

Claudio Oswald Niedworok's

Under A Primitive Moon



A Creative Web OF SHORT STORIES FROM a POWERFUL WRITING TALENT

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DEDICATION

**DEDICATED to my READERSHIP and especially to my inimitable friend and
lifelong inspiration as an author of many books and movies,
RAY BRADBURY. Cheers!**

QUOTES ABOUT CLAUDIO FROM LEGENDS IN THE ARTS

“Claudio! BRAVO!”
RAY BRADBURY.

“Claudio, you are as great an artist as any generation could hope to produce and you have a responsibility in your art.”
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JASON ROBARDS.

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PHIL HARRIS.

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LEONARD W. PHILLIPS / Founder-Owner of Phillips Oil Company.

“Claudio, Congratulations on the great success of your original production of Storytelling here at Theatre In The Park. Rarely is an independent work received with such overwhelming critical and popular support. To see an audience respond with a standing ovation after your opening night performance was encouraging to all of us producing original works. All of us at Theatre In The Park wish you continued success and we hope to have an opportunity to work together with you on future projects.”
IRA DAVID WOOD III

EPIGRAPH

“You must kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight.”

– Dan Fogelberg

PREFACE

When a writer writes it is not simply to pen a narrative or poem but rather wrestling with life itself. It is to answer the individual **why and wherefore** one is here. It is to validate being worthy of the calling that writing and becoming a scribe is. The masters and gurus of the written word reveal their emergence in this splendid and evocative craft as a badge of honour and courage they had to defend with every new word and chapter and volume writ. To strive with each new effort to exceed and excel the one before and to reach for excellence in all. So when you read a story or verse that is the fruit of such a dedicated soul, such an accomplished artist in the medium, you are not simply perusing words on paper or in a book but rather visiting a glance into the life of that life; the very essence of that soul in flesh and bone and craft. In deed a reflection of all the vitality he or she was once possessed of by virtue of the passions for the subjects and creations conveyed.

To truly savour the experience of reading a book or tale you must take your time with it as one would with a vintage wine or brandy. Read and re-read any line and composition that is unclear at first until it becomes crystallized and intimate in your own understanding of it. Realize that, upon reading, you are inside the mind and heart and thoughts of the one who wrote those words and imbued them with their meaning and their reach. You are more intimate than any lover ever was as they were all found wanting of a deeper knowledge that only solitude could bring. You hold and witness the very sacred thoughts and creations and imaginings the author took solace and refuge in. Every look of preoccupation ever yielded another, every gaze and distraction once interrupted, every solitude pursued and privacy sought for long hours and days and nights entwined and entangled in the creative process is in the gift of expression you hold within your grasp. Drink it in and let it reveal you to yourself by all it stirs and evokes in you, no matter the genre. Go to places you have never been and consider thoughts and motivations and cultures that are not your own. Identify in ways you never thought you could by expanding your imagination and broadening your horizons as a mental traveller. This will cause you to find an ever evolving sense of self that validates even more of you to yourself in ponderous and meditative ways few other experiences could provide such leisure for. This is the **why and wherefore** every writer writes and, having writ, moves on.

In that same spirit of writers and the written word...I give you mine. Cheers!

Claudio Oswald Niedworok

* * *

Please be aware that Claudio writes in the Queen's English and not American English, so as not to be confused or think he has strange spelling habits. Now enjoy a creative web of short stories from a powerful writing talent.

* * *

NEVER MOURN THE SEAGULL

The captain set fire to another cigar as he maintained a compass reading of two hundred and ten degrees. He had long been aware of the storm through which he now stubbornly guided the African Sun. The sixteen to eighteen foot waves caused the yacht to pitch, roll, and yaw port to starboard in forty and fifty degree angles. These ravaging seas bade an intimidating spectacle as the vessel helplessly sank her bow into the angry waves. The automatic pilot had become a true companion to many seafarers of the era and aided him at present as he endeavoured several well-balanced attempts to plot the course. Captain Condoile; a face that bore the mysteries of the seas with eyes that were indistinguishably blue or grey, perhaps both. A stub nose, thin lips, narrow cheekbone and stern chin which lay hidden beneath a thick dark beard. His nostrils were partially disguised by an untrimmed moustache. His legs were thin yet muscular in which every nerve and tendon was trained, throughout the years, to the extent of maintaining him erect at even the most precarious balance. His shoulders, chest and backbone were as if carved in granite and reflected every muscle. He wore long black trousers and a pair of white deck shoes. His white uniform shirt lay saturated in blood beside the bleeding corpse of the engineer who, along with the first mate and cook, had been slain by the intruding presence sitting in the captain's chair. A revolver was steadied by a firm grip and levelled directly toward the centre of his being.

“Damn it! Can't you keep this vessel a bit steadier?!” the gunman spoke, angered and a trifle seasick. Condoile ignored the indirect command and continued plotting the course. He had sailed directly off the Cuban coastline as a member of his crew sighted a smaller vessel giving signals of despair. Once Condoile eyed the apparent desperate situation he assumed course in its direction. Upon approaching the sailing vessel he was rather thrown to confusion in finding only one person aboard as he regarded such the venture of a fool or one entirely naive to the perils of the seas. Jeff Marvin, the engineer, had been the one to help the dark-skinned man aboard. Judging conclusively from appearances one would have thought him Cuban. As time and accent revealed him, however, he presented himself more an Englishman. The man had shared few words as he asked the cook for a glass of cold water. In a moment's gesture the Haitian cook descended the ladder leading through the crew's quarters to his galley from a slide hatch in the foredeck. None had taken particular concern as the stranger followed. Instances later two thunderous revolver shots violated the atmosphere. Within the very seconds Robert Fennace, the American first mate, ran for the aft-deck to retrieve a rifle from the owner's collective display. Condoile, in the same respect, shuffled

through his top drawer in the wheelhouse and took grip on a .357 Magnum which he had brought along for the trip. It was ere he had been fully able to plan an advancement that he witnessed as Marvin who, in his bafflement took an undecided approach to the situation, was forcefully taken from behind by a strong arm. The Englishman then proceeded to press his revolver awkwardly into the engineer's right temple. The stranger aboard had then convinced both the captain and first mate, who gave a daring squeeze on their triggers, that any further action would result in the death of the engineer who presently strangled at his very grip. The situation appeared hopeless and dim. The rifle and handgun were tossed to sea and in the very next breath the shattering force of a bullet through the skull flung Fennace over the railing. Condoile flooded with fury yet his predicament rendered him helpless to advance. The killer then tripped Marvin onto the wheelhouse floor and in the event sent a battering blow against his head. He proceeded then, at close range, to fire a bullet into the right side of his chest. The captain instantly removed his shirt and laid it upon the wound in an effort to stifle the flow of blood. He insisted Marvin be sent to a Cuban hospital or left ashore to the mercy of someone's aid. The killer rejected his plea and in turn fired a second bullet into the victim's head. The crew was dead.

These, as he recollected, had been the events of only six hours ago. He walked from the work desk to the wheel to eye the compass and set the course in what he hoped would be an easier degree. In truth he cared not. The skeleton-like figure that still sat in the corner on the captain's chair was now silhouetted eerily by the dimming grey of a forthcoming night of storms. Condoile slid several inches in the blood of Marvin's corpse as he returned to his desk.

"Throw the damned thing overboard! Do it now!" a mercenary tone commanded. The captain knelt down taking the lifeless body by one arm and lifted it across his shoulders. He arose and walked in balanced steps to the wheelhouse door, slid it open, and cast the engineer into a restless dark sea. Marvin's blood trickled in streams across his chest and down his back. He paid it no mind, returned to the shelter of the wheelhouse, and slid shut the door. The windshield wipers were in full operation and the radar and scanner gave no indication of any obstacles before them. Stealthily and persistently the African Sun swept her wake through the restless waters of the night. The Englishman emerged from the shadows and positioned himself beside Condoile.

"How many knots is she running?" he asked in an intruding tone.

“Ten,” the captain replied.

“She can do better than that!”

“Yes, but not in this weather!”

“Why in hell not?”

“Note how she heels.”

“Well in that case switch off the damned pilot and guide her yourself!” Condoile ceased the automatic pilot and gripped the wheel.

“Now,” demanded the despicable figure, “put her on full speed!”

“Listen, you crazy bastard, she’ll capsize!”

“Do as I bloody well say you sea-whore, or I should be tempted to blast your guts out!” he spoke in cold command and pressed his revolver awkwardly into the captain’s ribs. In sheer frustrated anger Condoile flattened the lever to a full fifteen knots which was the very limit this one hundred and ten foot feadship would submit. He permitted the wheel a very conservative degree of play. As the Englishman recognized the extreme heeling to either side and heard the crashing of supplies and breaking of dishes from the galley below he welcomed the previous ten knots and automatic pilot.

“Get Miami on the radio for me and no codes or fancy-talk is that understood?!” spoke the man behind a gun.

Condoile gave no reply, lifted the speaker, and turned the dial to channel five. ““This is whiskey-victor-three-five-nine, yacht: African Sun, calling Miami. Do you read me - over?”

After several more attempts an operator responded. The Englishman rudely gripped the speaker from Condoile’s grasp and began his communication.

“Hello operator, get me a Rodger Altwood at the Skyward, extension two-three-six.”

“You’re ringing. Go ahead,” the operator announced minutes later.

“Hello. This is two-three-six,” Altwood responded.

“Hello, Rodger, this is Ian Kent. I am presently aboard the African Sun.”

“Very good. I am glad to hear of your success. How did it go?”

Condoile was lending a curious ear to the conversation and began piecing the puzzle for himself. This mystery who called himself Ian Kent.

“I almost lost the match with this bunch,” Kent continued. “the captain had a very alert crew.”

“Had...What in hell do you mean - HAD?” Altwood returned in a tone of resentment.

“Listen - it was necessary to employ methods of my own!”

“I am nonetheless quite confident you didn’t try or even consider adopting any of the suggested means. You always did have a savage reputation, you bloody bastard!”

“Spare me! It is bureaucracy such as yourself which bids itself instrumental to such savagery as mine. Without your support we would be a perishing breed. So you see vermin like us are our only true means of sustenance. We need each other to feed off until the decay consumes us. Now you just be ready for me upon my return or I shall become reputable before your very eyes!”

“Your money will be settled as agreed. When do you come within range of Chevalez?”

“He lands by helicopter aboard the yacht sometime around noon tomorrow. We should be nearing the Mexican isle of Cozumel at that time. Rest assured his destiny is in my hands.” Kent concluded and replaced the speaker. He observed as the angry waters still came bursting over the bow and ran their white foam across the deck.

Ernesto Chevalez was a political defender of Cuba who had successfully uncovered several conspiracies and terrorist schemes against his native land which, in their unfolding, led him directly to the head chain of an assassin ring in Miami and Palm Beach. Local and National media had given this ongoing investigation considerable coverage but much was yet unknown. Condoile had been intrigued by what the newspapers and television media had exposed so far and continued to follow it. He had thus sized Ian Kent up as a reputable assassin who had been put into operation to prevent Chevalez from making any revelations to the authorities and public.

The captain, now fully aware of the motive and purpose of his adversary, had little hope of remaining alive unless he successfully plotted an immediate strategy for a kill. The African Sun had, since last he observed, sailed into calmer seas. They were leaving the storms and soon the waters would surrender to an even lesser degree of calm. Condoile switched off the windshield wipers and began resetting the course to accommodate the sea change. The isle of Cozumel was now less than two hundred nautical miles from their reach. With an unanticipated suddenness Kent arose and demanded the keys to the wheelhouse doors. He then proceeded to lock both including the door giving entrance to the aft-lounge and cabins below.

“I am going below deck for a cup of coffee and would strongly advise against your following with any ridiculous schemes.” He spoke, sliding the revolver between his belt and pants and descended the wheelhouse stairway into the dining room to another flight leading him into the cook’s galley. Condoile understood this to be his one and only chance and thus seized the moment.

It had been less than ten minutes ere Kent returned holding a cup of coffee in one hand and his revolver cocked in the other. Much to his surprise and discontent he found the wheelhouse entirely uninhabited. This baffled him for there were no broken windows, the doors were locked and he held the keys. He cautiously opened the door giving entrance to the head, which was situated directly behind the ship’s wheel. No one was there. Condoile had left no trace in his disappearance. The killer’s eyes scanned every inch of the wheelhouse for it occurred to him there could be an exit through the floor. At length he discerned the silver latch which revealed an emergency entrance into the engine room. Gripping it he lifted the snug concealment and made a swift descent into the crowded room. He searched the entire area of engines, motors, pumps and switchboards, yet there appeared no sign of Condoile. Gradually he advanced in the direction of the enormous main generator with his revolver extended apprehensively before him. The deafening tremble of motors

and persistent hissing of pumps made any movement impossible to trace by ear. Once there he curiously laid eyes upon an open toolbox that rested on top of the generator. It was in the distraction of that moment that a large rubber mallet struck him viciously against the head and swung his being clumsily into a screwdriver which stabbed awkwardly into his neck. In this gruesome event his revolver flew across the room.

Condoile lifted himself over the generator tossing the mallet and screwdriver into the box. He then proceeded to pull Kent's body across his shoulders and opened an iron-cast door which led into the galley. As he shut the door behind himself the dinosaur tremble of the engine room faded into a monotonous hum. Once reaching the wheelhouse he searched through the killer's pockets for his keys. Upon retrieving them he unlocked and slid open the door beside his desk. In the same gesture he flung Kent's body over the railing to drown if he was yet not dead. Dead or alive he would be a festive occasion for the sharks.

Condoile descended the steps below once more to dispose of the corpse of Samuel Rossi, the Haitian cook. Once accomplished he permitted himself to rest upon the wheelhouse couch as the yacht guided itself steadily onward. Hell in itself could not have been as gruesome as the preceding ten hours, he thought to himself, and then decided to concern himself no longer with such thoughts. What is done is done, he concluded.

For an hour he relaxed. Then, as he felt the sea to have reached a safe calm, he arose and ceased the automatic pilot, cut off her speed power, killed the motors, and descended through the open hatch in the floor into the engine room. For several minutes he examined the generator and then retrieved a torch from a metal cabinet above it, switched it on, and walked over to the main switchboard. He turned off the main electrical supply and then directed the light of the torch to guide him back to the generator. Once having suspended the light above himself, with its beam aimed accurately on the starter button, he set to work. He was fully aware that the yacht was now indiscernible to any travelling vessels on this vast ocean, for it shone no light and the night was an opaque black sky. The yacht swayed easily as the waters merged calmly about her.

Within half an hour Condoile resumed his position in the wheelhouse and soon had the African Sun on course and travelling at a full fifteen knots. As the night broke into morning and morning surrendered to the afternoon the helicopter made its landing on the top deck landing pad. Chevez

appeared with two armed bodyguards, an engineer, a deckhand, his cook, and the pilot. Condoile greeted him with his customary cigar between the teeth. Once descended to the lower deck environs he respectfully opened the door to the lounge.

“We’ve had some bad trouble aboard - an assassin! Wiped out the entire crew. Almost got lost in the shuffle myself.”

“You are serious?! Well then, immediately you must take these documents and film to the Interpol agents who await them in Acapulco. Also there is two hundred thousand dollars in cash in here for some discreet legal expenses to make some things go away, you know. The agents know where it must go and they will telephone me to confirm that they got it. Otherwise there will be lots of trouble for you. Here is a note with my instructions. You must leave now. Go!” Chevalez spoke with a distinguishable Cuban accent.

“Fernandez”, he addressed one of his bodyguards, “take the wheel!” He concluded and handed Condoile a briefcase and an envelope which bore his instructions. The pilot, Connery, and he immediately climbed the upper deck and entered the helicopter. They became airborne in a matter of seconds.

“From what I overheard things must’ve been rough for you. Bloody assassin, eh?! What about Chevalez?” The pilot inquired with a curious concern.

“Shut up and fly this damned thing so we can see the yacht! In a matter of minutes the timer I planted will cut off the generator and if you observe closely you will witness the results of what is to be once she is started up again. This is going to give a whole new definition to pressing the ignition, I promise.” He spoke and puffed the cigar.

As both viewed the yacht from their vantage point on high they soon experienced the tumultuous explosion which ended all life aboard. The impact of it was delivered all the way to the ascending helicopter in tumultuous wind currents and caused them to sway several times before they levelled out again. The African Sun rose in splinters to the sky and soon all but the burning oil sank beneath the surface of the sea.

“Very efficient. Bloody hell! So you’re the one they call The Seagull by code. Why?” The pilot once again curiously concerned.

“Why?” Condoile responded with a frown, “Because a seagull maintains an unsuspecting distance from its prey until at last it descends assured and confident of its kill.”

“Bravo! Very well spoken. Now, as you know, you are to parachute onto the isle of Cozumel and I know just the spot to drop you off. I think you understand that I can’t land this thing without bringing too much attention to myself from the authorities but parachuting you in should eliminate that concern.”

“Very well. I assume the area is secluded and as uninhabited as possible?”

“Yes, my friend. That it is.”

Condoile flicked his stub to sea and retrieved two cigars from his shirt pocket. He handed one to Connery and lit it for him, then lit his own.

“The parachute is behind your seat,” Connery informed him as they neared Cozumel. He steered the helicopter to the far north end of the isle and flew several hundred feet lower. Condoile strapped the chute around himself and prepared for his dive. He took several deep inhalations of the cigar, tossed it away, and dove acrobatically through the air. Connery leaned the helicopter and looked at the stony surface of the isle. He knew Condoile’s parachute would not open for he had personally woven the inside into an entanglement of knots. He had even switched briefcases with Chevalez, so the one Condoile had taken with him bore no more than the weight of an accumulation of outdated newspapers. He stole one more glance at Condoile’s wicked fall, inhaled a lungful of smoke, and in the event thought to himself ~ The Seagull flies, and laughed.

In the very next instance the cigar exploded.

SALTWATER AND ADRENALINE

That bastard son of a priestly affair more than had it coming when he affronted the old mariner. No one witnessing the entire shuffle between the two saw it coming, least of all did the offender. A sailour who stood to the right of the old man, a young American tourist to the left of the other and I at the far end of the bar, were all drawn to observe the situation. We were noticeably affected in doing so by the sheer tense nature of their pantomime and gesture. Anyhow, it was obvious to all of us that the younger brute, a mate from the schooner Alexander, who was commonly aroused by drink, began the confrontation verbally and was the entire fault of it. On several occasions the old man gestured him away but his attitude only became more aggressive and confrontational. This continued for what seemed a lengthy period of offence and defence which gradually appeared to take on a certain gloom heretofore unnoticed. It certainly made the occasion for a drink more interesting to all except the bartender who, by the distraction of his duties in preparation for a busy evening at port, was and remained oblivious to the psychological metamorphosis at mid-bar. The situation very abruptly began to lose any element of tolerance by its onlookers and I, having placed my drink upon the bar, was already in motion to bring it to a halt. I had seen enough.

The next few seconds held us all at bay and with bated breath. In mid-gesture of the brute offender the gnarly figured old seadog leapt from his stool with singular aim and absolute ambition and wrapped his narrow long fingers about the neck of this aggressive fool who was totally dumbstruck and ill prepared against the sheer momentum of it. Both fell with a heaving crash upon the floor thus startling even the bartender into alarm. The struggle continued horizontally and appeared rather conclusively that of the offender gasping for breath and attempting to rid himself of the mariner's claustrophobic grip about his neck, yet to no avail.

The old man had very successfully calculated the rhythm of exhalation by the undesired solicitor of his wrath. He had thereupon, in unanticipated momentum, clasped the fool in a death-grip from which only an outside support and physical effort could free him. As I momentarily regained my advancement in their direction, more due to the lunatic ravings of an unseasoned bartender than my own response to the turn of events, I was to find myself once more surprised.

Many minutes had ensued since the impact was delivered and many a claustrophobic moment hence had yielded the offender no relief in the nature of his struggle. As I arrived to separate the two

I was to witness the younger man slipping rapidly into unconsciousness while the elderly maintained his gruesome grip. Several of us realized that unless the strangulation hold was arrested immediately it would bear fatal results. I thus dedicated myself wholly to the effort. This was the moment of my surprise and a shock to us all. It was only with my truest physical force that I was able to unlock the mariner's fingers from about the young fool's neck and in so doing discovered the old man dead.

INTO THE ABSTRACT AND OUT OF THE BLUE

Neruda Picatisse; artist and lover of both impressionism (for its licentious lack of detail) and the abstract (for the uninhibited originality of design and detail it is possessed of and to which it is evermore a canvas of opportunity) was as bohemian in his demeanour as he was obsessed with his art.

The early, mildly temperate, afternoon held an otherwise unusual yet likely promise of sun outside his quaint Italian cottage. This particular midsummer had been to him a season of considerable discontent as it had been an obstacle of rains and winds that were neither conducive to canvas or paint. The tempest of restlessly moody days had left his soul somewhat less than illumined or inspired but an innate commitment and discipline, along with a routine kettle of South African Rooibos Tea, drew him ever so habitually to his easel and palette. Both were already arranged in anticipation of a splendid harvest of meditative hours spent painting amid the shading elongated cedars and pines of his annual refuge. An artistically picturesque, however exhausted, miscellany of partially used paint tubes and well-worn brushes also awaited him there.

Exiting his domicile with a degree of cabin fever that he was pleased to dismiss he could neither have suspected, foreseen, or been in any wise prepared, as the small two-seater aircraft, with its engine long silent, fell abandoned out of the sky and through the trees before him. Its fall was strangely, curiously, noiseless and nose-first into the clearing less than ten yards from his easel. The gravitational impact and subsequent transformation into a melding of combustibles surrounding their wrecked and mangled skeletal metallic counterparts drew only a minimal yet white-hot explosion. An ignition of seemingly little consequence given the more common outcomes of airborne failures. A slight earthen tremor was evident upon contact and what remained did more to agitate an abstract imagination in the artist bearing witness to it than the entire incident accomplished in and of itself at evoking any greater alarm and concern. Had the aircraft still been manned then the doubtlessly tragic consequences would have been far too dire emotionally, and otherwise, to have manifested any intrigue and inspirations at all. But since such was, most gratefully, not the issue an unanticipated surge of adrenaline began a satirical dance-macabre with his senses and maneuvered him, almost hypnotically, down the rabbit-hole of his own psyche. Neruda was slipping unavoidably into realms tangible only to the fantastic in his entirely unpredictable imaginings and spilling thus

eventually and inevitably into paint and onto canvas. A credit likely more due his subconscious than ever his waking self. Perhaps the likes of Blake, Picasso, Gibran, Matisse, Rodin, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and countless others greeted him there in regions familiar only to him. Each one yielding an aspect of the influences that shaped his own. He suddenly discovered himself anew in this moment...at this time...and standing on the fertile soil where the seed of an idea takes root and snakes along; where sleep and hibernation dissipate into Spring air and where the doldrums and the void shift inside themselves and surrender to the creative process.

So there he stood as deep inside his internal regions as he was outside his cottage where surrealism and the abstract were no less pronounced or defined. The influence of which still gestated in his soul and artistic vision. His fading white smudged, smeared, stained and over-worn overcoat was an element of art in as much as it was art itself. It revealed a man currently stupefied and dumbstruck by this dramatic shock and imposition upon his otherwise dormant senses...with his kettle and teacup still contained in separate hands.

UNDER A PRIMITIVE MOON

The night call of the animals and the song of nature gave their collaboration in presenting an air of indescribable allure to the setting of the African sun. A blazing blend of red and yellow lit up the sky above the wide stretch of open veldt¹ upon which Daka Ikwaga walked once again in the direction of the waterhole or Sea of Meditation as he had christened it. He walked with a crippled leg and used a knopkerrie² in case the pain became more of a burden than his leg could stand to bear. As he walked this eve he cast a long limping shadow and leaned heavily to the right relying much upon his wooden aid. It was an hour ago since he had left the kraal³ to indulge in his one mile journey across the veldt. As he arrived by the Sea he felt exhausted. Daka was now an old man and it seemed his beloved waterhole became a more strenuous journey each time he pursued it. He had lived to experience two entire generations and had had many wives and sons and daughters; forty-two wives and ninety-seven children. For reasons totally foreign to explanation he suddenly found himself thinking of the many cattle it had been custom to trade for his wives. He concluded these thoughts in reassuring himself that the price was justified for all except the few which had deserted him.

Footnotes:

1. **Veldt:** Afrikaans term for a relatively dry grassy terrain common to the plains.
2. **Knopkerrie:** An African hand-carved wooden walking staff with an extended round knob projected at the top of it for self-defense.
3. **Kraal:** A native village surrounded by a steep clay wall for purposes of defining the tribal dwelling as well as a protectorate from wildlife and other tribal attacks.

The last rays of the evening sun touched his aged black skin in golden reflections as he sat cross-legged upon a bank of hardened clay in observance of several wildebeest and zebras as they quenched their thirsts. A subtle wind whispered across the veldt persuading the tall blades of grass to bow gently in their greetings. There was a solemn intrigue and mystery in this eve for Ikwaga as he sat in eager anticipation of the dark of night. It was in this night that he was to hold council with the spirits of Drekan and Jala.

As he sat gazing up at the sky he noticed seven stars evenly spaced apart and following one another in a perfect horizontal row. He assumed this to be a message of the gods yet understood nothing of its significance. The wildebeest and zebras had parted from the water and were now

replaced by several chattering monkeys. The sky had surrendered itself to only a few clouded streaks of the parting sun and the night sang softly of its coming.

Daka used the knopkerrie to stand and looked far across the veldt to ascertain himself of any carnivorous prowlers. He then collected several twigs and brush to build a fire. Once aflame he gave his thoughts to the former philosophers and leaders of his peoples, Drekan and Jala. Both had been slain in battle against the Voortrekkers⁴ during their ruling. It had been during the leadership of Jala that the Sea of Meditation was chosen and anointed the sacred ground for only the leaders and wise-men of the tribe to hold council or purely for purposes of meditation. And sacred it was, for the spirits of the dead held communication there. Any of lesser authority bidding intrusion were to behold the curse of being outcast from the tribe and thereupon hunted and killed like prey.

Footnote:

4. **Voortrekkers:** The early Dutch settlers.

Ikwaga was riddled and confused for he knew not how the communication of this eve was to be performed. During the leadership of Jala, yet unlike Drekan, it had been custom to sacrifice a member of the tribe in order that the spirit may possess the flesh as an instrument of its communication. These sacrificial gatherings often resulted in the most horrid of events.

In this moment Daka's memory returned one particular night of such an occurrence. Many of the tribesmen would have volunteered their lives for such a sacrifice as it was thought to be a most worthy cause and an honourable death, though Mana had long preached its unworthiness and most influentially expressed his disbelief amongst his peoples. Jala had found this to be a threat to his leadership and therefore commanded Mana be the chosen sacrifice. This revolutionary of peace was thereupon seized and forcefully taken to the sacred grounds. He had battled violently against his captors and shouted shame upon his followers who aided him not. His desperate efforts to regain his freedom resulted in a total distortion of his facial structure. His left eye had been torn from its socket by a sharp rock which a warrior had used against him. As three held him fast the fourth warrior struck the rock repeatedly into his face, tearing his lips in such a manner that his cracked teeth and torn gum were revealed directly beneath the nostrils. His nose had been splintered in fragments and his jaw hung loose and broken. Blood rushed furiously from every tear. His panic-

filled struggle continued and the most gruesome sounds emanated from within him until the blade sank deep into his trembling heart. In nightmarish a sequence the communication was then performed with his punctured, torn and bleeding flesh. Daka had witnessed these events and shuddered at their recollection. The communication of that night was held with the slain Drekan and concerned procedures in battle against the Voortrekkers. Jala fell to the mercy of a rifle bullet in the battle that followed and Daka, the witchdoctor, philosopher and wise-man, who had always reserved himself, was elected new leader of these Umsulu peoples. Due to the dreaded memory he out-ruled all human sacrifice and brought wise teachings and philosophies of love to his people...and he spoke well of the revolution of Mana.

Daka ascended from the depths of his thoughts and memories and once again became conscious of his surroundings. He saw that the moon had risen from his slumber and cast his light in silver reflections upon the still water. The fire burned well and yielded a generous light to the eyes of Ikwaga as he scanned the area around himself for any movement or sign of their arrival. He saw naught and gradually resumed himself to his patient wait. As he sat in silent meditations he heard a rustling sound from behind and moved closer to the fire. He had not yet cast a glance backward as he suddenly felt a warm panting breath upon his naked back. The effect sent a shiver down his spine and he froze in his poise. As swift and unanticipated as lightning marks a somber sky he retrieved a burning branch from the flames and turned holding it before him to face the mysterious presence. To his entire bafflement and shock he found himself staring into the mocking steel-grey eyes of an intimidating cheetah. Holding the burning branch to its face he bent low to reach for his knopkerrie. Once in his grip he stretched back to enable a full swing and strong force against the head of the beast. It was in that moment that he heard what he could not conceive. The carnivore spoke. Indeed a voice came from within the beast and spoke in an Umsulu tongue thus saying: "Ikwaga cease! It is I - Drekan. I have come to hold council with you and must warn you that the Xhewanga tribe has declared war against your people and will attack in the young hours of the morning. Unless you warn your people of their coming they shall fall to the spears of the enemy while asleep!"

And the surprised Daka spoke, "I had long suspected this, yet not for the morrow. The gods be with me. I must warn my people for they know of nothing and expect only the sunrise and my return." Daka looked about noticing no sign of Jala and asked, "What form has Jala chosen for the communication of this night?" The mouth of the cheetah opened revealing strong canine teeth and a healthy jawbone as the inhabiting spirit of Drekan spoke once more in a voice of ages. "The spirit of

Jala was condemned to the eternal fires to exist no longer among creation.” Daka felt no surprise as he heard of the condemnation of Jala for he felt if justice was not meted out in the arena of life it would indeed be done so within the chambers of the justice of the ruling gods. He looked deeply into the eyes of this carnivorous beast of prey and observed as the spirit strained it once again to speak. “Daka, you must look above and observe the seven stars. Note also that the moon follows directly behind them. It shall be when the moon passes over the seventh star that the cheetah will be relieved of my spirit and return to its natural instincts. You must therefore crush the skull of the beast or it will destroy you. This will be my last communication for I have been chosen to dwell once again amongst the living. I shall be returned as a child at birth. You will know of my coming for I shall come as the son of the leader. The moon is now over the fifth star. You must prepare to destroy the beast and go back amongst your people to warn them of the Xhewangas. Lead also your wife Letanga to safety for she is the chosen flesh of my conception.”

The voice of Drekan ceased as the moon hid the seventh star. Instantly Daka struck a fierce blow against the head of the carnivore using his knopkerrie and the beast sank like death upon the ground. Somewhat disillusioned he began his return to the kraal. He had to give warning and prepare his people for battle. Already a strategic plan seeped into his consciousness as he hurriedly made his way across the veldt. It was ere he had walked far from the sacred grounds that he heard an agonized growl from behind. He thought immediately of the cheetah which he had left for dead. Swiftly he turned to face his adversary yet saw none. There appeared no sign of any existence behind him. In sheer disarray he turned to resume his walk. Ere he was fully able to conceive the next moments he felt an excruciatingly painful tear across his chest and down his back. He fell weakened to the earth and in his bafflement and horror recognized the beast. It was not dead. Though it must have been in a frenzy of pain for the side of its head, which had been struck by the knopkerrie, lay raw in its exposure. Ikwaga fumbled about blindly in an effort to regain his wooden aid which he had lost in the fall. He had to defeat this cunning predator and warn his people or he felt their slaughter would haunt his soul forever. Drekan had warned him to destroy the beast yet he had failed in his anxiety and was now being dealt the penalty of his neglect. The carnivore tore once again into his naked being and, with one forceful blow of its monstrous claws, painfully parted the flesh from his battle-scarred stomach and exposed his rib carriage in a most gruesome revelation. With his last strength he released a yell that echoed far into the kraal and then surrendered himself to the savagery of the beast.

Three warriors awoke at the sound of the piercing cry and rushed from their huts across the veldt to the aid of Ikwaga. As they arrived they saw naught but the scattered flesh of their leader and then laid eyes upon the beast that lingered there. The warriors raised their spears and then, in mutual astonishment, observed as the carnivore spoke.

“Cease, for it is I - Ikwaga! You must be warned...”

With sudden effect a warrior raised his voice and thereby awakened the others from their stupendous fixation. “It is an evil. Slay the beast!” The warrior commanded and the cheetah fell victim to their piercing spears. Once dead the three warriors retrieved their spears and walked back in the direction of the kraal as the African sky cast its early morning light across the veldt.

KNIVES OF WIND

A late October wind mocked and chaffed wickedly through the old burial ground where an autumnal rustle of leaves gave vocalization to its restless, haunting murmur, all to an audience of one. “I am...” began an intermittent stir of raspy echoes, “the ancient and eternal one; a voice to all who are sunken here in the premature cessation of lives unlived to purposes unrecognized and fates unreconciled to their demise.”

Skye Trocken stood as still as the great dead sentinel oak in the midst of numerable sunken graves with his long dark coat yielding yet another mystical element to the gothic, bleak borderland between twilight and dusk. He was attentive to the audible murmurings in the rustle of leaves like a distant and subdued sharpening of knives by an ancient army on the path to war, in this instance however, October’s eerie vocal chords. Perhaps, he thought, the wind itself was simply a gathering of ghosts and as such merely the beginning of stranger things to come. A disorienting chill had already seeped into his being and he was frozen where he stood by the power of the language and its effect on him. This small deep-wood region of the forest was referred to as “Witches Cemetery” or “Restless Graves” by the encroaching local populous even though there were neither tombstones or any, in such accordance, identifying markers whatsoever save the concaving earth beneath his feet. To Trocken the burial site was known through prideful legacies passed on among his own bloodline along with a frequently expressed communal dread of it. Being the descendant of a lengthy lineage of witch-hunters, however distantly removed, he knew himself to be standing on the ground both hallowed and cursed of an extensive and disquieting mass grave; a realm of horror where the cries of the blood were still in the earth. A place where terrified witches and outcasts were burned at the stake, were wickedly drowned in a manner so cruel yet so loyally attended by the nearby townsfolk that the process was often stretched out for days on end in the distant lake. These mystics were tortured, crushed, had their tongues cut out, eyes gorged, limbs severed, were lashed beyond recognition, mortally wounded and left to endure an agonizing death while the puritans looked mockingly and self-righteously on. They were crucified, torn apart, strangled and suffocated, entrapped with vicious and diseased malnourished dogs, ravaged and raped mercilessly and repeatedly, and by all such heinously violent and vile licentiousness destroyed. All this with the expressed unyielding support and extreme prejudicial indifference of Church, State, and Justices. They were frequently buried alive with their adolescent young in the name of puritanical

purifications and other such macabre religio-political rites of the day. Their newborn were seldom spared a similar fate. Even in death these pagans did not remain unviolated by necrophiliacs. The witch-hunters themselves were the very catalysts to these atrocities and often found authoring their own. This human carnage was morally, spiritually and physically absolute in its devastation and the earth remembered all, the very earth on which he stood.

“Why are you here?” The wind rustled and shifted. “Even though your own deeds may not be kindred to past generations your blood is! And that alone vexes your presence here amid the blood in the dust mingled with the clay beneath the soles of your feet. This, of all the eves to come, is by far the direst of choices you could have made in bringing yourself here. The eve of all hallows is upon you! Why are you here, young fool?”

“To attain some hope of absolution for the sins of my forefathers and a greater sense of harmony with this torment known as the blood of which you speak coursing through my veins.” He spoke while running his right hand across the top of his head and nervously arresting his motion in the lengthy blond hair at the nape of his neck.

“Absolution you will not find here, Skye Trocken, you of the dreaded Trocken lineage. In lieu of your arrival here, however, there may be a remedy to your other torment!” came an edgy clamour of distant knives of wind falling piercingly silent as dusk dissolved into descending night.

Nightfall brought with it an uneasiness and concern for his very life.

Trocken became increasingly alarmed and suddenly felt himself swept up in a heightened anxiety given the disadvantage of his predicament in being the last of his descent yet alive and standing ankle deep in the sinking mulch and soil of Witches Cemetery. Being somewhat of a confirmed bachelor only cemented his isolation to his peril. It was by far the premeditated probability of his own extinction, as opposed to that of an entire ancestry and lineage, that curled insidiously up his spine like an invasive worm in the stem of a flower. At this moment, despite all personal motivations that had brought him here at this hour on this walk, he could not be certain as to whether he had followed a summoning from the graves or come of his own accord. In its well intended spontaneity he began to question his own naiveté in this undertaking as he felt entirely convinced of an impending encounter with the living dead. In as much as he disbelieved any such

superstitions the unsettling idea of it began to take on a life of its own. He was, he reminded himself, after all a man of science and medicine given in his services to the local community and townspeople which he had often felt would not fare well in any prolonged absence of his skills and remedies. He was the first doctor in all of the ill-fated generations from which he sprang and was possessed of an uncanny ability to transform herbs, mushrooms, cacti, and the most unlikely vegetation into highly effective and remedial medicines with occasional hallucinatory results, a craft which would in itself have been his own condemnation and as likely to have numbered him among the tormented dead. The town was plagued with malady upon malady to which only he had devised the cures, and because of his unorthodox methodology and practice in originating these medicines and tonics, no outsiders to the small community, still more a village than a township, were ever apprenticed in these arts. To compound this dilemma the current native offspring or elders were, ironically, neither so inclined nor apt. There was the belief that the town itself would be damned for witchery if news of their doctor and his locally accepted practices ever travelled far. Skye Trocken was thus maintained excessively wealthy, queen bee of the hive, while much about him was squalid poverty. To him, not unlike his family tree, the human body was more flesh and fleshly machinations than there was ever any proof of housing for a soul. It was more the brain, in his determination, that made one good or bad or imbued one with the capacity and mastery by which to hone a skill. Furthermore it enabled confidence, fortitude, and success, and any of these varied aspects were to him the product of environmental stimulus, parental conditioning and genetics in as much as his education steered his understanding. Genetic codes were at the time more suspect than knowledge-based and given little scientific credence in the medicinal arts but were none the less in keeping with his own translations of the unexplainable. The concepts of good and evil were to him quite calculatedly scientific but slaughters and carnages simply went against his medical indoctrinations and healing oaths. Somewhere in the midst of all his logic and reasoning there was a heartbeat not yet fully evolved to its human potential, subdued perhaps by an ancient blood both cold and resistant of true warmth. In pondering these issues he felt even more ridiculed at his presence on a veritable sea of skeletal remains from which the town had purposefully distanced itself, especially by night.

He was in no less a quandary concerning the facing down of these ever evolving discernments and, in further contemplation of this, sat down where he had stood unmoved. How was it he understood these murmurings of wind and what instilled in him this new capacity for fear and, above all, conscience? Why had he abandoned himself in all his excesses to this aberration, this

oppressive and lingering dark? His bearded chin was surrendered and sunken into his left palm with the elbow fully supported by his knee. He regretted not being in the comfort of his luxurious home, a regret, he began to realize that was becoming increasingly greater than the noble pilgrimage that had brought him to this foreboding and forbidden haunted terrain. He began to feel irrefutably more disingenuous to his original purpose and arrival; the hallowed ground rapidly losing any significance save that it had become a mere roost of buried carnage upon which to dread his myriad discomforts and to insult himself most discontentedly for the barren attempt at finding redemption and resurrection from generational sin. He sensed that the October wind and its gathering of ghosts had recognized his futile reach at conjuring a conscience in a lineage cursed to none. The wind's own measure had been as effective as it was brief. It had thereupon ebbed into a silence that both embarrassed and shamed the stalkerly gestalt and questionable character, as well as intent, of Doctor Skye Trocken who was discovered dead in his bed at age thirty three late the following afternoon. The addicted township crawled in shock at the news of it. Even the coroner was aghast at his emaciated corpse which he declared, in his findings, as unusually pallid and gaunt and evidently drained of all its blood.

THE LAZARUS SLEEP

The hands of the clock were about to strike eight as he awoke although there was never any sounding of the alarm. Ossman el Awar, the Egyptian, arose to confront yet another day of a similar routine of living. His life had always been one of a monotonous and carefully categorized reality. The time from his earliest hour to the hour of retirement was accounted and scheduled in an arrangement of precision and constancy such as only the methods of bureaucracy would inspire.

He arose from the bed folding his sheet and blanket to the left in a quick toss. In a somnolent state he stumbled over to his writing table by the window and retrieved from it a crumpled pack which contained the two last Rothman's Filter cigarettes of its previous twenty. Drawing one he held it between his lips as his eyes scanned the table for matches. There were several empty packs and sticks with their phosphorous heads already burned and used scattered across the table. Also three ashtrays which were overloaded with butts smoked down to their filters. Yet oddly, in this entire graveyard of waste, there lay not a single useable match. Ossman took the cigarette from his lips, tossed it against the window with its curtain half-drawn, and watched it bounce back onto the table where it immediately blended with the matchstick, paper, and tobacco disorder. Briefly he focused his attention on the untidy table and gave some thought to the loneliness, confusion, desolation and general lack of personal ambition it reflected within him. It was then, suddenly and without invitation, that every occurrence since his awakening returned to him in the reflection of failures during the course of his life.

His somnolence reflected his ignorance. In failing to find a match it reflected his lack of success in life, love and the business realm. The tossing of the cigarette; his impatience and hesitance to pursue as well as eventual capitulations. The overloaded ashtrays; escapism. The scattered matches; a mind at war with itself. And collectively the disorder of the entire table reflected a man surrendered to disorientation, self-neglect, and essentially, existentialism.

Ossman attempted to put an immediate halt to this condescending pattern of thought. A matter he had accomplished many times before yet always with only a temporary measure of success. No matter how uninvited or skilfully resisted these thoughts prevailed their unseen shadow upon him time and again. This time he found his efforts to dismiss, even momentarily, entirely ineffective. He tried again and again yet discovered himself futile in every attempt. Focusing his vision on objects

surrounding him failed to distract or ease the torment of his mental captivity. He had become a victim to revelations of his own weaknesses and fears. There was no escape. He was, in fact, a prisoner downcast to the mercy of his own scorn. Ossman was bound to his mind's convictions and he now realized that the only pathway to redemption was to resurrect himself from this slumber of ignorance; this Lazarus Sleep.

THE CONFESSION OF MISTER CLATTON

No! It was definitely not without motive, and neither with inhumane intentions, that I abducted young Susan Erasmus and it is therefore that I ask whether I can rightfully be put to blame for what eventually occurred.

Since the passing of my wife, Eva, I had lost all hope. I began blaming myself for not having showered her with riches and cherished her with a good home, honour, and love. Alas, I was born a man of poverty and without ambition. Unlike many of my short acquaintances, I was also completely untalented. Home... Oh, we did have a shack with a bedroom and bathroom up in the hills, and I dare say, we were extremely fortunate not to have had it demolished by the wind. Its wood had aged extensively and was plagued with the stench of decay.

Furniture... Ah yes, we had furniture. Several chairs, a table, an old couch, and a bed which I had managed to deprive old Jenson the junkyard dealer of. All was worthless and reeked of age. The only thing of value in our possession was perhaps the wedding ring which I had given her. The one for which I had dug up the grave of a rich man's wife and cut off the woman's finger when the ring resisted me in my vigorous attempts at removing it. Once in my possession I had the engraved initials changed. I recall she gave a look of disbelief when I placed it on her finger. The wedding ceremony, I dare say, went much to our satisfaction, although, when I think of it now, it was all a lie that has put me to shame ever since. After the marriage I was to find myself subjected to unending questions concerning the ring. Although I never told her and she never confronted me with the thought, I feel she knew it was acquired in a manner of dishonesty although I feel certain she had no idea it was done in disrespect to the dead. Had she known, it would most certainly have been reason for divorce. It was after seven years of marriage that Eva was taken from me by a fatal attack of pneumonia, which brings me back to where I first began.

Mister Schmidt, her father, had gained his respect from the people in the village through his country cafe which I was employed to guard come the night. It seemed, no matter how well I performed my duty to him, I was never quite able to impress the man. In essence what eventually occurred led me to believe my employment with him was due to an agreement he held with his daughter. I was released the week following her death. Poverty, despair, and darkness overwhelmed

me in my solitude. For several weeks I secluded myself in the old shack, contemplating suicide. I had even as much as attached a hangman's noose to the crossing wood beams supporting my roof. It was in the late of one Sunday afternoon that I finally reached my decision. I had decided to fight the darkness and my shame by beginning a new and respectable life elsewhere in another town, another place, where I would be a complete stranger. Yes! Such were my intentions.

Optimistic illusions, it suddenly occurred to me that my present finances would not support the execution of my decision. For a brief moment I stared at the rope suspended from my ceiling, though completely oblivious of its presence for my thoughts were of financial concern.

Ah, then of a sudden, I remembered. I had yet failed to receive my final payment from Schmidt; the payment due me ere my seclusion within the world of my own tortuous pessimism. I thereby made it the first step in my new direction by venturing forth to settle the matter with old Schmidt.

It was a three-mile walk from my shack to the cafe, which I had so often dreaded deeply, though strangely not upon this day. Perhaps the reason for it was that for the first time in my forty years of life I had indeed set a goal for myself. One which unto this moment I had no doubts of reaching, neither had I the intention of committing myself unto anything leading from it.

As I arrived by the cafe I observed an elderly couple with their young daughter sitting by a table in the centre of the dining area. It was the same table upon which Eva and I occasionally chose to have our meals, mostly though, I dare say, upon invitation by her father. Her father, who though in debt to me, nonetheless, and I have no doubts, wished me dead. There passed the rumour that he had put me to blame for the death of my wife. Though I dare say it came as no surprise that he should think of me in such terms, for it is as I have told, that he had no respect within him for me or any of my doing. When I think of it now, the thought of him wishing me dead was perhaps the more peaceful of his own thoughts for my fate.

The pungent aroma of pipe tobacco teased my nostrils as I approached the rear of the cafe. I saw Schmidt leaning back in his favourite rocking chair in a rather contemplative composure while enjoying his pipe. Before I was able to break the silence by introducing my presence he was approached by one of his waiters. The waiter mumbled something to the effect that a Mister Erasmus wished to discuss a proposition with him. He arose and turned looking directly at me, then

entered the cafe in complete and utterly deliberate disregard of my presence. I refused to allow myself to be overcome by the feeling of insult and therefore decided to await his return. I was even to take the liberty of comforting myself upon his chair. So I did.

Ere the passing of an hour, as I comfortably anticipated his return, the young girl whom I had first seen in dining with the elderly couple; apparently, or as it would seem, her parents, came running outside displaying her youthful energy and making it most obvious that she had been permitted to play. When at last she saw me sitting there she looked over as if inviting me to participate and share with her the joyous feeling of her own freedom. Convincing me to do so was no task for, despite all, my love for the young was indeed overwhelming. Eventually, as she tired of play, she began relating, through her own verbal intelligence, more and more of their extremely wealthy background and included, in her manner, that her father was presently proposing to purchase the cafe from old Schmidt. She had no knowledge of his financial proposal though it was clear to see Schmidt would not sell cheaply. I must confess that, with the continuance of her family revelations, a most hideous thought implanted itself within my brain and grew like a phosphorous bubble about to burst into a luminescent spray.

I placed the ransom note with details for the return of Mister Erasmus' daughter upon the rocking chair. Suzanne required little convincing as I proposed it to be merely a game of "hide and seek" and she followed me through the forest to the rear of the cafe as we took the long way around and were soon invisibly bound for the old shack.

In the ransom note I had made mention of Erasmus' black horse and carriage and that he was to appear with it, alone, and with my demanded sum of ten thousand francs. I also included that all could be settled peacefully and that informing the police would only lessen the chance of her safe return.

Abduction! Kidnapping! Call it what you will! No doubt you now regard me as one unworthy of even the last breath. A victim of insanity; social hazard, a bastard worthy of nothing less than having my pupils slit through the razor's edge. No! No! Is it not apparent to you that I had intended the girl no harm? I... I had even related the reason as to why I so desperately needed the money and that was not all. No! No! Now hear me well! I had even gone so far as to offer him the return of his money once having gained the desired employment. You fail to recognize and understand my only

desire and motive was to create the chance to begin anew elsewhere and at long last live. Live! Live! To live was my desire. Not to harm... And the money, I felt certain it would not as much as put a dent in his account. He would merely have to postpone the purchasing of the cafe.

We soon arrived by the old shack and I bade her inside to hide with me. She had not the slightest suspicion of having been abducted, for I beheld a very clever attitude toward her. I had the perfect answer to her every question and thereby comforted her to stay. I recollect when first she entered the shack it appalled her to the very marrow of her bones. Though once explained it to be only a temporary hideaway, she became more content with her dispirited surroundings; the ones that had for so many tormenting years been to Eva and I what I had given us no choice other than to call home. I shuddered at the very thought.

The child in young Suzanne permitted her curiosity to guide her through several of my belongings as I patiently anticipated the arrival of the black horse and carriage through a crevice between the wood. It was less than two hours before I eventually discerned what appeared to be the top of Erasmus' carriage as his horse drew it stealthily up the hill and into my full view. Mister Erasmus himself sat behind the reins and it appeared he was alone. I watched with a critical eye as the carriage came to a halt and he appeared before it, more a silhouette in the dim light of the dusk of evening. Once assured and confident that he had indeed taken it upon himself and come alone, I opened my door and turned to face young Suzanne. It was in that moment my heart fell to the mercy of a thunderous beat. I observed the horrible in shock and with paralyzed eyes. The chair which I had left standing beneath the rope intended for my suicide fell and one strangled scream emanated from her young lips... and with it came the loudest silence I had yet experienced within myself. Her father, as he heard the scream, came bursting through my door heaving me face first upon the splintered floor. Immediately he freed her from the rope and her dancing dead in mid-air while I fumbled about to regain myself. I knew before he so angrily thrust himself upon me that Suzanne was dead, for the rope that now dangled in this enraged, hate-enshrouded and blood-stained atmosphere, was indeed secured in such a fashion that my own weight would not as much as have budged its grip around the wood. And the noose, as death ensured as in the tradition of the executioner.

Now I am here, born from yesterday into the today that is tomorrow's hell! Alas, I feel I need confess no more, for I, the hunter and victim of my inner self, have, despite all, been crippled with

my final burden. The judgment is made. I am crucified to my conviction and the penalty shall be dealt me ere the full rising of the morning sun. So it is. And so before I bring to conclusion these vain frustrations and therewith this dismal existence, I must bring clarity upon these, my bleeding words.

Their purpose you have doubtfully comprehended for they were intended neither for mercy nor any, in such accordance, sympathizing emotions. No! I merely sought an audience for my theatre of words. Though this theatre is become that of my condemnation, where the room and chairs are filled with an aura of the living dead and justice sits glorified upon his throne of skeletons and bitter tongues spit the convictions. I rejoice that the cloak of death shall embrace me here. Never before have I been so prepared and willing. Yes, death is indeed the gift for which I have lived and yearned, for in all of my days I have achieved no less than making the perfect enemy of my inner self. Yes, alas, in this life death shall come as the welcome visitor for it shall be the ecstasy.

The sun shall rise to a newborn day as the guillotine will fall and decapitate my uselessness. I will be relieved of all ulcerous emotions that were the foundation of my life and days. Ah...I see it there, beyond that distant hill; one glimpse between the roofs and steel cast rods of my cage; a voice in the courtyard, the barking of dogs. Life as it challenges the morn. And there again... Yes. I see it now by far more clearly, the rising of the morning sun!

A HOBO ON HILLSBOROUGH STREET

Essentially, when one regarded the very heart of his situation, it became ultimately apparent that it was not due to a lack of desire, will, or ambition, but almost, except for variables of his life, which I am in no position to endeavour to analyze or explain, exclusively due to a social disease named poverty. His name was Isaac Hosskin, or so he called himself. I became familiar with only a short rendition of his life's achievements and failures. Short though it may be, in its essence and the respect in which the story was related, it uniquely and genuinely gave revelation to nothing less than a lifetime and a possible insight and understanding of the death of a compassionate man.

I had the good fortune of meeting Isaac Hosskin a short distance before reaching the Bell Tower as I was taking an early stroll along Hillsborough Street one crisp and windy winter's morning several memorable years ago in Raleigh. I watched him from my distance and observed his weathered face and his rather clumsy and tired attitude of walking. Observing the man and his weary gestures, not to mention an insufficiency in dress, a tattered grey coat which was far too small for a man of his stature, pants legs which ended in their length slightly above the ankles, and stained brown leather boots beneath which the soles were held together by nothing less than a miracle, I was compelled to make my approach. Compelled without reserve, though I may have been, I was careful to maintain an attitude that would not dishonour or offend him.

He accepted an invitation to breakfast with me and so it became my next task to find an inoffensive little restaurant where he would not become a victim to blatant stares. I distinctly recall his eagerness to sit down in the comfort of a chair and warm surroundings. He read the menu and glanced across the table at me in a gesture of respect suggesting that I was to decide upon his choice of a meal. I encouraged him to have anything he desired. He ordered brains and eggs, double hash browns, double grits, coffee, and toast. I ordered two eggs poached, served on toast with hash browns, grits, and a cup of hot tea.

Isaac Hosskin ate as if it were the last promise of a meal in years to come. Once breakfast was digested and our coffee and tea cups were down to a single sip, we had them replenished by our waitress. It was then that Isaac began his story.

“Claudio,” he said softly, “I thank you for your generosity and kindness and, as I have no way of repaying you, I will tell you in short what it is that makes fools of men like me.” He shifted himself into a more comfortable position in his chair, as did I, and once again began to speak.

“There was a time when I was wealthier and more prosperous than you see me now. A time of a wife and son back in the earlier days in New Orleans. A time of love, smiles, laughter, and prosperity. And then came the war and with it a depression the likes of which will not be known again. My son, Alfred, died of a bullet wound in Munich in late ‘forty-five as the war ravaged the European continent. My wife, Marcelle, and I were barely able to make ends meet as my piano playing and entertaining in French saloons became almost entirely insupportable to our livelihood there in New Orleans. She was unable to accept the death of our son and gradually receded into a depression so deep that I was no longer able to reach her. She survived Alfred by less than a year. So, my friend, I was re-wed to my solitude and an almost unbearable sadness.”

I noticed the tears of painful memories forming in his eyes and rolling down his beard-stubbed and wrinkled face. It was a face which bore the scars of lifelong tears. Even when he smiled his eyes reflected a mournful glow. I recall subduing a few tears of my own.

“So how did life go on?” I asked in a low voice as I took another sip of tea.

“Well, friend, for several more years I continued to play the piano in many of the same places in the French Quarter of New Orleans. I was affording myself a reasonable living for a man of my conservative needs until the days of the more sophisticated musicians came along, the ones that could read sheet music. It seemed that performers such as me, who had received no formal education and who therefore played songs by ear and memory, were dying out in rapid succession. The day arrived when such jobs were no longer attainable without a considerable education in the arts and some sort of a musician’s degree. The unions of that day only aided in making matters worse for those like me. Their rates were unaffordable, and when a man did pay, the only guarantee given was secure employment with the same salary and insufficiency as before. To tell you the truth, the only thing that kept me going in those days was pure faith and belief in the one above, that and a stubborn persistence in the belief that things had to get better. They were, at the time, at their ultimate worst.

In 'sixty-nine I left N'Orleans after one last glance at Marcelle's grave and stole my passage aboard a train headed for Florida with about fifteen hobos. Until 'seventy-five the hobos and I were inseparable and travelled far and wide across America, always working for a few bucks here and there. When one of us didn't have it everyone shared and shared alike. I learned to love those people. Everyone, including myself, had a dream of greener pastures, better days, and an imperishable belief in that unseen power named God. Frankly, that was all we ever have when you got right down to it. In the late summer of 'seventy-five a few hobos and I boarded, in our own way, a train bound for North Carolina, though first it was due to pass through New York from Orlando, Florida. In Raleigh we were due to meet several more of our travelling friends on a train from Baltimore. And so, my friend, this is the winter of that same year. The train from Baltimore arrived yet without our friends. McCarthy, Daniels, Sheperdson, and I assumed they got arrested until we read in the papers that the train they boarded from Chicago to Baltimore had derailed and capsized, killing twelve unknown people who happened to be in the boxcar that caused the accident. My three friends departed for Florida the first chance they got, yet for some reason I remained in Raleigh. I'll tell you why, it is because I like the feeling of this place. I enjoy its aura of serenity, its colleges, and its youth, but most of all it is to me a place for the spirit to communicate with such as have found God. I love the country people here and I have come to love that which I have discovered of North Carolina. In short, I believe I came here for a learning of my spirit as I have discovered nowhere before."

We both shifted in our seats to once again maintain a position of comfort, ordered more tea and coffee, and eagerly drank our cups down. It was at that time that Isaac Hosskin introduced the conclusion of his story. "And so, my friend, that is all I wish at this time to relate. Please forgive me but I have a train to board this afternoon and should begin walking in its direction."

He began to get out of his chair as I asked, "Where will you go?"

"Oh, methinks to Florida where my friends are and where ones like me and the hobos can sleep the dry nights on the beaches and have a few laughs and share a few dreams for old times' sake!"

"Isaac..." I urged "please allow me to pay your passage by bus. I have more money than I need at present and would be glad to help a friend."

“Thank you, my friend. You must understand that offers of this nature come too few times in my life, so I gratefully accept. I do believe Alfred and Marcelle are talking to God about me and sending luck my way. Thank you, my new-found friend.”

It was around evening before his bus arrived. The bus that would reunite him with friends who could share his dreams, laugh together, and spend the dry nights on beaches by the seashore. He shook my hand tightly before boarding and gave me a smile of gratitude so rich in its expression that I shall never forget the likes of him. Then he boarded and took seat by a window, opened it, and as the bus began its journey, shouted, “Remember, friend, the moral of my story is **keep the faith**, for in all of your days you will find nothing more true about life than your belief in it. No matter how often you stand discouraged, no matter what any man may tell you, no matter what, my good friend, remember well the words of Isaac Hosskin, **Life is but a matter of belief!**” And so the bus assumed its journey.

It was much later during that same evening that I overheard a news broadcast on a friend’s radio. It went as follows: “A man approximately in his late seventies was found dead in a passenger seat aboard a bus, destination Orlando, Florida. Death is believed to have been caused by a long-term pneumonia. Evidently the man bore no identification whatsoever. He is believed to be a vagabond who boarded the bus in Raleigh, North Carolina, earlier this evening.”

I turned off the radio. It was a good night for a long walk. I would later stop at the Bell Tower on Hillsborough Street and offer a silent prayer in dedication to a friend whom I had met there earlier upon a stroll. I decided that I would celebrate his passing. After all, where we go from here in the end when the physical is over, when our souls journey into the spiritual realms, was aptly put in his own words as, **a matter of belief.**

**Dedicated to the memory of my beloved friends,
Robert E. Crew and Ralph O' Quinn.**

AFTERWORD

AFTERWORD AND DEDICATION BY THE AUTHOR
CLAUDIO OSWALD NIEDWOROK.

I dedicate my “UNDER A PRIMITIVE MOON” to the gift of imagination within us all and particularly to my late friend and World Renowned Author: RAY BRADBURY. I hereby offer the tribute I wrote to this amazing Man of Letters that began our deep and abiding friendship more than a decade ago. Cheers!

The very imaginative authors from Ray Bradbury to Edgar Rice Burroughs to Jack London, Herman Melville, and Jules Verne, and on... were among my own childhood inspirations to become a writer. Fairy tales from *Puss in Boots* to the hilarious abstract mockery of *Snow White and the Three Stooges* or any other imaginative nook and cranny of world literature preceded them. Comics were my greatest discovery, and I could never count the hours so splendidly spent. Being possessed of a very curious mind I was literally consumed by most any genre as long as it captivated my attention. I had an insatiable appetite for entertainments and stories that were imbued with educational and historical aspects. From fantasy to science fiction and rugged adventure, as well as a romantic story well told, I began sculpting my own originality and imagination. But most of the inspiration arose from a life (already in so young a day, and to this day) well lived.

The seeds of literature took root in me very early on, and the mirror reflects that much was drawn from, and nourished by, the stories of Ray Bradbury that were somehow omnipresent in my youth. Always a paperback or comic in my back pocket. I was moved to write this dear creative soul a tribute when I first moved to my little Ray Bradbury town of Summer lawns known as Broadway, North Carolina and I am proud to say it has inspired a true and genuine friendship between us.

In writing this I chose all of his book titles as part of my language. I put them all in ***Bold Italics*** to make it easy to spot his literature. Perhaps some of you will recognize them along with the tapestry of meanings I imbued in my quilt-work of memory by which to salute a master who was still in our midst for more than a decade after our friendship began with a shorter version of this poem because I had not yet included new books written since our friendship began. Sadly for us all 2012 was his ***Farewell Summer*** (1920 to 2012). Upon reading the work Bradbury himself sent me the title to it:

Journey To Bradbury.

Really altogether ***The Cat's Pajamas***

A realm of the psyche

nebula and paradox

mindful, mindless, fertile, barren,

seasonal and seasonless...

Quicker Than The eye.

Let's All Kill Constance

with ***A Medicine For Melancholy***

in ***A Graveyard For Lunatics.***

Where...***A Journey To Far Metaphor***

Long After Midnight

Somewhere In Yestermorrow

becomes the soul's twilight

in kaleidoscope...

where ***Death Is A Lonely Business***

and ***I Sing The Body Electric***

by ***The Machineries Of Joy***

for ***One Timeless Spring***

in ***The October Country.***

Where ***R Is For Rocket***

S Is For Space

and ***Something Wicked This way Comes.***

A Zen In The Art Of Writing

When Elephants Last In The Dooryard Bloomed

alongside ***The Halloween Tree***

where ***The Martian Chronicles***

are drunk with ***Dandelion Wine***

in ***A Dark Carnival Of Woes***

and ***Fahrenheit 451***

burns ***The Golden Apples Of The Sun***

melting ***The Toynbee Convector***

into metaphor

and fertile lore

for ***The Stories Of Ray Bradbury***

himself

The Illustrated Man

amid ***Green Shadows, White Whale***

observing the white whale...

pondering Melville and "Moby Dick."

Across the diamond-studded lawns

Now And Forever

of certain omnipresent dawns

Bradbury Speaks

of ***The Homecoming***

where laughter coils upon a swing

that ***Farewell Summer***

with ghosts of memory

gathering ***A Sound Of Thunder and Other Bradbury Stories.***

The windstrewn countenances

of days gone by

The mother's laugh

the father's cry.

The tail that ever wagged

the pup

whose absence is but

sorrow's cup.

A mirror

to man's twilight

and oblivion

Driving Blind.

Yet a voice

From The Dust Returned

to nature's rage...

to Journey To Bradbury

you need only turn the page...

Here's ~ ***One More For The Road.***

Cheers!

Claudio Oswald Niedworok.

www.ClaudioArts.com

