the kids kinda picking on him, cause his dads like some old movie star and was a big deal. He was from here, like a small town hero big-shot, and now he’s retired here. I guess he’s got some money too. I mean, I’ve been to his house once or twice and it’s big and he’s got some really nice toys. Dad’s cool, but I never seen any of his movies. Don’t like old movies much.

But yeah, I don't know if you remember but it was pretty goddamn hot at that time and that day it was a scorcher. So Shaun wanted to stop real quick at the creek, and jump in. Wally sat on a big log by the bank.

"Come on Wall, don't be a bitch. The water is just – Ahhhhhh!" Shaun pretended to get eaten by a shark or something. An alligator I guess would make more sense. Wally didn't want to go in, so I stayed out and talked to him.

"I wonder what that dumbass got to show us." I said. Shaun was notorious for not telling us his surprise before we see it. I guess on account of it not being there half the time.

"I got no idea. But we haven't really ever been much past this creek, so its probably something new." He said.

"Yeah. So I saw you talking to Jasmine earlier today. Eh?" I nudged his shoulder.

"Oh no, I was just," He said bashfully, "I was just telling her about the homework. She was uh, she always asks about the homework. "

"You mean she always asks for the answers." I said

"Yeahhhh..." He said.

"Dumb bitch." I said.

"Yeah, but she's pretty though. She's uh, I don't know what's the word. Elegant."

"Elephant? You callin' Jas an elephant?" Shaun approached from behind, putting his shirt on.

"No no! I said eleg—" he stammered.

“Damn, I don’t think she’d take to kindly to you callin’ here an elephant. I don’t know, maybe she’d dig it.” Shaun does an impression, “Oh Wally, I want your peanut, I want it so baaad.” We laughed, and started heading further down the trail. Yeah, this trail, I don’t know if you know the one but it’s pretty well stamped up until about the creek, but past that it gets kinda hairy. So we kept trudging through it, all underbrush and thorns and shit, all the while wondering what the hell Shaun is bringing us out this far for. I caught a thorn to the cheek and thought ‘Shit it better be good.’

“How’d the hell you find this, what ever it is?” I asked Shaun.

“That asshole Johnny Morris told me about it, in exchange for a couple cigarettes. I actually never been this way.” He cracked a wily smile. Wally and I looked at each other with a nervous sort of look, one we would exchange often when Shaun was in charge. Finally, the brush began to thin out, and we approached an opening. “I think this is it.” Said Shaun, proud like he like he discovered something special. As we broke through the edge of the woods, the first thing I laid eyes on was a baby fox, and I was about to be pissed as shit. I mean it was cute and all - but a gasp from behind me directed my attention to the yawning mouth of a badass cave. Wally and I just stood and gazed into the darkness that came up from the back of it for a while. It looked pretty damn deep.

“Come on, assholes, I didn’t bring you to stand out side and bug eye. It gets better.” Shaun walked towards

the cave, not missing a beat, cocky as fuck. Wally lagged behind, and hesitated as we started to enter.

“Whats the matter Wallygator, kids go in this cave all the time.” Shaun Said. The entrance was littered with beer cans and cigarette butts. I had heard whispers of some sort of cave in the woods where the teenagers drink and smoke and fuck, but I thought it was a pretty well kept secret.

“Nah, I think I’m going to stay out here, maybe keep watch. In case somebody comes.” You could tell he was nervous, Wally gets like that sometimes. A lot of times.

“Hell Wall, if somebody does come I bet you eight of the nine dollars I own they’ll take you cause you’re alone, and bring you into the cave anyway, kill you or something.” Wally considers this, and enters with us. The cave was unbelievably dark. Shaun pulled a flashlight out of his pocket, but I think he thought it would work a little better than it did, because it barley lit up the walls. It was nice and cool though, the cave, and as we went down, ‘cause it was pretty easy going at first sloping down, it got even cooler. We sort of had to push Wally along, he was going all slow. I felt kinda sorry for him, but I wouldn’t want him to be outside by himself either. Shaun wasn’t kidding. So we kept going through the cave, and we took a few turns at forks. Shaun seemed to know where he was going, but that didn’t stop me and Wall from being pretty nervous. Shaun looks like he knows where he’s going all the time. It’s not always the case. There were noises, shit dripping and even like bats were fluttering. It was really creepy. It kept getting narrower and narrower. We had

gone pretty deep. I was starting to feel nervous. I'm pretty sure so was Shaun, because he would pause at the forks before choosing a path. Once we found a dead end. I'm not going to lie I was scared as hell.

"Wait, I think this is it." This was the first time Shaun, or any of us had spoken in a long while, and his voice was shaky, like I never heard it before. The tunnel finally opened into a chamber, which was the size of a small room of a house. Like a bathroom or something. Shaun shined his light about, searching the walls. He finally found what we had crawled all this way for. Set up on a ledge in the wall was a framed picture of a man. There were a bunch of pictures, some framed some not, but all of the same guy. There were also a bunch of different candles, and movie posters. Like a shrine.

"Oh god." Said Wally.

Then I recognized the guy, it was Wally's dad, like younger, but unmistakable.

"Craziest shit you ever seen, right?" Said Shaun, who's pride had gave way to a sort of shocked fear that we all felt. Wally looked pretty goddamn horrified. We made our way out of the cave and walked back to town in mostly silence. But yeah, I don't know, none of us ever really told the story, but I guess now it makes since after that guy broke into Wally's house, and his dad shot him. Which was pretty badass of Wally's dad, but yeah, maybe we should have said something but Wally was pretty freaked out, so we didn't talk about it much. Anyway, yeah, that was creepy shit.

Crab, part two

One windy day in May a boy bought a kite.
He went to the beach and tied it to a crab's claw.
A gust took the crab up into a cloud.
The crab battled a cloud monster, and won the hand of
a beautiful sky maiden.
But before the wedding, a gust took the crab over an
island.
The crab came down in the middle of a colony of gulls.
The elder gulls had passed down a tale of a great sky
god who would descend from the heavens.
They built the crab a throne, and brought him many
shipwrecked treasures.
But before the first ritual sacrifice, a gust took the
crab over a city.
There he led an archeological expedition into the
ancient ruins were buried under the city by an ancient
earthquake.
But before he could accept his achievement award, a
gust took the crab over the ocean for days and nights
until he was dropped on the beach.
The boy found the crab the next morning, and the crab
told the boy all about his adventures.
The boy took the kite and the crab home.
He boiled the crab and ate him.

Googlie Rock

WALTER

Okay here's a story story - There was once a cute little rock.

With googlie eyes.

BRYAN

Great googlie mooglie! What was his name?

WALTER

Googlie. Of course. And he lived on the edge of the river and looked out at it every day and watched the sun rise over it and watched the sun set over it and because he was a rock and couldn't go many other places, most of the colors he has seen in his life have been dancing on this river, from this sun. Once he saw blood from a dead deer, and watched it decompose. And that was color for a second. But then it was just dim and sad. But he watched the river and sometimes it was smooth and sometimes it would ripple and sometimes it would be rising and falling little spikes, and the trees would whip around. He always wondered what it was like, beneath those ripples. He would see birds land, and dip down, and disappear under the water for seconds at a time. If he really trained his eyes for a long time, he would sometimes, if he were extremely lucky, catch something silvery reach out of the water and pull back quickly. The rock wanted more than anything to roll down to the edge and peer in. But he couldn't because he's a freaking rock for christsake.

Then one day a kid comes by, a little kid with his dad going fishing and the rock had never seen these people. The only time he had seen people was a long time ago when a little kid, a different one, would come and throw some line and a pole into the water. But he never pulled anything out. But now there was a little one and a big one. And the little one walked over and picked a rock up near Googlie. And the big one walked over, laughed, and picked up Googlie. And in unison they threw them into the water. The sensation of constant, rapid movement opened up a corner in Googlie's brain that he didn't think existed before. He splashed into the water, far past the other rock, and began to sink. And he sank into the dim tan and brown mud and sticks. And there was a new strangeness to the vibrations he felt, and a new heavy feeling all around him. He looked up at the sky, but all he could see was a wavering wall of green. Huge shapes would drift above him, casting him in shadow. The darkness would fade in and out, from green to tan to brown to black. And again. Googlie would look up and try to pick out the colors he once saw, but he could not make any out. He became sad, and closed his eyes, and shut out the darkness with his own darkness. He stayed like this for a very long time.

--

BRYAN

What? That can't be it.

WALTER

He's a rock. How can he get out of the lake?

BRYAN

That's your job! You're the storyteller. For thousands of years storytellers have been throwing Googlie eyed rocks into lakes and finding a beautiful way to get them back to the shore.

WALTER

--

PART TREES.



Baba Yaga

Browns mills, a grubby little spatter of houses and strip malls, is surrounded by Pine Barrens. Miles and miles of sandy soil and skinny pines crowd on the edges of the town, as if pushing inward, as if trying to heal over a scab. The pines, old stubborn things, grow stunted in the loose, dry earth. Among these trees sits the cabin of the Baba Yaga.

Her name has been a whisper around the town for as long as anyone can remember, and its constant presence seems to hang above its streets like a light fog. To children, she is a witch. They say if you find her cabin - a slouching shack of dark, mossy planks - and knock on the door, she will welcome you in. If she is hungry, she will kill and eat you. If not, she will answer any one question. And the Baba Yaga is all knowing. Finding is not so easy, however, as in every story it is in a different place, like it moves around the woods on legs. To the adults, she is a species of deranged hermit that the pinelands breed in abundance. But secretly, she has been a witch to them since they were children, and always will be.

To remind Browns Mills that she is no myth, the Baba Yaga comes to town once a month. Her cloaked figure is seen shuffling up the fractured sidewalks of Main Street to the Acme grocery store, the cultural center of the town. She enters half an hour before sundown and the store itself and everyone inside feels it. This bundle

of shadows, lurking in the back of the town's mind, whispering through the wall of pines, now walks past the cash registers to aisle seven, awash in fluorescent light. Very few stare - once you have made eye contact with the Baba Yaga, you have no desire to look again. But that first time you see her -

She is gaunt, knobby. Her back arches and her shoulders dip. She keeps a small hand on a walking stick. The hand and the stick seem inseparable - one in the same. Both are rigid, the color of pinelands sand, all knots and veins and fibers. The joints of her fingers are swelled, like a tumor on a branch, and they curl around the staff. She uses the staff lightly; her feet slowly slide across the linoleum, as she steps the stick ahead of her. She sways with the sound, 'shffft. shffft. clack,' as her hair, hanging about her face thick and all shades of grey, swings back and forth like a bent willow in the breeze. It looks as if it has been dead for a long time, and hangs on out of sheer stubbornness. Her neck stoops forward from the coarse black cloak that falls in folds around her, and is thin with deep creases and ridges.

She is old. Old in a way that age no longer accounts for - as if death has finally given up and just left her alone. Her cheek bones stick out, and her cheeks hang like cloth draped over them, dipping down to her chin. A large, blunt nose shelters thin, pale, cracked lips. Her eye sockets are cavernous; the bright light barley reaches the eyes set in the back of them. They are wide, the eyes - round, with only a sliver of tarnished white surrounding the edges of

the pupils. At first they are the coldest grey, the color of the clouds that hang over the Barrens all winter. Everyone in the Acme who now averts their eyes has seen this grey, and it has seen them. They could not look away. But after a few moments locked eye to eye, the longest moments of any of their lives, they notice something in the grey. The faintest trace of blue, the lightest a blue can be without disappearing. And at that moment, seeing that blue, they feel ashamed and scared and they turn away.

All she buys is a thirty pound bag of flour. She pays for it in dusty bills, heaves it over her shoulder, and lugs it back through the town. Then she disappears into the pines, as the sun hits the horizon and orange light washes over the sky and clouds. And above the eastern wall of trees, the last of the day disappears from the sky, the faintest blue.

Paul Dreaming

Paul woke up in the morning after his thirteenth birthday and slid out of bed. He rubbed his eyes and felt that the tips of his ears were cold. It was the first night the cold had found its way into the cabin, and he decided it was the first day of winter. He tucked his blanket under the mattress, over the pillow, and threw on his overalls. He grabbed the water pail from the kitchen and took it out the door. The morning was crisp, brittle. The low sun pecked holes through the trees and fell down in blotches onto the porch. He walked toward the side of the cabin and saw his ruined garden. Browning stalks and leaves dipped and sunk into the soil, wrinkled mounds of olive colored cabbage lay scattered, trampled. Green bean vines hung, now rigid and brittle with frost, off a segment of picket fence. Several planks were punched out and lying in the bed over a pair of tire tracks that cut deep into earth. Somebody had driven into his just to do it. His shoulders sank and he continued swinging the pail.

The spicket jutted out of the ground near the foundation of the cabin and tilted left. Paul pumped it and water crashed onto the pail's tin bottom. The noise jarred something loose in his still groggy brain – the image of a gold field of grass, and a large, old oak tree. Curious, he closed the spicket and plumbed his memory for more. Tiny bits of things he dreamed the night before began bubbling to the surface - hazy, blurred, shifting colors

and sensations began to creep up from the corners of his mind. He dropped his pail onto the frozen earth – this was the first dream Paul could remember. He knew he'd had dreams before, he felt that he was moving as he slept, but he could never call up an image, a sensation. But here one was, bobbing around like driftwood in his head. It warmed him slightly, this field and tree, so he welcomed it and went on with his day.

Hours later, a red Chevy pickup rumbled out of the mouth of the trail that lead to Paul's cabin, and lurched to a stop some feet from the house. The door of the truck swung open with a long whine and a pair of blue jeans hopped out. In them was a tall, thin, strong man with a plain t-shirt. The shirt was white, but nearing yellow. He was scruffy, his face unshaven, but he looked sharp as a razor.

"Well, hello there, Paul! Well, godamn look at you!" The man said as he slammed the door shut. The whole truck shook. It was old and nearly falling apart. He walked towards Paul in long confident strides.

"You sure are taller. And look at them ears, holy hell," he said. He reached Paul and stuck out his hand. Paul was in a daze. He had never seen this man before in his life. What struck Paul more was the way his voice bounced off of the trees - Paul could not remember a sound like it before. It was terrifying. "Look at that face – you must not remember me. Uncle Bill? You remember your mom's sister, Sally? Big old thing? It's not matter – I'm just coming

to check on you, I remember hearing that your Grammy had passed some time ago. It's a shame. I'm sorry to hear that." Paul finally shook his hand. The man asked him how he was.

"I'm doing fine." Paul said. He let the door close silently behind him, and he shifted his shoes on the wood porch. Paul felt uncomfortable, so he invited the man in for something to drink. He wondered if that was the right thing to do when someone visits. Paul wondered if this is a visit. He lit the stove and filled the pail and poured some water in the teapot. Paul sat in his chair, and the man sat down in his grandma's old rocking chair. It was the only other chair Paul had. They sat, and the man talked about the different things Paul was doing here, and how he liked it.

"I find plenty to do, and I enjoy it. There is lots to do. I think I am going to make a chair. As a project. I could use another." Paul said. He had a hard time looking at the man, who rocked back and forth – he thought his body seemed so unnatural in that chair, and his swift, jerking sort of rock looked unnatural and painful for it.

"Do you ever wonder about maybe moving somewhere that's more suitable for a boy your age?" the man asked.

"The cabin here's fine. Plenty to do." said Paul. The man smiled and nodded. The teapot whistled as the man got out of the chair. He had to go, but asked if he could stop by from time to time to check on Paul. Paul didn't feel the need to be checked on, but he didn't mind a visitor. Paul left the tea on the stove, and watched the truck bounce

off into the woods.

Paul found that he had a lot of time in the day. Most of the sunshine in the summer was spend tending to his garden. He had not had to prune or till or pick anything for two weeks, not since he had come back from gathering fire wood to find his garden ruined. He had put some food away for winter – tomatoes and strawberries he canned and some dried beans and peas he put in jars – but he still had a garden full of fall harvest intended to hold him in the long winter months. He would have to do without, and sleep through the tremors in his stomach. Instead of garden work, he now fell into the little tasks of winter; he tramped into the deeper forest and bundled up tinder, carrying it back in under his arm. He patched a pair of work pants he had caught on a nail in his fence. His small, chapped hands moved the needle slowly in and out of the fabric, with an odd swooping motion. This motion, this sweep of the needle up, back and over with his wrist and elbow was a tic that his grandmother sewed with her whole life. As his sewing become more and more natural, Paul gradually adopted the movement without knowing. Paul's most vivid memories were of his grandmother sunken into her rocking chair, curled over a shirt or a table cloth with her white hair pulled away from her face by a pale ribbon. She always seemed to be mending something. Paul had only seen her sew one thing new – a small cloth doll. He was young and thought this odd. For five years Paul has done his own sewing and lived alone in the cabin.

In the years he lived with his grandmother, from the age of two to ten, life was not much different. There was the garden and the chores and the blocks of silence, but there was a hidden comfort that seemed to insulate the cabin's thin walls. The winters were never as cold as were now. Paul, lost in this recollection, pricked his finger with the pin. Numbed by the cold, he did not notice until a bright red drop fell and soaked into the jeans. Paul was startled and another bit of dream from the night before welled up. For a second Paul's mind was filled with the reddest, flowing hair. It swayed and shimmered in front of him, individual strands shifting and returning the sunlight. Paul liked this fragment in particular, and made a point to hold on to it. He went outside with the water, and scrubbed the blood out of his jeans with an old cloth. His grandma left him with many old cloths, for drying and dusting and scrubbing. It seemed to Paul that the things she left him when she passed had aged along with her, and in her final days she was as pale as the old cloths and the dusty doll on the shelf. Every day she seemed closer and closer to the floor, and often he would find her staring down at it from her rocker. She was quiet, and moved slowly. Paul knew she loved him, and she held him much as the cabin held him then. It was a cold sort of belonging, and it was all that Paul had ever known.

Paul filled the rest of this day as he did all of his winter days - with chores. He would wake, fill his pail, and find himself cleaning the cabin, raking and gathering leaves, wiping soot from the single, small, warbley

window. With a band saw he had purchased the winter before, he began cutting bars and planks out of a fallen tree to make his third chair. Some of the wood was blackened from the lightning strike that felled the tree, but Paul didn't mind too much. He boiled beans over the iron stove in the corner, and spread strawberries over bread. The man would come from time to time, maybe twice a week, and Paul would make him tea and offer him jam. The man would rock quickly, and ask Paul about the chair he is making. Each time, he would find some way to ask Paul if he is happy living alone. Paul didn't think himself alone, especially when the man was there. His movements and echoing voice became less and less unnatural.

In the evenings when Paul was not working with his saw and knives carving out a chair, he read. A part of him quietly welcomed winter, because it gave him the empty time to sit and read without guilt. He sat in the big sturdy chair at the table by the window, and laid his book down on worn wood, hunching over it, his face hanging inches above its pages. As he read, Paul forgot the trembling in his stomach and the coldness at the tips of his ears. He read until the sun went down and the window no longer threw that square of garbled light at the table. He then shut his book, placed it on the shelf that held his book collection – six or seven books, ranging from an illustrated book on tropical amphibians to a Jules Verne epic - and buried himself under the covers in his bed.

In the following weeks, Paul gradually stopped count-

ing the gaps in the planks in the ceiling to calm him and instead just closed his eyes and fell instantly to sleep. He would wake up in a flash, and it would be morning. Quickly now, he would be struck by those floating remembrances of the night's dreams. They were still hazy, abrupt, incongruous, but they were becoming larger, more colorful, bumping into each other and sticking in a new logic. During the day he could call up the tree and see it in his mind's eye – towering, thick, and branching out wide into the sky. He was now sure it was an oak tree. He began to notice that the branches splayed out directly over him, and the trunk ran below him into the golden grass of the field. He was in the tree, on a low branch. He clung to these images as he worked, and the his movements during the day and the movements of his daydreams became similar, and would blend from time to time as Paul became lost in thought. When the man's pickup came, Paul didn't notice it until it was nearly parked.

"Hey I never asked you, what did happen to that garden there?" the man asked. He watched Paul working his hoe back and forth, churning the brown plants back into the half frozen soil.

"Not sure," said Paul. He figured someone from town had wandered back this way in their car, and just decided to tear it up for the heck of it, or were angry because they were lost. "You hungry, want something to eat?" asked Paul.

"No, but do you got water inside?" Paul nodded. "Well I think I'll pour myself a cup. You just keep working. Don't

know why I'm such a thirsty man." Paul continued to push and rake at the dirt, and the disappeared in the open door. Paul was thirsty too, and decided he would take a break and sit down and talk with the man. He moved to the porch, but stopped. He saw the man on his knees clawing at the floor boards like a cat paws at a window. The man dipped his face to the floor, and tried to look down the cracks between them. Paul felt awkward, like he had seen something he should have been ashamed to see, and that it was his fault. He went back to his garden, and the man came back out with a cup of water.

"Don't know why I get so thirsty when it's cold. Dry air, I think." the Man said.

One particularly cold night, a week or so after the dreams began surfacing, Paul fell asleep and he found himself dreaming. He was not remembering a dream, not piecing together bits and images in the morning, but he was living and thinking in the dream. He had sensation. He could see rigid blades of dry summer grass under him quiver in a rogue breeze. He felt the roughness of the branch he sat on, and tingle of the blood that was pulled to his feet. This rush of feeling and warmth jarred him, and the dream flickered. He steadied himself urgently – he would not lose this. He looked up at the branches and leaves and saw the sun peeking in at him. He looked out over the field and saw a small house near the corner of it. It was a faded white, yellowed by time and weather. It was low, wide, like it was sinking into the flat field. He looked

to his right, and he was nearly knocked out of the dream again – a girl sat on his same branch a few feet away from him. She was his age. Her legs kicked in the air sending her buttercup yellow sun dress fluttering lightly under the branch. Her arms propped her up on the branch, her elbows bent inward. Her skin was fair, milky. Long locks of wavy red hair danced around her shoulders and arms. She turned to him lightly, betraying a face that instantly made him feel glad and comfortable and other things that he couldn't explain.

"It's you," She said. "You're back." She smiled and said that she'd hoped he would come back and that she was glad to have his company. She asked him his name.

"Paul, my name's Paul."

They sat in the shade of the big oak leaves and swung their feet for what seemed like a long time. They talked about how pretty a day it was, and how dry the grass was this year. Paul was nervous, but he was so transfixed by her big eyes and her hair and the warmth of her presence that he felt like that tree branch was the only place he had ever been and would ever care to be. Then, as the sun began to dip below the tips of the trees and the sky reflected the grass in its new tinges of gold, Paul woke up to the frigid stillness of the cabin.

From then on Paul started his day later and went to bed earlier and earlier each night. He rose in the morning with the sun already lost from the window, risen up over the tops of the trees to the edge of his clearing. As he did

his chores he did them with an urgency and speed that was lost to him; his mind was on a different time in a different place. He thought mostly of his dreams, and rarely the things that came between him and them. His cabin became a way station, a resting place of sorts where he could spend the energy and forces that kept him up, that kept him anxious. More and more he cursed the tensions in his muscles and the quick way his eyes moved as he worked. When he finally felt his body had slowed down to the right level, a level he became proud of his ability to gauge, he slid under the covers, taking care not to excite himself, trying to suppress the anticipation and the fluttering of his heart under his breast. He focused on the top of his stomach, right below his ribs, and the tightness and white he felt there. It was a constant, and to it he would let his body and mind fall once more beyond the bed.

The girl was in every dream. That field slowly washed into his vision, that dry gold. Most times, the red haired girl was already there to meet him, swinging her legs with her face in the wind. Other times he sat for what seemed like a minute or two and waited – musing over the clouds or lack of clouds, the wrens and blue jays that bolted in and out of the branches above him, and watching the squat little house across the field. Sure enough she appeared at the door and bounded across the field, her hair like a red cape flowing behind her, and then climbed the tree like a bobcat. They talked about everything they knew to talk about. Paul talked about his books, the girl talked about her middle school teacher and how excited

she was for next year. Paul told her about the sturdy chair he was making, although he stopped when he remembered his neglecting to finish it. The time they spent together each night was short – even if Paul slept longer, his dreams never lasted more than an hour or so – but during that time they were both so engulfed in the warmth of the grass and the dizziness of their feet swinging. Paul's dreams left him more and more tired each morning, and the heaviness and gray of the air and the cabin seemed to push him harder and deeper into the mattress.

One night there was rain around the tree. Paul found himself on the branch once again and felt a cold prick his shoulder. This cold startled him – it didn't really belong in this world, and he was suddenly scared that somehow, in some odd way, the reality of the cabin was seeping through. Then he realized the sound that was around him – the deep airy hiss of a heavy rain on the grass and the pop of the drops bouncing on the broad oak leaves – and was relieved. He took a deep breath of the wet air and let it out. More drops made their way to his hair and the back of his neck and the side of his nose. He turned his face to the house as he was used to, and he waited. After a few moments, the screen door flung open and the red haired girl stepped out of it onto the porch. She looked out over the field to the tree, and lunged forward to tear through the rain and the wet field. Her body jerked mid-step, and Paul flinched. A huge man had his hand around her arm, and held her back. She stopped and looked up at him. His

thick arm tensed and locked her in place. Paul's mouth fell open slightly, and he shifted his weight forward on the branch, his feet swaying lower. They seemed to exchange words, and her head sunk lower and lower as he spoke. He lifted her by her arm and swung her around his side to the door. She looked just like a rag doll. The man pushed her into the darkness of the doorway, and closed the door. The rain hissed and closed in on Paul, and the drops on the top of his head and nose stung like ice as they slowly rolled down his scalp and face. Paul shifted his weight all the way forward, and pushed off the branch with his palms. His jeans slid off the bark and he felt them rip. He fell into the air and was for a second weightless and scared.

Paul woke with a start. It was around noon, he knew immediately. His eyes darted back and forth and his whole body seemed to want to jump out of itself. He threw the covers off of the bed, put on his shoes, and grabbed his pail. He swung open the door, but stopped in the threshold. The man in his blue jeans slid out of the truck and approached the house. This was the first time in over a week that the man had visited, and this was the first time Paul realized how lost in time he has been.

"Afternoon Paul! Not lunch time I hope, I already ate, I didn't want to interrupt yours. Can I come in?" said the man. He hung at the edge of the porch, waiting for Paul to motion him up the stairs and into the house. He tapped the toe of his right shoe in the dirt, and he squinted at Paul. The man seemed fussed, uncomfortable standing in the cold and the noon sun. Paul let him inside.

“Well look at that – what a chair! Top craftsmanship if I’ve ever seen it.” The man shook the chair a bit, and it clattered lightly on the floor. In a casual, smooth movement, he sat down in it. “So how has this week seen you –” the chair fell apart, and the man rolled to the floor. He scrambled to find his feet and dust himself off. He forced a chuckle “That chair didn’t want to be sat on. That’s for damn sure. Easy fix though. Set the legs a little deeper.” The man stood at the table for a few seconds, surveying Paul’s reaction. Paul had almost forgotten about the chair – he hadn’t worked on it all week. He was more interested in the man. His movements felt wrong in the cabin – they were too wide, too fast. “Paul I’m going to level with you. You look terrible. You look like you’re starving. I don’t see much food here. I asked in town and you haven’t bought any. You can’t live here anymore,” he said. Paul looked down at the table, away from the man’s eyes. “Your aunt Carol, your mom’s older sister said she could take you. She lives in Cranford, real nice. They eat good - you should see them.”

“I don’t know any Aunt Carol.” Paul said, into the table. He felt the man’s movements.

“You’ve met her, believe me. You must have been real young.” said the man. He stepped over to the rocking chair and lowered himself into it, carefully. He rocked it slowly and self-consciously. “Well regardless, she knows you. I can drop you off in town and you can take the bus. I’ll give you the address.” He said.

“I’m going to stay here.” Paul said. He scratched

at the table with his fingernail. The man finally sighed deep.

“Fine. I was planning to give you it anyway, but here goes – I’m going to buy this dump from you. Four hundred dollars. Cash. I got it in my truck right now. You take it, and I drop you right off at the bus station.” He said.

“I’m not selling the cabin.” Paul said.

“The fuck is wrong with you boy? Four hundred dollars why when I was your age I would have –” said the man. He was suddenly very red, and swung the rocker back and forth with his shoulders. He stopped and a smile spread across his face and he chuckled. “I got you, you’re funny. Yanking my chain like that – you got some acting boy. Come on out with me, I’ll give you the money.” he said.

“No thank you.” said Paul. The cabin was dusty and faded on the inside and the wood was wet and mossy on the outside but it was the only thing the world had ever given Paul. He suddenly felt very small, and the house very big.

“Boy I can’t let you keep living here, so you had better take what I can give you and be on your way. I’m looking out for you, it’s about time you realized that and were a bit damn appreciative.” said the man. He looked almost regretful. “Now, I got some boxes in the truck. You pack up your stuff and I’ll haul you into town, help you on the bus.”

“Sorry.” said Paul.

“Son of a bitch. I’m sorry kid. But you’re just so goddamn stupid.” The man sprung from his chair and was across the room before Paul could flinch. He wrestled Paul out of his chair by the sleeves of his shirt. Paul struggled, flailing, kicking the chair to the floor. The man dragged Paul as his heels clawed at the floor, and threw him out the door. Paul landed with his shoulder in the dirt, and he began to get up. The man stepped across the porch, and picked Paul up by his arm. He threw a wild, sloppy punch, and Paul recoiled back to the ground. He hit Paul a few more times, tossing him around violently. His blows and motions were mechanical, unenthusiastic. He finally stepped back from Paul.

“This is my place now. You get on out of here and if you come back I’ll kill you. Now go on, get to town and head out. I don’t care where. Find yourself some common sense.” he said. Paul turned over, and got up to his knee. He ran the back of his hand across his nose, smearing blood. The man stood between him and the cabin, and Paul could see that it was no longer his. It looked foreign to him, tall and looming like the man. He hoisted himself to his feet, and began to step towards the woods. He faltered, then caught himself and took it slowly, his head swaying back and forth. He did not look back – he could feel the man and the cabin behind him, and they were nothing he needed to see.

He continued along the road, and came to the edge of the town by sundown. That night, Paul sat in the bus station, and decided he would go west to Watonga, Okla-

homa. He had no image of the place, or idea of the distance between them, but only the name that was told to him at his mother's funeral. They had taken her body to Watonga, to bury next to her parents. Paul thought it was the only place to go, and the only place he could name, that had people he could name.

Paul did not dream again for the four months. He shared cars and meals and shelter with strangers. He ate enough, but the strangers still remarked on his thinness. He saw every variation of small, medium, and large town he could see and he slept every night. On an unseasonably warm day, Paul was walking along a thin stretch of highway outside of Tulsa. He was close, and had only to find a car that was heading to Watonga. It was a small town, a rare destination, so he had been walking for a while without luck. The road was black with water, and the shoulder was muddy. It had rained hard the night before, so Paul slept behind a diner. He didn't mind the walk, because he liked the smell. He was picked up by a Ford station wagon, that happened to be going to Roman Nose resort, right past Watonga. They were a young couple, and it was their spring vacation. He slung his bag in the back seat, and rode up state for two hours, past fields of wheat and bales of grass and slowly churning oil rigs. The sun was going down, and Paul wondered where he would sleep that night. Finally, a wooden welcome sign that said 'Watonga' blurred past. Paul peered out the windows, but it was still just golden fields. He wasn't sure entirely what

he was looking for – he imagined them to be buried in some small graveyard with a low wall.

Suddenly, Paul saw a house. It was a low, squat house that sank into the middle of a large field. He knew immediately what it was – it was the house from his dreams. He asked the driver to let him out. The driver asked him if he wanted him to wait for a bit, but Paul said no. The man shrugged, and drove off. Paul ran across the field, dropping his pack among the swaying golden grass, long left to grow wild. It was wet, and it slapped against his skin as the cool droplets splashed on his arms and legs. He reached the house and the porch – he had never been so close to it. But it was different; he screen door hung off its hinge, and the windows were a dark shade of grey. The yellowed paint came off in large flakes, and littered the porch. Paul made his way around to the back of the house. There, by stooping willow tree, were three graves. They were all the same shape and size – small, rounded, and modest, just names and dates. They looked very much comfortable with each other, and Paul almost felt intrusive for happening on them the way he did. He sat near his grandmother's grave for a while, as the sun went down. It was comforting, and very quiet. As it got dark, he made his way across the field. There was no tree, no towering oak with its broad branches and hissing leaves. He moved closer to where he remembered it to be from the dream. Instead, there was a stump, leveled at Paul's waist. Its surface was wide, massive, smooth with age. Paul pressed his hand on it, and followed the rings with his

eyes. In the very center was a blackened hole. It was as if something had torn down the center of the trunk, burning it from the inside – a lightning strike. Paul thought for a second about something so momentarily powerful meeting something so eternally large. It must have been a sight to see.

It was dark, and now purely nighttime. He climbed up onto the stump and laid down on his side. He drew his arms and legs close to his chest. There in the moonlight, curled inside of the pale circle of the stump, Paul fell asleep. He dreamed of the red haired girl, but her hair was now white. They sat together on the stump, and as they swung their legs, their heels knocked against the bark.

The Ballooner

The basket shuttered as the balloon swayed against the line.

“Binoculars and a basket of bread is what they give us,” said Antoine as he began to drift off, “I will write home and say, ‘Mother, Father! Today I defended France from The Hun with a loaf of the hardest bread you have ever seen!’” Antoine did not like the balloon; he said “You cannot kill Germans from a balloon.” Though I wouldn’t have told him, I did not mind it. I liked its movements, the way it swayed in the breeze. I liked the view - the way the forest, to the east, shivered under the low, wide moon. It was our second week manning the observation balloon. The wicker creaked as I leaned my elbows on it, peering over. There was a tiny tent where our tether met the earth. A lamp was lit inside, casting an amber glow on the anti-aircraft gun beside it. I stepped back, sitting down next to Antoine. Shielded in the dead air of the basket, I listened to his low breathing, and the wind whistling through the wires above. I stared into the moon, over the edge of the basket, and my thoughts began to slow, and I felt tired. I was on watch, I couldn’t fall asleep. I listened the low beating of a heart against my thin chest. I needed to think to stay awake. So I wondered whether the night sky knew what swayed and glowed and rustled and slumbered under it. I must have fell asleep.

I woke to the roaring and throbbing of blood in

my ears. The world around me was all white - I moved my arms in front of my face, and it dimmed. It was my parachute. My arms and legs flailed, throwing wrinkles of thick, white cloth onto the grass beside me. I stood up, and swayed dizzily in a lightning flash of pain and a flood of images - a violent burst of fire against the night sky, a falling sensation, yelling to Antoine, pulling my chute, the ground quickly rising and fading into darkness. Then I remembered something very clearly and vividly; the opening of my eyes at the low, pulsing hum of distant engines, then the image of a fleet of approaching planes. Behind them a massive, round craft – a zeppelin – moved across the moon. Reeling from these images I touched my throbbing head, and felt dried blood crumbling in my hair. I rolled it like sand between my fingers, and I thought of Antoine. In one last flash of memory I saw him taken by the rogue gust, soaring east as I sank. I shook off my harness, gathered myself, and set east – towards the front line. I would have to find Antoine quickly.

As my footsteps on the thick grassy hills began to drum out the pain in my head, I could not help but realize what a beautiful day it was; the birds sang the last of their summer songs and the trees were just beginning to change. The grass felt strange under the soles of my boots, so unlike the creaking wicker. I breathed deep – there was an earthy smell that I had near forgotten up in the balloon. It reminded me of the kinds of late summer days Antoine and I spent as children in Rennes, before he and his parents moved to Meaux, which lay about

five miles west of the front lines and four miles west of our balloon. We stayed good friends through visits and letters. But when when we signed up together, and were assigned to the observation balloon, he seemed different. At night in the balloon I would watch him as he stared at the glow of Meaux's streets and buildings on the horizon. His eyes were troubled. I would then catch a glimpse of the smoke rising from a fire outside the tent below, and think of my own parents; how my father leaned over his tea in the morning and with his nose blew the steam into the well worn lines of his face. He looked at me with his tired eyes and said "Be careful son." I remember the night they burned Epernay, to the east. Antoine looked out and with that same low, orange glow in his eyes, whispered, "Godamn."

I trudged east, towards the forest, as the sun rose higher into the sky, beating onto my shoulders. The pleasant morning suddenly became very hot. My eyes traced every dip, every rise of the rolling field, straining to find that patch of white on the grass. From the top of the last hill, I finally saw the edge of the forest. My heart sank – if he landed in the trees he could be injured, or already picked up by a patrol. Suddenly, at the base of a large pine tree, I saw a pile of billowing white cloth. I ran to it, the wind roaring in my ears. As I neared, I realized that the cloth was far too flat to hide Antoine. I searched the cloth anyway, throwing armfuls of it to my side, finding only grass. The harness was gone; had been cut crudely away from the line. I thought I must have missed him,

as he was heading back towards the camp. I figured was well enough to free himself, so I was relieved. Suddenly, my eye was caught by a glint of sunlight from just inside forest. I followed it. Laying on top of the dirt was a combat knife with the mark of the Reich, on its hilt. There, in the shadows of the trees, my heart sank.

The forest was strange from the inside, nothing like I had imagined from my balloon. The shadows shifted around me, and the thin spots of light moved back and forth with the trees. Every rustle of leaves I imagined to be Antoine's dragging heels, every snap of twigs was the rough step of a German soldier. I moved recklessly through the undergrowth stumbling as branches lashed at my face. I imagined Antoine being beaten, as the soldiers barked questions in some rough, primal French. I then looked up through the needles and branches at the afternoon sky and reassured myself that those were just stories told to rile us up. That monsters do not fight wars, people like me do. I nevertheless reached down and ran my fingers along the hilt of the revolver strapped to my hip. I remembered how heavy it felt when they first handed it to me. I had remarked "But I'm a balloonner, what will I have shoot at?" They chuckled, and and I thought it was strange.

I followed a thin, ragged trail where I spotted a blue shape at the edge of the road some ways off. I bolted towards it. I recognized the blue uniform as I ran. My heart had stopped in my heaving chest, as I began to turn over the thin body of a French infantryman. I did not for a

second consider that it was not Antoine. I braced myself. It was a stranger. I stared at his pale face, long and hard, until for a moment I thought I saw the Antoine's thin cheeks and furrowed brow. I set the soldier down awkwardly. I was did not feel relieved. I looked a few yards ahead, to where the thin trail opened to a clearing.

The clearing turned out to be a wide road, lined with broken and severed trees. It came to an abrupt end where I stood – the clearing party must have stopped suddenly. Near the end of the road lay the charred shell of a tank. The hulk lay still, all shades of black, gray and shadows, like the soot covered remains of some unholy creature. I moved around it and ran my eyes along it's cogs and treads. I had seen a tank before, but the machinery had never seemed so terrifying. My foot caught on something soft; the leg of a German soldier. He was sitting with his back on a felled tree trunk, almost contemplative. In his face was an expression of something deep, damning. Two yards to the left was another man, this one in a blue uniform, face down in the trampled brush. Behind the tank was an iron crossed truck, with a lieutenant slumped over the wheel. As I stood in the middle of all these things something terrifying began to well up in the bottom of my stomach. "I did this." I realized. I remembered how excited I was, when I finally spotted something through the binoculars. How I remarked to Antoine that the tank and the truck in the forest looked like little beetles, slowly crawling through the grass, bending and moving the blades around them. The people like little ants, marching

alongside them. It looked almost silly to me. I had slept through the gunshots that night, as a battalion ambushed the road building crew. I dreamed of moonlight glinting off the backs of beetles, shifting into a kaleidoscope of colors. What I felt, though, as I left the shell of the tank and the truck, and set down the abandoned road, was not guilt. No, as my heart turned colder, and my blood warmer, I cursed the Germans for coming into my forest, for creating this war, and for the tortures they were surely setting on Antoine.

I made my way over the tree trunks, many of them stamped by the treads of the tank as it had crawled over them. My imagination ran wild with visions of blood-eyed Germans. They cackled as fire glinted off their steel instruments, as they pulled apart Antoine, and my mother, and my father, and tossed them into a fire that raged above charred, twisting cogs. I continued to search the forest, going deeper and deeper. After several hours, I spied wisps of smoke, rising listlessly in the distance against the dimming orange sky. I ran down the road towards the smoke, vaulting trunks and branches like a deer, bounding from a hunter. But I was beginning to feel much more like the hunter; my eyes glowing with that low, orange light. I followed the smoke to a footpath, which opened to the left and the right of the road. I took the left path, the rising ash looming behind it. I stepped as lightly as I could, and struggled to quiet the gasping of my breath. The path wound around the largest trees for what seemed like ages; around each corner my lungs drew in quick

shots of air, freezing. Each time I exhaled at the sight of more trees. At last I turned a corner to reveal a clearing. The trees had been thinned – stumps dotted the ground, which was cleared of the messy underbrush. Standing at the mouth of the trail, moments passed in the fading light before I could discern the source of the smoke from the trees. It was a cabin. Low, one roomed, it was a rough marriage of knobby trunks, dull thatch, and smoky, warping window panes. On it's far wall, a stone chimney was held up by some spell. It exhumed a light swath of black smoke through the spidery branches above. The door was ajar, spilling light onto the entry-way stones. I moved like a ghost towards it, my heart fluttering like the fire behind the windows.

I heard no sound in the cabin as I approached the doorway. There was only the rustling of some bird overhead, the bugs beginning to warm up for their night-songs, and the crude pounding of my own heart. I kept my body still against the gnarled, ancient wood and I unfastened the button on my holster. It's leather was raw and stiff. I gingerly slid out the pistol. Its hilt felt cool in my shaking hands. I moved my face into the warm light. The first thing I saw was a teapot. Worn, cast iron on top of a small wood stove, it slowly spouted a frail white trickle of steam, like a dying candle. My eyes flickered next to an old man and woman. They were sitting on the floor, leaning against one another shoulder to shoulder. They were still - the trembling firelight was the only movement in their placid eyes, set deep in a nest of creases

and wrinkles. As I watched them, my every breath was weighted, labored, strung to a sickness sunk in the deepest depths of my stomach. A dark sickness, a violent sickness, a gnawing sickness slowly eating its way up. An old sickness. A homesickness. It began to smolder inside me, dripping embers into a slowly rising rage. My eyes hung on the couple a moment too long, as I was jostled into awareness by a quick, rough exclamation and the clatter of wood moving across wood.

There, on a rough wooden stool, sat a German soldier. He was stiff, with his arms in the air and his hands beside his head. My gun was instinctively leveled at him.

He pleaded in German. His voice was quick, wavering. I stared past him for a moment, then my eyes met his. They were wide and trembling. I glanced back at the couple who sat still calm, forever leaning on one another, his hand fondly resting on her blue checkered smock. My eyes flashed back to the German. At the table beside him a shallow, pale porcelain cup sat. It radiated a thin, silky sheet of vapor into the air above it. My knuckles turned white around the pistol hilt. Here, I thought, was a monster. I thought I saw darkness behind his eyes, and in it the still, empty faces of the couple, of Antoine writhing, of my mother, of my father.

“What have you done with Antoine?” I yelled in French, the voice bellowed from somewhere deep, surprising myself; a surprise quickly muted by another wave of anger.

He pleaded more desperately. He shook violently, stammering.

“Where is he? What have you done to him?” I shook my pistol, now weightless, with every word.

He could not understand. Like a beast, I thought, he knows no language. I’m not sure I would have cared much if he did. The trigger gave way to my finger. It clicked as it reached the end of its swing, and falling towards me after an unexpectedly slight pressure. There was a pause. No explosion, no kickback. None of the things I imagined you would feel when you fired a gun. Six months in a war, and I had never fired a gun. Then I heard the explosion. In those moments afterward, as I stood frozen in time, I could think of nothing but the sound, the ghost of which rang in my ears. In the balloon, often I had heard gunshots in the distance. Low and slow, sizzling out in the air around me, heard the slight taps of the Sopwith Camel’s guns and the sluggish cadence of the Fokker. These always rang out out blanketed in the hum of pistons and blades beating the air. Never could I have imagined this white silence, this empty air that lingers after the explosion. Such an absence. I felt a sharp pain. My eyes focused finally on the German. He was still seated, with his hands in the air. My legs gave way under me. My shoulder hit the floor, and with a flash of distant pain, the room surged with bright light. My eyes caught the fading image of four tattered boots at the threshold of the door, on which danced the reflection of flames from stove’s open mouth.

I woke to the warm hiss and pop of a fire, and a

searing pain in my shoulder. I wanted to touch it, but found my hands bound behind my back. I looked up into the large campfire. I tried to piece together where I was, but my confusion was cut by the low sound of breathing beside me.

“Antoine!” I exclaimed. His head rested against the tree, as his chest rose and fell slowly. A flicker of firelight lit the shadows of his face, revealing a trail of coagulated blood that ran from his scalp, and from his nostrils.

“Shhhhhh!” A low, breathy voice came from across the fire. A shadowy figure rose, and made it’s way around. A young German soldier, tall and thin like a rail, sat down a few feet away with his back against a wide tree trunk. His face surprised me; it was tired, but seemed warm. A face filled with life, eyes weighed heavy with all sorts of thoughts. I was taken aback. “Spricht Deutsch?” he asked. His words betrayed a flickering spirit, an irony. I shook my head slowly, my eyes never leaving his. I understood the phrase, but did not speak German. He sighed deep. A flash of weary humor struck his face, as he spoke clearly, but with a thick accent, into the dirt “You would not speak English, would you?” He looked up at me.

“Yes.” my heart jumped. I paused for a moment, searching for the words then asked with urgency “What have you done to my friend?” I spoke with a tinge of an anger almost forgotten in the still of the night and the sharp pain of my shoulder.

“Carried him about ten miles. Keep your voice down. Getting him to quiet and sleep was not as easy. Your

friend, he is a wild one. He woke up, and would never stop yelling. I am glad I didn't know his words. They seemed harsh." he spoke, still with that tired humor.

"Is he fine? You did not hurt him?"

"We did not hurt him. A rough landing. Bump on the head, a broken nose, leg. He is lucky." I breathed a sigh of relief.

"The old man, and his wife..." I asked. My blood began once more to bubble, churn.

"No, no. That was not us. Friedrich was maybe guilty of taking their tea, what they had left. He is the man you tried to shoot. We thought it was hilarious." There was a long pause. I hung on the slow, steady rhythm of Antoine's breath. "When have you last eaten?" he asked, shedding a light on my empty stomach, on my hunger. I wondered if he could really offer me food. Defying reason, I answered hopefully.

"Last night" I said.

"Fortunate Frenchmen." he chuckled. "We have no food," he paused and continued with a slender smile, "But bullets in our guns! You have food, but no bullets!" He chuckled again, pointing at my shoulder, which I realized was bandaged. I attempted a chuckle, but winced. "See? Bullets." he said, almost proudly, but tenderly.

"You speak English..." I say. He nods. "Why?" I ask.

"I was going, before the war, to America. Was a few months away from a boat ticket. A hundred or so marks." He paused, as sadness welled up in his eyes, "I have a

daughter in America, in Boston, with my brother. I sent her ahead. One year ago. He has not written." He stared at the fire, then turned to me. "How about you?"

"I," I spoke slowly, delicately, "I hope to have a daughter in America. To go there." He smiled weakly at me, and then stared back into the fire. I stared also. I remembered the moment when I decided to leave, and how I was unable to tell my parents. It all seemed so far away then. "What happens to us?" I looked at Antoine. His breathing labored for a moment, then slowed once again.

"Well," he shifted, shaking himself out of deep thought, "We cannot keep you. We have no food for ourselves. No food for prisoners." He paused, "And the rest of my scouting party, they do not have the heart to kill you."

"Really?" My hope filled my chest for the first time.

"So I am supposed to." He looked down at the soil, then again at the fire.

"Oh," I said, the hope quickly stifled. I sat for a few moments, eyes at the dirt. "Do you have the heart to kill us?" I asked timidly. He looked back at me, the reflection of my face flickered in his wide eyes, and shook his head.

"No," he spoke wearily, "I do not think I do." A heavy moment passed. Suddenly, we were shaken by the dry snap of a twig from the shadowy trees behind the fire. The German started up, moving towards the other side of

the fire, picking up his rifle. I watched through the shifting flames as a figure emerged.

“Kommandant!” He snapped to attention, as the figure moved past him, around the fire. Through the fire, I could see a uniform adorned with a mess of ribbons and ornaments, and capped by a spear-topped helmet. The soldier followed, as the commander stood by the fire and stared at me.

The commander snapped something in German, glaring at the soldier. The fire cast shadows under his bold cheekbones and his sharp brow. I could not see his eyes.

The soldier replied, his voice trembling slightly. I watched his head twitch.

The commander barked.

The soldier seemed to plead, shyly.

The commander took his revolver from his side. It was ivory hilted and crested with a golden iron cross. He handed it to the soldier. The soldier looked despairingly at the commander, with the revolver in his palms. The commander shouted at the soldier. My heart raced in my chest as Antoine’s breath, pulsing in and out, filled my ears. The commander shouted, his whole body shaking with every syllable. Still with that look of crushing desperation in his eyes, the soldier took revolver’s hilt in his hand, and extended his arm and the gun towards me. He looked me in the eye. I saw that low, orange glow, deep inside of them. He looked away, and I shut my eyes as tight as I could.

A series of explosions sounded. A few moments

passed, in that terrible silence. I opened my eyes, and saw the soldier and the commander dead, lying one atop the other next to the fire. Three men emerged like spirits from the trees. "We got a Kraut general boys!" one of them exclaimed. His voice was American, strange. He lightly nudged the commander with his foot. Another spotted Antoine and I. "And a couple of Frogs! Some lucky sons-a-bitches." As they moved to untie us, I stared deep into the fire, into that orange glow, and listened to the slow rise and fall of Antoine's breath.



Octopus on my mind.

About the Author, Thanks

Bryan spends his time slaying dragons in the pine barrens of New Jersey, and studying screenwriting at SUNY Purchase in New York. He hopes someday to have a successful career in dragon slaying. He is the creator of Newt Jersey, a comic that lives on the web, in various print forms, and right outside your window when you sleep.

Bryan would like to thank his family who has been amazing, and all the wild folk that have given him inspiration over the years.

In the future, Bryan plans to be older. He also plans to publish a book collecting the first run of Newt Jersey comics, with a gaggle of tiny stories.

Contact him anytime. Don't be afraid.
Don't be afraid.

bryan.korn@purchase.edu
bryankorn.blogspot.com
newtjersey.blogspot.com

