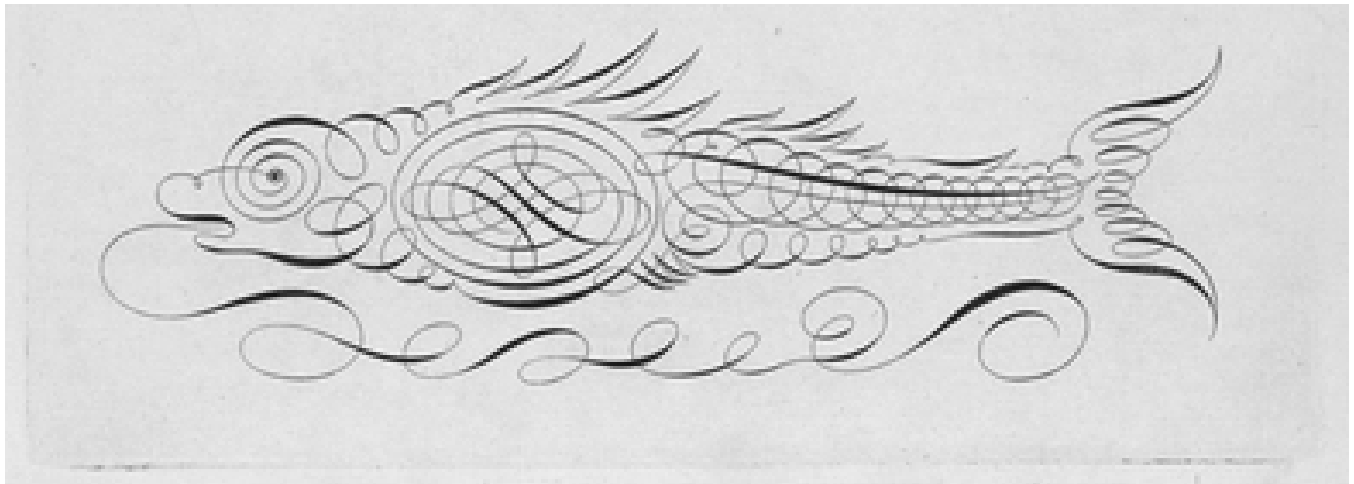


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Page 1 – A LAST THOUGHT BEFORE DYING by Simon McHardy. Mr. McHardy is an Australian archivist and historian. He has published numerous fantasy and horror short stories which have appeared in such publications as *Jitter*, *Kzine*, *Devolution Z*, *Five on the Fifth* and *9Tales Told in the Dark*. He is currently working on a short story compendium which will be completed in 2018.

Page 8 – THE TINWEED MAN AND HIS FOND IMAGINARY WORLD by D. S. White. Mr. White teaches high school and loves the short story format. His work has appeared in *Pif Magazine*, *Mystery Weekly Magazine*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Mythaxis*, *Zimbell House*, *Zero Flash*, *101 Words*, *Rollick Mag* and *Novopulp*. He was born in the mountains but now lives by the sea.



“A THOUGHT BEFORE DYING”

by SIMON McHARDY

Henry Olson was in the living room leaning on the windowsill when the taxi cab pulled into the driveway and blared its horn. He gulped another mouthful of coffee from the mug he was holding and placed it down on the table, “Let the bastards wash that themselves,” he said. This was it, the last moments in his home of fifty-seven years. He felt a flood of relief, he was finally abandoning the source of so many bad memories, they had overwhelmed him, piling up upon him until he felt crushed by their weight. Jean stumbling down the corridor throwing up after chemo, Jean, naked, staring into the mirror at the surgeon’s butchery and Jean coming home to die, unable to be left alone with her pain and fear and lying on the ancient couch which she had had religiously re-upholstered every ten years – its current incarnation navy blue. Then, Henry’s last image of Jean, still and broken, all the life extinguished from her body.

Henry remained in the home for several years after Jean died, aimless years, one of the last residents of a once flourishing town, his money all but exhausted from Jean’s long illness. He sat in the window and watched the one car pass by each day, a pick-up belonging to Dan MacMillan who

drove for two hours each morning to the next town for work. He counted the hours till his weekly grocery package was delivered but mostly he just thought about Jean and the horrible way she had died. He wondered if he could have done more for her. Then one day he opened a letter from the bank advising him that they were foreclosing on the mortgage and, as he had no family or friends, they had taken the liberty of arranging for him to stay at a retirement home in a nearby town.

The loss of his liberty did not anger him, he knew that he could not go on much longer as he was, his own health was failing rapidly and dare he say it, he wanted to remember one last time what it felt like to be happy again before he died.

The taxi blared its horn again, Henry wheeled himself out the front door not bothering to lock it behind him. “Mr Olson?” the driver said, getting out the car to meet him “need a hand?” he didn’t wait for a reply but helped Henry from his wheelchair into the back seat of the taxi that smelt of sun-baked vinyl. Henry knew the driver, Chad Mulligan, he had worked with his father, Virgil, in the mine until it closed in the winter of sixty-eight, the town had been in steep decline since then. “I’ll just fetch your bags for you.” Henry’s lug-

gage comprised of two duffel bags filled with mouldering clothes and a box full of tattered paperbacks which Henry had been meaning to read for over thirty years and which he hoped the bank wouldn't miss. "Where are we heading?" Chad said flicking the dial of the radio to a light jazz station, something he guessed Henry might enjoy.

"Greene Country Retirement Home," Henry replied. He hadn't talked since he ordered the taxi from a neighbouring town yesterday and his voice was croaky and rough.

"Lucky you, nice place that, tricky to get a spot, I tried to get Dad in but I was told Greene Country is a state-run retirement facility for people with no families."

"Yes there is only me now," Henry said simply, causing the conversation to end. The drive to the retirement home took over an hour along deserted country roads. When they pulled into the car park of the sprawling estate Henry was pleasantly surprised, the grounds were a little overgrown but there was a sense of peace here. Chad helped Henry out of the car and wheeled him into the lobby of the main building. "Mr Henry Olson for you," he announced to the woman behind the reception desk. She was startled by the sound of the voice but quickly recovered and offered a painfully broad smile that showed as many teeth as it did morsels of food. "I was just having my morning tea," she said wiping the corners of her mouth with the back of her hand, "I wasn't expecting you till after eleven, Mr Olson."

"I was keen to get here," Henry said, and he felt like he really meant it.

"It's no bother at all," the woman said, coming around the desk and offering Henry her hand, "I'm Irma." Henry smiled in way of a greeting. "We don't get many new folk anymore," Irma said, "so it's quite a treat to see a new face."

Henry turned and waved to Chad who was stacking his bags beside the desk as Irma pushed him through some double swing doors down a long, silent corridor, its lights dimmed to evening.

"Everyone's been gradually moving on since the mine in Penance closed and neighbouring towns are faring little better, but it hasn't really affected us." Irma said, a little out of breath from the exertion of pushing the wheelchair. "We are one of the only fully funded state-run retirement homes in the whole state. Doesn't cost you a dime to stay here and coupled with the excellent care we give, it's no wonder our residents are with us for years." Irma beamed with pride.

"Sounds wonderful." The twilight corridor was lined with bedrooms, their doors ajar. Henry peered in, they appeared identical, beds neatly made, bedside cabinets and chests of drawers uncluttered, no obvious signs of habitation.

"Where is everyone?" Henry asked.

"In the lounge watching television," Irma suddenly stopped pushing the chair, "Room 103, this is your bedroom, Mr Olson, have a look around and I'll go and fetch your bags." The room was like the rest, Henry wheeled himself to the only

window which overlooked a neglected garden, tangles of jasmine and honeysuckle crowded a mature elm whose branches stretched out to the window as if beseeching Henry for help. There was a knock on his open door and Irma and a young man in nursing scrubs entered carrying Henry's box of books, "I'm David," he placed the box beside Henry's bed and shook Henry's hand firmly. "Are you okay unpacking by yourself, Mr Olson? I can give you a hand if you like?"

"Sure, that would be great."

"I'll leave you two boys to it then."

Irma said. "Hope you enjoy your stay here, Henry."

They spent the next hour unpacking the bags full of musty-smelling clothes and

laughing at how outdated Henry's wardrobe was. The yellowed paperbacks were given pride of place on the chest of drawers and Henry vowed to read every one, he had the time now, it was a happy thought. When they were done, David offered to take Henry to the lounge to meet the other residents.

The long corridor, lined with identical bedrooms, continued until Henry noticed a bedroom overflowing with stacks of books, magazines and papers. Upon the bed, which was also partially covered by the literature, lay a fragile figure, rigid and gasping for breath. Short, ragged inhalations rattled around in her puny chest like ball-bearings in a pinball machine. The ashen face pointed to the ceiling, the sunken eyes



closed but fluttering as if lost in a dream. "Is she okay?" Henry asked, putting his hands on the wheels to slow the wheelchair.

"Not really, but we've made her comfortable and she is sleeping now. Sarah is over ninety and very frail, but she still loves her books. She's been here over twenty years and had her nose in a book ever since I've known her. One of the staff reads to her each afternoon." David smiled fondly at the tiny woman and quietly closed the door. The corridor ended with a left turn and disappeared into a communal eating area which opened up on the right, into what Henry perceived to be a staff room, as it was occupied by a small group of people who were hunched over steaming cups of coffee, and on the left, into a lounge for the residents. The entirety of the lounge's walls were lined with an assortment of old armchairs, each tilted at a slight angle to face a small television with a faulty tube that cast a deep, blue glow into the room that made Henry feel as if he were in the galley of a ship at the bottom of the sea; the sound from its dusty speakers crackled like old bones. This did not seem to lessen the enjoyment the room's occupants derived from it, two dozen elderly residents swaddled in blankets like newborns peered out from their warm cocoons with wide, unblinking eyes. Henry shivered, the air in the room was chilly.

"Why so cold?" he said.

"The people in these parts seem to like the cold, too many hot, sticky summers behind them."

"Not me," Henry replied, "I want to be warm in my old age, always figured hell would be like Barrow, Alaska, that's what it feels like in here." He chuckled and looked around the room for a reaction, but no one was paying him any attention.

"It's okay, Henry, they are always like this, they all love their television, if you need anything please don't hesitate."

Henry slumped in his wheelchair, he had had images of striking up a few good friendships in Greene Country, maybe even a little romance but if these were the residents then he saw little chance in that, the staff seemed nice though and he was grateful they had made him feel so welcome.

Henry woke with a start; the room was a little darker and the light from a nearby window suggested it was late afternoon. The television still crackled away like fire and the residents had not moved away from its blue glow. David must have checked on him, Henry noticed a blanket had been placed on his knees along with a plastic-wrapped chicken, salad sandwich. He hadn't realised how hungry he was. He devoured it ravenously; it was good, fresh and delicious.

Feeling emboldened with a full stomach, he said "What do you all do for fun around here, when you are not watching television, of course?" The only reply was the static from the television, he sighed in disappointment. "Well, I'm off to read a book in my room then," and he wheeled himself as briskly as he could from the lounge.

Henry's foot had been bothering him in recent weeks, he had been meaning to

have it looked at but with the advent of the move to Greene Country he had been putting it off. Today it throbbed all the way up to his knee and a sickly heat emanated from it. He decided he would swing by the staff room on his way back to his room. The door was closed but he heard muffled voices inside and tentatively knocked. There was a squeak of a chair and heavy footsteps, the door opened and David beamed down at him. "Mr Olson, how was lunch?"

"Thank you, David, it was very thoughtful of you," he glanced over David's shoulder into the staff room, two young women smiled back at him, "I was wondering if someone could have a look at my foot, I've been having a lot of problems with it?"

"I'll come down and take a look presently, are you going to be in your room?"

"Yes, thought I'd better get started on the box of books we unpacked."

"Okay, I'll be there shortly."

Henry wheeled himself through the dining hall and down the long, empty corridor which connected on to the bedrooms. The door to the old woman's room was still closed, Henry paused for a moment waiting to hear her troubled breathing, the tortured rasping of breath was absent. Concerned he cautiously opened the door a crack, the draught disturbed a column of dust that had formed in the afternoon sunlight. "Hello," he whispered into the warm silence. He nudged the door open further and wheeled his way into the room careful

not to disturb the towers of books. The old woman was on the bed, her chest still, the white sheet hugging the contours of her wasted body like a shroud. "Are you okay?" His voice sounded muffled in the thick silence. He reached out instinctively and took hold of her hand; the flesh held no warmth beyond the faint heat from the afternoon sunlight that illuminated her bed. Conflicting emotions welled within him, sorrow for her passing but a sense of relief and happiness that her misery was at an end, the same feelings he had felt upon his wife's own passing.

"Mr Olson," Henry started, "you shouldn't be here, this is a private room."

"I'm sorry," Henry blurted guiltily turning to see David, "I was worried for her." His voice was breaking with emotion, "Was someone with her in the end?"

"She's not dead, just sleeping." David whispered taking hold of the chair. Henry gently let go of the hand and it flopped down lifelessly on the bed. He looked at it for a moment, red blotches of blood were already pooling in various parts of the arm. "Come on, Henry, let's go and look at your foot and leave Sarah to sleep." He wheeled Henry from the room and down the long, silent corridor to Henry's own room, leaving the dust to play in the sunlight and Sarah to sleep.

"She looked dead," Henry said as David helped take off his shoe to examine his foot.

"She's ninety-four, she hasn't looked good for a long time." David was removing the sock now and a sickly, sweet odour like

fermented fruit filled the air. The two blackened toes like little pieces of coal didn't surprise Henry but the red tendrils of infection that had crept up his leg did, as did the ulcer that had bloomed almost overnight to the size of a dime on top of the foot.

"I've seen worse," David said, "You're a diabetic?"

"Yes, I was foolish putting it off this long, I should know better," Henry said embarrassed.

David let out a long sigh and stood up, "All right, well, we will have to organise the doctor to have a look at this, it can't be left untreated. In the meantime, we will get you some strong antibiotics to help with the infection."

As David was walking from the room Henry called out, "I could have sworn she was dead, would you look in on her, just to see if she needs anything?"

"Just to humour you, Henry, but she is fine, just sleeping."

Henry picked up the book from the cabinet beside his bed and began to read.

At breakfast time the next morning the dining hall was deserted, he asked a carer he recognised from the staff room yesterday where everybody was and was informed that most of the residents were in the habit of having breakfast in their beds. After three pieces of toast and a coffee he joined the residents in the lounge; seemingly little had changed since yesterday, they sat in the cold, blue room with the same rapt attention in the television. He pushed his chair in between two chairs and pulled up the

collar of his sweater against the chilled air. It was then that he noticed one of the chairs which had been unoccupied yesterday was now taken by a small figure wrapped up in blankets just like the rest, the face seemed familiar. He rose shakily to his feet, the pain in his leg making him groan aloud, steadying himself on the furniture he moved towards the pale visage, stumbling as he drew near and sprawling at the figure's feet. Staring up at her apologetically he recognised the woman from the room.

"You're okay," he said astonished. He began to rise to his feet, resting his hands on the arms of the chair, his face looming over hers. She was deathly pale, her unblinking eyes staring through him, the glassy orbs reflecting his probing stare. He turned to the person next to her, an old man whose mouth was caught in an extravagant yawn, the dry orifice looking black and unwholesome, then the next, a woman, the tip of her nose a black stub, her lips pulled back in a cadaverous snarl. "They are all dead," he said. He reached out and touched the old woman's cheek, she was cold, the flesh taut.

A hand touched his shoulder. Irma and David were both standing behind him.

"They are all dead," Henry repeated.

"Yes, we have them embalmed when they pass and perform some simple taxidermy," Irma replied.

"Why?"

"We would have had to close years ago if we hadn't done something, Henry."

"This is horrible." Henry looked to

David for support, but David shrugged.

“We are the biggest employer in the region, with over eighteen staff, that’s eighteen families that can still put food on the table and not have to think about moving to the city.”

“I’m not going to live here with the dead.” Henry began to crawl across the room to his wheelchair, the carer who had made Henry’s breakfast that morning joined Irma. Seated back in his chair Henry tried to muscle past them but David reached out and took hold of the chair.

“We are sorry, Henry, we really did enjoy having you to stay and we didn’t want it to be this way,” David said. Irma and the girl nodded at the sentiment. David began to push the chair from the room.

“It’s not that bad, Henry, you will be in good company and we will treat you with respect and dignity,” David continued, “besides, your leg is in terrible shape, the doctor would have insisted it come off, it’s best not to go through that at your age.” They stopped at a nondescript door. Henry tried to grab the door frame as they entered but his feeble grip came away with a hard push of the wheelchair. The room was little more than a storage cupboard, a naked bulb swung above, moving the shadows in the room like a sideshow, a shelf containing various bottles lined the wall. Henry noticed several tall bottles marked ‘Permaglo Embalming Fluid’ which were full of a clear liquid.

Irma began to roll up the sleeve of his right arm, he felt a stinging pain as she made a small slit in a vein with a razor

blade and deftly inserted a long tube into the opening. Henry watched fascinated as the tubing turned red, he followed the bright, scarlet fluid with his eyes as it emptied into a plastic drum that the young woman had placed at his feet. Meanwhile, David busied himself cutting away Henry’s trouser leg and then making a small incision in the femoral artery. Henry gasped as the liquid from one of the bottles began to scorch his veins like liquid fire as it wound its way to his heart. “I won’t tell anyone, I promise.” he said groaning in pain.

Irma smiled kindly, “We can’t take that chance, Henry. It will be over soon, and we will have you all tucked up watching television with the others.” He could feel the fluid in his chest now, at first it felt like heart burn then the pain intensified until hot coals were rattling around in his ribs as his chest heaved desperately for each breath. His heart, unable to bear it a moment longer, let out one loud thump then stopped. A haze flooded his brain like black ink, drowning the memories of his wife and her illness that forever played there in a loop. The last memories to be extinguished were fresh, recent moments of little kindnesses, the care he had received at Greene Country. Then from the blackness a last thought bubbled to the surface before sinking into oblivion, the many happy years that awaited him with the kind staff and silent tenants of Greene Country. ❖

“THE TINWEED MAN AND HIS FOND IMAGINARY WORLD”

by D. S. White

Part 1—INTO THE WOODS

Jon Tinweed got an urge. It began with a tingling sensation. He searched frantically all over his little pockets until he discovered something there. In one of his pockets was a bit of wood-sponge, the kind you find growing on trees after it rains a lot. Wood-sponge isn't useful for much of anything, other than wiping your butt. And Jon Tinweed carried a bit of spare wood-sponge around with him in case the need to defecate in the woods ever came calling.

Who was he? Jon Tinweed was a tiny man. He was so little that even the little people didn't want him. Somebody had to be smaller than everybody else in the whole wide world and it fell on Jon Tinweed to proudly carry this title. Although he often boasted about his tiny weed-like frame, nobody gave him much notice. This was probably due to the fact that you could hardly hear his voice. Whenever Jon Tinweed spoke, it sounded like an echo, as if the original voice had already disappeared and you might just be hearing only a fraction of it, if you heard anything at all.

How did he come to have the name Tinweed? We really don't know, because we don't know much about his mother and father, who wanted to discard him at birth,

thinking he was just a miniature set of clothes and a tiny hole to feed, nothing that would ever amount to anything of any stature at all. The Tinweed family had been big, bigger than most, with somewhere around 20 children, give or take a few, all of grand appearance. Nobody really knows how many children, because we don't know much about the Tinweed family. But one thing we do know, they had little room for one tiny insignificant Jon Tinweed, who didn't take up much room at all. When he ran, you could say he flew across the land inches at a time. But that was only when he was in a hurry.

Why was he there? Earlier in the day he'd been evicted from his shoe box of a home by a pair of kittens who thought they owned the world and had a right to sleep where he slept every night, down at the end of an alley next to an odd assortment of broken and discarded manikin parts, the one place you'd never expect to find them.

Jon Tinweed had a heart made of metal. He was not someone you could easily mock. One time he toppled over a three-year-old girl for laughing at him, when all he had done was drop a cup, chipping off a piece of the handle. From such a small height it is hard to imagine any cup could be broken at all, but in fact the cup had

already been weakened by many similar falls. Therein lays the trouble with small hands and drinking too much wine.

On this particular day it just so happened that Jon Tinweed was out in the woods, alone, looking for a new place to live, when the urge to shit hit him. As he wandered about the woods, frightened by the dark towering trees, he was overcome in an instant by the need to drop his shorts and bare it all to the wind, depositing on the moist ground the things he'd eaten the day before and returning them back to the earth from whence they came. He grunted once, twice, three little times and out popped a smelly pile of you-know-what.

As he was cleaning up with the wood-sponge, a tree-gruel, one of those strange but hard to spot fungus-covered snails, came sliding across the damp floor of the woods in search of something to eat. And when it came to Jon Tinweed's tiny pile of shit it found a feast to delight a tree-gruel king. In fact, this tree-gruel was a king of sorts, king of its own domain, overseer of a vast population of about three other tree-gruel who were all too old and too slow to move on to better lands.

This tree-gruel's name was Bart. Just Bart. But it preferred to be called King Bart. However, no one called it anything at all. Who would be caught alone in the woods talking to a tree-gruel, especially one that thought it might be of noble lineage?

"Well, lookie here," said Jon Tinweed, regardless of how absurd this might seem, talking to a tree-gruel all by himself somewhere in the deep dark woods.

The tree-gruel paused, as if considering where such a small voice might be coming from.

"I hope you are enjoying yourself there, little tree-gruel," Jon Tinweed said with a hint of satisfaction, now that he had found something more little than himself.

The tree-gruel burped.

"That meal will cost you three pig's feet," Jon Tinweed demanded. Only the greedy type would ask for four.

But he got no response, for how could a tree-gruel say anything? After pausing a moment, and then giving the tree-gruel his best glare, Jon Tinweed realized nothing was going to be paid to him. So he stomped on the tree-gruel, swiveling his foot about, tearing it to pieces. In reality he'd just stepped on his own pile of shit, which left his shoe stinking and brown.

Quite angry now, for it seemed like the world was always against him, he plopped down near the base of a tree and tore his shoe off, careful not to get anything brown on his hands. With a twig he pried at the cracks in the bottom of his shoe until he had most of it cleaned up. Then he turned and rubbed it against the tree behind him, using the rough bark to finish the job.

"Stop this evil nonsense!" a voice boomed.

Jon Tinweed jumped. He spun left, then right, looking everywhere but behind him, where the old tree protected his back. Nothing in the woods moved, except the shadows, as clouds darted in front of the sun. The clearing grew dark in a hurry, which amazed him. The whole woods took

on an aura as if night had fallen, cast into a peculiar blackness, much like the kind you only find in your wildest nightmares. Truly afraid now, Jon Tinweed swung his stinking shoe back and forth in case there might be an attacker coming his way.

“Who’s out there?” he asked, his voice barely carrying as far as the next tree.

“Turn and face me,” the giant call came.

He spun around. The old tree, with fresh brown turds smeared on it, was talking to him. The tree swung its branches like they were on fire, but really, it could not harm Jon Tinweed. The tree was too big and he was too small, something he was happy about for the first time in his life. Today, he thought prematurely, he was

fighting against the world, and the world had not won.

“What-what do-do-do you want?” he asked in a faltering voice.

“For smearing your stinking shoe all over my bark, you owe me a favor. But first, you must come inside and have something to eat. I think we can discuss your payment over dinner.”

“What?” he peeped, but nothing came out, so he tried again.

“What?!!” And now he thought he might just sound as big and as impressive as the old tree. “Why shouldn’t I just run away?”

“I can’t hear you. Could you come a little closer and speak a little louder?”

Jon Tinweed scratched his head. It



might be a trap. He looked around, but no one was watching him. He danced around the tree one time quickly to be sure no one was on the other side, someone who might be pretending to talk in an ominous voice. He stopped again when he returned to his original spot. It couldn't hurt to talk to a tree alone in the woods, he thought. At least, he'd never heard of anyone running into any kind of trouble in this way. He leaned in a bit closer.

A hole opened up in the side of the tree and the ground beneath him heaved in such a way that he fell into the darkness. The hole closed with a snap and he was trapped inside the tree. He sat petrified, not even able to breathe. He heard a rustling, as if delicate feet were dancing about inside the tree, circling him, around and around. His head spun as he tried to imagine who might be there, sometimes tapping him on the shoulder, like in a game of duck-duck-goose. He sank lower than ever before, groveling on the rough floor in the hollow in the tree. He noticed at this time, for no particular reason, that he was missing a shoe.

Somewhere in the dark, he heard a chuckle. It sounded both evil and menacing. But Jon Tinweed had been heckled many times before in his life and he wasn't affected by this. Really, the only thing on his mind was finding his shoe, because he hated to walk around with only one shoe on. He especially needed his shoe if he was going to walk around on the floor of this old tree, which was so rough and barren. Finding the shoe took over his mind until

finally he sat up, determined to do something about it.

"So I'm stuck here inside this tree," he thought rather loudly to himself. "And there's nothing I can do about it, as far as I know. Ho hum."

"I can hear you," said the voice in the dark.

"I think she can hear me," he said.

"I'm just a little girl, you know. Don't be afraid," she said, and stopped her dancing.

"Yes, that voice sounds just like a little girl's voice," he exclaimed. "Nothing to be afraid of here."

"Wait a moment and I'll light a match."

Jon Tinweed lost his mind at the mention of fire. He was about to be burned alive inside a tree by a little girl who was playing with matches. He stepped back, and back again, until he came to the rough wall on the inside of the tree. He pounded his fists and elbows behind his back, against the inner bark, but it wouldn't budge. For a moment he thought he smelled smoke. He pounded harder again, not daring to turn around and face the trunk, in case the girl set fire to his hair.

"Stop!" he yelled. "Wasn't there something you said about a favor? And dinner? What's all this talk of fire so suddenly?"

"I'm just going to light the stove, so I can warm up the lamb. You do like lamb chops, don't you?"

That was when he thought he smelled it. Mixed within the decaying stench of the tree, and the hint of smoke in the air, there

it was, the smell of cooked lamb! Mercy, he thought. He hadn't had a piece of lamb to eat in years. Could this dark cavernous place really be a little bit of heaven?

"I can still hear you, even when you're thinking," she said.

His curiosity was piqued to no end. He thought he'd test his senses and try just a bit of the lamb, in case it might really be real. What could it hurt? Slowly, in this way, he overcame his fear of dark places hidden inside trees.

A spark appeared and from it a remote flame grew, which moved slowly, carefully, so as not to go out, into the belly of some deep distant black pit. A bit of woodcaught fire, and the fire blossomed, colorful as a leaf on a tender autumn day. The glow was magnificent, here in the darkest depths of the tree, so much that Jon Tinweed took a step forward away from the safety of the wall.

At that moment came a gush of wind. A shadow flew around inside the tree, circling overhead, moving lower, around and around, until it disappeared behind him. The little man felt two gentle hands pushing at his back, ushering him forward to a chair by a table. The hands moved to his shoulders and pushed him downward. He landed in the chair with an unceremonious plop.

The shadow fluttered once more, faster than the eye could follow, always just on the edge of his vision, regardless of how hard he tried to look right at it, until it arrived opposite him in the chair on the other side of the table. For the first time he

could see the barest outline and catch the slimmest features of whoever it was that lived deep inside the tree.

She was just a little girl, a maiden, simple and beautiful, possibly a tree nymph, although he'd never seen a tree nymph before. He couldn't really be sure. He stared at her in silence, quite lost within himself. He really had no idea what to say or even what to think, and he let his little mind wander, awed and empty.

"Wow," the girl said.

"Wow, what?"

"You're so little, yet your empty mind is so big. So big and empty," she informed him.

He had no idea what she was talking about. It could have been an insult, or even a compliment. But these things rarely affected him, as in his life he'd been called many things much worse than big and empty. It struck him that the girl had said his mind was big. Nothing about him, as far as he'd even known, was big. Maybe this was a trap, but it was starting to be a rather enjoyable one.

"Do you mean it?" he asked.

"Well, if you need a compliment, I could give you a hundred. They're easier to deal out than they are to sort out. I mean, how would you ever know which one was real and which was just phooey?"

Just then the lamb on the grill started to sizzle and the girl turned around without getting up, cramped as the space on this side of the tree was, and dished up the meat and handed him a plate. He took it from her and placed it on the table. As he

searched for utensils, they appeared out of nowhere and landed in his hands.

After he'd taken a few feverish bites, his stomach softened and he started to relax. Trap or no trap, he was content for the first time in a very long time. His mind stopped skittering around like a moth in search of light and he thought he could stretch out and take a good nap.

"Good. You like it," she said. "I haven't had a guest here in a long time. In fact, I've never had one, not in all my lifelong life. I always dreamed about this day and wondered if I'd upset someone, or make them feel right at home, just like you do now."

But Jon Tinweed had already let his head fall and was snoring softly. She quietly returned the uneaten lamb to the top of the grill, keeping it warm. Then she leaned over the table and blew gently on his nose. It started to itch, but he failed to respond. She huffed three more times, stronger than the wind, but all he did was brush her away with his arm as he draped it over his head.

She sat back and paused for a moment, thinking of what to do next. Then she picked up a spoon and thumped him on the knee. His foot jerked and he sat upright.

"Hey, no sleeping in the middle of dinner," she reprimanded him.

"Where-am-I-why-does-my-knee-hurt?" he said, the words all coming out in rapid succession.

"It's time to discuss your payment. You offended my sense of dignity when you smeared your stinking shoe on my tree. For that I demand you apologize. You also owe

me a favor. Do it, or I will never return you to the real world again."

"Why should I say I'm sorry? Why should I do anything for you?" he asked, thinking himself more clever than any little girl living in the middle of the woods. "Maybe I like it here. Maybe I'll just set up shop and call this place home from now on. What are you going to do about it?"

She sat and thought for a long minute, peering deeper and deeper into his eyes, as if she was searching his mind for the oldest and most longed after possession in his life. Finding little there in the empty halls and coliseums he had erected to hide in, she seized on one remote thing in his empty brain that he had recently desired. She decided if necessary she must use it to her advantage.

"Do you ever want to see your stinking shoe again? Do you want to limp around with only one shoe on for the rest of your little life?"

He looked around inside the tree in the firelight, but the missing shoe just wasn't there. The stinking one wasn't there, that is. The other one was doing well keeping his other foot safe and warm. His heart dropped like a rock an inch from the floor, as there wasn't far for his little heart to fall, considering the size of his little frame. But he hadn't been mocked all his life without some benefit. He still had a heart made of metal, even if his heart was now lying on the bottom of his rib cage.

Jon Tinweed needed to find a way out of this trap. He decided he would pretend the shoe really mattered, for it did matter

to him, so it wouldn't be that hard at all to pretend such a thing like this was really important to him. He would use her as she was using him, but when the moment came, and surely it would, because moments always come and go, he would find his freedom.

"Yes. Yes. I'll do whatever you want," he cried. "Just help me find my stinking shoe!"

"First, you must cut a door in the wall. I need a way out of this tree and I can't release myself."

"Where would you like me to start?" Jon Tinweed asked, looking around.

"Anywhere would be fine. Just make me that door!"

The barest of a thought crept into his head: the idea of a door also appealed to him. Maybe he could use it to create his escape. Before she could peek into his mind, he hid the thought of his departing her presence in the farthest corner of his skull. He didn't want her to know it was there. He hid it so well he almost lost track of it. Only a thin string, which he had mentally tied to the thought, followed him back as he retreated from that distant place and returned to the living, conscious part of his brain. The string stuck to the inside of his skull like a sticky spider web plastered against the wall.

"Ha!" he chuckled. He reached over and tagged her lightly on the shoulder as if she were a drinking buddy who'd just ordered another round of his favorite beer.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"A door sounds just wonderful. Let

some fresh air into the place. While I'm at it, why don't I make us a couple windows, as well? Now, if only you could provide me with something to cut with."

She looked down at the knife lying on the table. He followed her gaze and reached the same conclusion. It might just do. He picked up the knife and weighed it in his hand. It had a nice balance to it. He turned and flung it at the inside of the tree. There it stuck and there he would begin to cut.

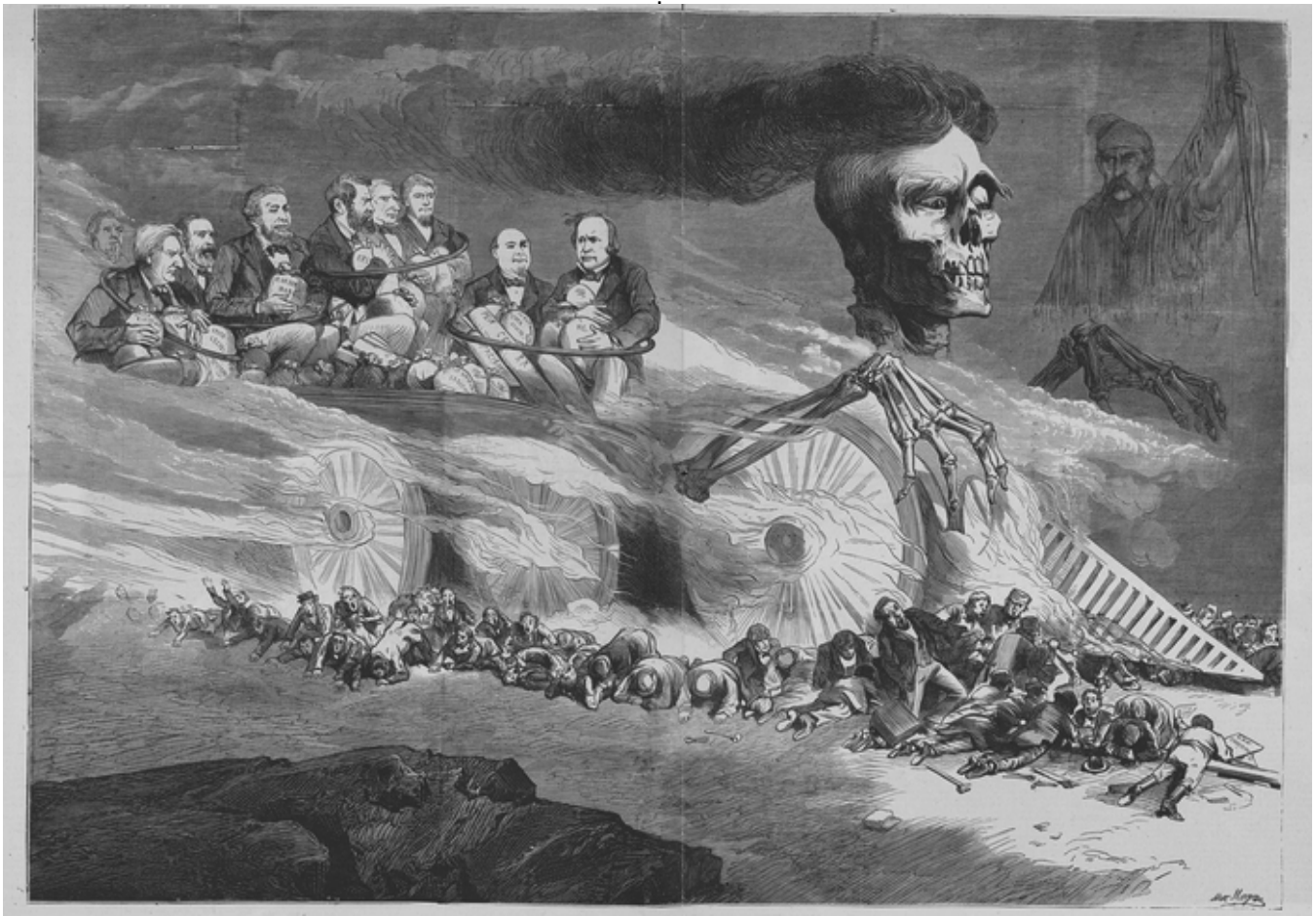
As he walked toward the knife, another curious thought flowed into his head, fresh as a cool waterfall after the winter snow melts.

"How's it that you have such tasty lamb, here inside this tree, enough to eat for whenever you're hungry, if you can't find your way outside to catch such an animal?"

In that instant everything disappeared: the fire, the stove, the lamb, the light, everything except the little girl. Only now she was hidden in darkness. He heard her there, somewhere inside the tree, although he couldn't see her. She was just sitting on the floor, he imagined, possibly looking at her hands. That's what he would've done if he'd been stumped by a question as magnificent as the one he'd just thrown at her. Then he heard it: a quiet sigh. She began to glow, a pale-bluish glow. It was a warm glow, but he didn't feel any warmer.

"Your shoe is outside the tree. If you want it back, please, just get me out of here."

He shrugged his tiny shoulders, which was hardly noticeable because they were so



little, and grabbed the knife by the handle. It felt good in his hands, like a knife he'd used many times. He pulled it out of the tree and began to hack away at the inside of the bark, until a small hole appeared and he could see daylight coming through. He'd been cutting in the exact same spot where he'd smeared his stinking excrement all over the tree. A bit of it stuck to his knife and the smell of it, as the wind blew through the hole, caused him to wish the lamb hadn't disappeared. Even wood-smoke would have been nice at a time like this, anything to cover up the odor.

"How's it you can open the tree to let me in, but you can't open it to let yourself out?"

This was a good question, perplexing

indeed! Jon Tinweed hadn't experienced such profundity before. He was startled to his core by his own inner genius, which was a magnificent startle, because he'd hardly ever had any depth to himself at all.

"My door lets people in. It won't let me out."

She'd responded so clearly and cleanly that he felt a puddle of stupidity spilling out of every crack and crevice of his sordid life. Why hadn't he thought of that? Better stick to the simple stuff, the stuff he knew best, he decided. If she wanted to have a new door in her stuffy old home, better get it done fast.

He whittled here and whittled there, all the while whittling the door into a nice oval shape. Before it was done, he had one

last question to ask her. It was this third question that really should have been left alone. He never should have even imagined he'd ask such a thing. But once he'd started riddling her, he could hardly stop.

"How's it you need my help at all, if you're so magically powerful?"

The words slipped out of his mouth, too late to take them back. Behind him he heard a sound so devastating that he curled up on the inside. As her scream expanded, echoing upward through the tree, it amplified, until it erupted out the top, frightening the birds a continent away. Like her voice, her shape also grew. Her shadow on the walls grew tenfold, flickering like lightning in the middle of a black night. She reached out to grab him and he shrank back.

Just then, the door fell open. And Jon Tinweed slipped and rolled out. He got up carefully, afraid to look back into the tree. He knew she was angry at him, more than ever before. He cursed himself for asking too many questions, making a mental note never to do it again. But like most things in his little mind, the note blew away and was forgotten. Jon Tinweed reminded himself that he had a heart made of metal and had nothing to fear.

He turned to the tree as she stepped out. Fully visible in the bright sunlight, he could see she was absolutely beautiful, a miracle come to life, the most stunning apparition he'd ever beheld.

He bowed deeply to her. She turned here and turned there. Then she spoke.

"You destroyed my property with your

stinking shoe," she said flatly. "Apologize."

"Sorry, my dear one," he said most sincerely and bowed again.

"And there's your shoe!" she said, pointing to it in the grass.

He picked it up carefully, avoiding the remaining excrement dangling from the bottom. When he turned around to thank her, she was gone. Even the tree with the hole in it had disappeared. Little did he care. He was free. He had his shoe. It was time to move on.

And what would he have told anyone about the experience, anyway?

"Sure, Jon, we believe you. You met a wood nymph. And, by the way, how did all that shit get on the bottom of your shoe?"

They'd say he'd imagined the whole thing as a means of dealing with his deep sense of inadequacy. They'd say he'd made up the story about a tree-gruel named Bart—who had ever seen one?—and instead just stepped in his own pile of fecal matter. And how would he respond to that?

Although Jon Tinweed had a heart made of metal and overcame taunts from all corners of the world, inside, he was still sensitive. Sometimes he cried late at night when no one was around.

Part II—THE NEW WORLD

Jon Tinweed placed his foot firmly on the path and stepped forward with dignity, as much as his tiny frame and grand shoes would allow. It was only by his deep courage and the sharp point of a knife in his back, that he made it away from the

waterfront at all. Once he'd entered the trial, he saw it was harmless in the wood, although they appeared to be ominous from the safety of the shore.

Jon Tinweed had stepped out into the wild with no intention of ever coming back. This was a long time ago, long before the second set of settlers ever arrived in the New World. Back then, the continental region we now know as North America stretched out, vastly uninhabited. You could walk for days without seeing another living soul. The trees themselves touched from branch to branch in such a great network that you might hardly ever get a glimpse of the sun when wandering mindlessly below the leaves, such as Jon Tinweed was doing now.

This made it cool under the trees, and great for walking, even in the morning, when the day was getting hot, such as on a day like this when Jon Tinweed entered the woods alone. He couldn't walk as comfortably as you might imagine, because he was still standing on his sea legs. He'd barely managed to scrape the money together to buy a voyage across the great ocean, hoping to avoid ever coming in contact the tree nymph again. He often had a sneaking feeling she might be following him everywhere he went.

Before setting out on the tempest waters to the new land, he'd envisioned meeting a new kind of people there, a kind of peace-loving folk he could call his friends. He'd laid down to sleep the first night in the belly of the ship, only to rise in the morning to find the ship had already

set sail, his hope of flipping off the Old World gone forever.

Jon Tinweed had come to the New World with the first set of settlers. This wasn't the second time, when settlers came over the ocean and had no idea how to survive. That was the time when indigenous people living nearby had attempted to save these settlers from sure extinction by teaching them how to hunt and gather and make ends meet. Sadly, though, in return for this beneficial knowledge, the second settlers ran off the natives who had been so considerate to them, once the settlers got themselves established and the community began to take shape. Then, even though they thought they were getting well established, a kind of delirium set in and they wandered off into the mountains and vanished in the snow. They might have been in such a state of madness due to the eating of human flesh, but we won't know much about that, because they don't teach that stuff in school.

This is before that wicked story ever happened. This is when the first settlers arrived in the New World by means of following islands both small and big, far to the north. It may be disputed by archaeologists and other quasi-scientists whether this really happened, that settlers actually came from the Old World to the New World long ago. But Jon Tinweed was one of these original settlers, a sturdy kind of people who already knew how to live in the wild, lessons learned long before they set out across the ocean. They weren't so arrogant as to presume they could just figure it all

out once they got there. At the same time, while it might appear that Jon Tinweed was indeed pursuing the goal of finding a new home, he was also escaping his problems of the past. He had no need to continue living a life where he was always fighting for a box to sleep in with a bunch of inconsiderate creatures. Damn those kittens!

It wasn't the first time Jon Tinweed had been outcast from society and it wouldn't be the last. He'd left the Old World for the New World in a good mood, with high hopes of a better future, only to find that he didn't really fit in with the crew aboard the ocean-bound vessel. The very moment they arrived on dry land, they set about sending him on his merry way. He was given little choice in the matter when he stepped out onto a trail that led him into uncharted territory.

Jon Tinweed had a curious habit. He only cut his hair once a year. When he cut it, he cut it all off, clean and sober. This was quite an economical approach, he reasoned, although reasoning wasn't his strong point. When the summer was building up steam, when the time of year was the hottest, he'd pay a barber to shave his head down to the bone. As fall approached, he'd get a little bit growing again, and then in winter, when the wind was cold, he'd have gathered enough hair on top his head to keep from freezing. In spring, his hair would get long, needing to be tied back so that it didn't flop about in his face all the time. And then, come summer, just as soon as he began to sweat profusely, he'd have the whole mop totally scraped off once

more.

As the ship to the New World had set sail in the spring, just when the ice in the north was starting to break, his hair had grown longish. He had it tied back behind his head in a kind of horse-like tail. Giving little thought to the future, since he had little room for thought inside his little head, he'd assumed he'd find a barber somewhere on the other side of the great ocean. It never occurred to him that he alone might be about the only one desiring a haircut on those distant shores. The people who already lived there lived a rugged kind of life and found little need for cutting their hair—or wearing shoes—at all.

He wondered where they were. He wondered if they really existed. He jumped along the path, scampering from tree base to tree base, in case he was attacked and needed to find shelter quickly. Jon Tinweed knew very little about much of anything, and he knew almost nothing at all about the nation into which he had just entered. He hoped he'd meet someone soon, for the day was growing hot and he was already a little hungry. For him, a little hunger was a lot. It amounted to a mountain of pain, yet he wasn't about to knock on a tree and ask a local tree nymph for a bite of lamb.

Recall that Jon Tinweed had come from a people who knew something about the wild. They had learned those hard lessons of survival, long before they ever started out on this journey into the New World. With this knowledge planted firmly in his head, it was natural for him to think that he could take care of himself through thick

and thin. He plodded forward, with no regard to where he would sleep that night or what he'd find to eat. For a moment he almost felt invincible.

That's where he made his big mistake. He forgot one of the oldest rules of survival, that there is strength in numbers. There's that other rule as well, the one that says you should always tell someone where you're going before you head out alone into the woods, but that hardly applies here. Who would he have told? And would anyone have really cared?

He grew so confident that he started talking to things, naming things, as if he were destined to be crowned king here one day. He had come from the Old World. How impressive is that on one's resume? As he walked, he focused on what he saw as his natural right to take over the place. He spied a fresh piece of wood-sponge growing on a tree and broke it off and put it in his pocket. It might be needed at the most unexpected moment.

"You, old tree, I name thee, Earwart," he said, pointing to the towering oak. It swayed in the wind in gratitude, or so he thought.

"And you, young beauty, shall be called from henceforth, Bellyblossom."

That one was a fragile purple flower. There were many young flowers like it along the trail at this time of the year and he took the time to name every one of them, being careful not to trample on any of them.

Just then he came across a slug on the trail. A spirited mud-colored slug, with a

fresh collection of slime on its underside, and bits of tree and trail dirt stuck inside the slime. He thought he'd step on it, but then quickly glanced around. No, there were no piles of fecal matter anywhere nearby. There was no tree about to envelope him. Although that event mentioned earlier had passed harmlessly, he'd learned from it to be more careful when alone in the woods. This just goes to show that even the shallowest person can fathom something beneficial out of the depths of their own ineptitude.

"You shall be called Wigglethorn," he said, pointing his finger at the slug's bobbing head.

It wasn't exactly an Old World tree-gruel. It was more the New World type. Wigglethorn had a curious history. This slug had traveled nearly eighty kilometers in its lifetime. This was an astounding fact, considering slugs might move at no more than the ferocious pace of 10 meters a day. It had taken Wigglethorn nearly all of his reserves to travel this far. But in search of what? No creature living in the wild would set out on such an arduous adventure without a purpose in mind.

It just so happened that Wigglethorn was heartbroken. He felt like his heart had been pulverized into a million little pieces, like the way they treat your kidney with ultrasonic sound when you have a kidney stone, where the stone is broken up and expelled the next time you urinate. But that isn't a fact that matters at this time. The pain felt within his heart is just an expression used to point out how miserable

Wigglethorn was inside without a partner in his life.

What about the feelings of slugs? You see, there are many things in the natural world that the closed-minded scientific community has yet to acknowledge, like the fact that slugs have feelings. It's one of the mysteries of life. It's much like trying to measure the weight of the human soul. How can scientists declare that something doesn't exist when they can't even find it? The feelings of a slug are much like that of the human conscience, immeasurable, inexhaustible, and sometimes, when they are rude to strangers, simply inexcusable.

Wigglethorn had not traveled eighty kilometers in a straight line. He had traveled in a circle, in search of someone of his liking to replicate with. All this talk about a broken heart and deep feeling of affection put aside, the act of replicating with another slug was something that really turned Wigglethorn on. As fate would have it, he couldn't leave his own ecosystem. Wigglethorn was caught within the boundaries of his own limited world by forces far beyond his control.

When Jon Tinweed almost stepped on Wigglethorn, the New World tree-gruel had almost completed his circuit, returning to the same spot from which he had begun. But instead of stepping on him, Jon Tinweed picked up Wigglethorn and began to play with him, like a kid might do when playing with jelly inside a plastic bag. It was quite comical, the way you could shake the poor creature and make its head swing around in circles. Around and around

Wigglethorn's head went, until he was nearly sick and almost expunged his stomach matter on Jon Tinweed's hand.

Without warning, a chorus of warriors stepped out of the woods and surrounded Jon Tinweed. They were tall and ferocious looking and had been observing Jon Tinweed playing with Wigglethorn with baffled expressions smeared across their faces for some time. Instantly, Jon Tinweed knew he was conquered. He had been king of the woods for only a couple of hours. This land was their land. All seven of them.

Knowing he had little chance of escaping, he decided to go the diplomatic route. He offered the slug to the warrior standing closest to him. It was a cool toy to play with, and cheap.

When it dawned on them that he might be a little thin in the head, they laughed so hard they nearly peed on themselves. This reaction, though clearly not threatening, left Jon Tinweed feeling somewhat confused. What was it they found so comical about playing with a slug in the woods? The more they laughed, the more he smiled, and soon after, the little man began to feel quite buoyant. Meeting these fine country folk had indeed lifted his spirits. Might it be possible that one of them, in this distant place, could be in possession of the skills of a barber, and would he not kindly assist Jon Tinweed in cutting his hair? The little man thought he'd offer them his knife and mimic a haircut.

They were laughing so hard that none of them saw him slip the knife out of his belt. It felt good in his hands, although it

still reeked somewhat of shit. He'd never been able to fully remove the smell of his own excrement from the knife after the wood nymph had asked him to cut a door in her tree. He pulled his long hair up in the sky, reaching as far as he could, and then he pretended to swipe at his scalp with the glistening blade. They froze on the spot. Clearly his actions spoke louder than words. They were mesmerized as Jon Tinweed attempted to scalp himself.

Little did Jon Tinweed know that these particular warriors had taken a vow of peacefulness. They had sworn to uphold a New Year's resolution of the noblest kind. They were determined to treat strangers better this year. They would ask questions first and scalp heads later. To them, the little man was openly tempting them to break that vow. They wondered if he might be an illusion, a demon in human form. Some of them stepped back.

The silence grew longer, stretching out like the shadows of the trees as the sun swung over their heads and down the other side. Nobody moved for what seemed like eons. Jon Tinweed took a wack at his own head and cut some hair lose. He offered the knife and the hair to the ring of warriors. One of them thought this might be a ritual that strangers from across the ocean practice when meeting new people. The warrior took the hair from Jon Tinweed and smelled it and almost gagged. He faked a smile and then threw the hair behind him.

Another warrior, the one with leadership potential, understood at that moment

what Jon Tinweed wanted. He approached Jon Tinweed and took the knife from his hand. He inspected it, running his thumb along the edge of the blade, impressed by the fine craftsmanship. It had been hardened in a forge over five thousand kilometers away by some of the best metal-smiths in the world. Slowly, without putting a single scratch in the skull of Jon Tinweed, he cut the little man's hair, never releasing a single drop of blood. Some of the warriors, moved to the point of religious hallucination, began to weep. When the haircut was over, Jon Tinweed looked deeply satisfied with how life in the New World was turning out. He dropped Wigglethorn on the trail and let the tree-gruel get away unharmed.

Sensing a change in the air, the warrior with the knife relaxed a bit. All the warriors felt immensely satisfied, as they had partaken in the scalping a man and no harm had come to him. Oddly enough, the experience had put a smile on the little man's face. What strange world this little man must come from, they said to each other through the exchange of odd glances. Who in the entire wilderness would be so happy just to have his hair cut? The one warrior still holding the knife in his hand hefted it a few times, and after feeling the weight, tossed it at the nearest tree, where the blade went in and the knife was left hanging.

Jon Tinweed walked over and pulled it out. He still had a good bit of tree-gruel slime on his one hand and was tempted to wipe it off on the tree, but hesitated, won-

dering if there might be a nymph hiding inside. He put the knife back in his belt and turned to thank the warriors. Only this morning he'd been forced out of the boat by those treacherous swine, but if they could just see him now, making new friends and influencing strangers, what would they say? It was their loss, not his.

Just when he was about to hug one of the warriors, the wind shifted and the tree behind his back swayed. What the warriors heard was a loud creaking sound, but what Jon Tinweed heard was a voice from a place somewhere deep in his past: "Apology accepted!"

This startled him. He'd run away to the other side of the ocean in the hopes of never coming face to face with that same tree nymph again. Could it be possible she had relatives who lived here and knew the story of his stinking shoe?

The warriors, once they had regained their senses, took him peacefully back to their tribe where he could meet the elders. The elders, sitting around a fire and smoking god-knows-what, found the little man an entertaining sight and asked in a foreign tongue if he could dance for them. They wanted to get a kick out of laughing at this little puppet of a man who had come to visit them from the far side of the ocean. They had no idea what the warriors had witnessed in the woods. Some of the warriors still thought Jon Tinweed might be possessed by magic. What do elders know? They respect are all so gullible.

Jon Tinweed had no clue what they were saying, as language, any language, was

not his natural gift. One of the warriors pantomimed doing a dance, and as he moved playfully around the fire, to the amusement of everyone, he slipped on a tender piece of wood-sponge. It rolled under his foot and he fell head first right into the flames. This caused everyone to laugh to the point of exhaustion. And then, being tired out, they decided to eat and drink a little more before taking a nap.

The warrior who'd fallen in the fire pulled himself out with little harm done, except that his eyebrows were gone and his pride was no longer intact. The two sat down beside each other, John Tinweed and the shamed warrior, being outsiders. Here the beginning of their friendship took root. The warrior was often called Samsuch. Jon Tinweed had heard him called that, although he didn't really know if that was his true name or just a taunt people liked to throw at him.

Samsuch offered Jon Tinweed a wooden cup full of berry juice, and a slab of meat. The juice, just short of wine, filled Jon Tinweed's little stomach, seeping all the way into his bones. The meat tasted a lot like turkey. It had been suspended over the flames and allowed to cook for days, giving it an exquisite smokey flavor. It was something special. He'd never before had anything like it.

Things were turning out well for him here in the New World. He grew excited at the prospects of his new life. He forgot about the tree nymph. He forgot about the kittens who'd forced him out of his home. He even forgot that he couldn't speak the

same language as the people sleeping around the fire. He babbled on for a full five minutes before he noticed the angry expressions on their faces. Mostly, they were upset at having been awakened from a decent afternoon nap.

Since nothing was getting through to them, he thought he would jump up and down, as he imagined a wild turkey might do, although he was wrong about that. He ran around the fire and at the same time he flapped his elbows, mimicking flight. He wanted to know where he could find more turkey. His intention was to get across the message of traveling to some place new, some place with plenty to eat, a place he could call his own. He pretended to drink from an invisible bottle as he moved sporadically about, being careful not to fall in the fire like Samsuch had done.

About this time, some the elders sitting around the fire took notice, and thinking he'd finally decided to dance for them, prodded the others back into a state of wakefulness. They watched as Jon Tinweed circled around the fire, moving dangerously close to the throes of lunacy. And they got a kick out of it. This stranger from another world could make you laugh at times, until you nearly peed yourself.

The other warriors, the ones who'd first found Jon Tinweed in the woods playing with the slug, looked on in shock, not quite sure what they'd brought home with them. Was this some phantom from the deep? Had they upset some unknown deity, and now, it was among them, sure to bring about a plague of destruction? No one in

his or her right mind would ever act so odd, not twice in the same day. The young warriors mimicked laughter, trying to please the elders, but gave each other glances, their eyes revealing a deep fear that was welling up inside them.

The one with leadership potential, thinking haste was the best course of action, consulted with the elders, seeking advice from them about the newcomer. Once he'd stopped twirling about madly and the banter had died down, the warrior explained that they wanted to take the little man to the Spring of Truth, which was far away in the mountains, and ascertain what rank he should hold as a new member of their tribe, now that he had come to live among them. In reality, they tricked the elders, who were often tricked by the youth. The warriors did not trick them out of disrespect, but as a matter of sport. Although they said they wanted to find the truth from the spring about the virtues of this little man, if he continued to show signs of malignant behavior, they intended to tie his hands together and throw him into the deepest part of the pool and leave him there to drown. It was a dangerous game they were playing, but little did they fear. They were warriors of the bravest kind.

Part III—THE SPRING OF TRUTH

It would take days to reach the place in the mountains where the sacred spring was located, following the trail they'd decided to follow. Little did they know this wasn't the shortest route. This was a long and

weary route to traverse, walking being the only means of transportation in the New World at this time. There had been a breed of horse-type creature living here millions of years ago, but they'd all become extinct. It wasn't until later, when the second kind of settlers came, that the mechanical horse was introduced to this environment, a kind of horse that polluted the atmosphere and destroyed the environment. The pollution they would eventually generate would cause all kinds of terrible mutations in a plethora of species when it came down to the next leap in evolution. The trail the warriors would take to the Spring of Truth was a hiking trail that only the strongest could master.

Bright and early the next morning, the warriors and the little man set out on foot, following a path that went on forever. In the lead were the seven warriors who'd first encountered Jon Tinweed playing in the woods, followed by the little man himself, and then, taking up the rear, his newfound friend, Samsuch. Overnight this warrior's

name had come to mean dances-with-fire-and-loses-his-eyebrows, as warrior's names have a tendency to change over time due to unforeseen events.

The trees all around were turning brilliant colors and the smell of them perspiring lifted everyone's spirits about the journey ahead. As Jon Tinweed climbed the trail up the mountainside, he walked with a bit of a wobble, being unfamiliar with the proper way to climb a mountain path. He'd never been so high above anything before. It made him dizzy, with the thinning atmosphere and the heights. They'd hardly climbed more than a hundred meets in elevation above sea level and already he was short of breath.

Because he walked with such a faltering gait, he slowed the whole procession down, but they never said a word about it. Silently, they loathed him, cursing the day they'd met him, which was only yesterday. They wandered slowly up the trail, dreaming of the moment when they might finally reach the Spring of Truth and throw him



into it. Wouldn't that be fine? Each warrior kept his fingers crossed, hoping the little man couldn't swim. They were not far from the truth.

Samsuch was often verbally abused by the other members of his tribe, just as Jon Tinweed was insulted by the people he'd left behind in the Old World, and not having a heart made of metal like Jon Tinweed, Samsuch had retreated from society, becoming an introvert in nature, never caring much for what other people liked or didn't like about him. Let's just say his value system was a bit misaligned from that of the average woods-folk. Although he had a soft heart and was often crushed by the demeaning remarks dumped on him, he was a thinker of sorts, meaning he thought about things more than other people did. This really didn't amount to much thinking at all, though, because most people never really think much about anything.

Samsuch had also noticed, like his fellow tribesmen, that Jon Tinweed constantly fell behind the rest of the group. They often had to stop and wait for him to catch up, which allowed them to catch their breath. And then, the moment he'd arrive, they'd set out again, the results being he was never really able to rest like they were. During these resting periods, when Samsuch looked down the hill behind him and watched the little man hobble in his direction, he thought about his newfound friend's dilemma, who still had a bad case of sea legs. That's when the solution to the long delays occurred to him.

"Boo pity bee pity bop," is what he said

when Jon Tinweed arrived at the next plateau, nearly out of breath. At least this is what Jon Tinweed heard, because it was in a language foreign to him.

Jon Tinweed wasn't thinking too clearly, feeling dizzy and disconnected. This would have made matters worse, except that he rarely thought clearly in the first place, so nothing really was going on out of the ordinary here. He said nothing.

Samsuch encouraged him to sit down on a rock of rather small stature, about the perfect height for someone as majestically disabled as Jon Tinweed was. To say he offered him a seat is an exaggeration towards politeness. The truth is Samsuch by this point had grown as disgruntled as the rest of the warriors at the constant delays they were facing. He pushed Jon Tinweed backward and watched him totter. Not having two solid feet on the ground to support him, the little man pantomimed a short fall before actually landing flat on the ground.

Samsuch leaned over and tried to remove the shoes from the feet of the little man, thinking it would make more sense to go barefoot than to walk around with those cumbersome clod-like things on. He hoped they would travel more quickly this way.

Jon Tinweed had never considered this option before. He was a civilized man, a modern man, and this kind of thinking was below him. The idea of living in the same fashion as his newfound brethren, the wild tribesman he now traveled with, with no shoes, this thought had simply never entered his head before. He had to have

two solid shoes on his feet at all times, if ever he hoped to get anywhere. The way was forward, not backward.

And although Samsuch had good intentions, one thing worked to his disadvantage. Jon Tinweed didn't want his shoes removed. In fact, he questioned whether or not his friend was really a friend at all, or was just pretending to be friendly. He wondered if Samsuch and pals had taken him out into the woods to a mountainside far from home, a place where no one would ever hear him screaming for help, as they stole the one good thing Jon Tinweed had in life, a pair of decent shoes. They clearly didn't have any shoes of their own and might want a pair. The little man at that moment decided he would have to watch his misguided brethren more closely in the future, in case it turned out his hunch was right and they were only leading him onward to his own demise.

Samsuch gave up after exerting a great deal of effort and sweating profusely and losing his breath and cursing the day the word shoe was ever invented in any and every language. He sat down next to the little man and tried to regain his composure. This was the cue the rest of his fellow tribesmen had been waiting for. They took off, leaving him and Jon Tinweed both to lag behind forever.

Up above, the clouds appeared to slide sideways, which would have been odd enough to see, if anyone had been watching the skies, but nobody was. At that altitude, where clouds liked to laze the day away, the wind was moving in an entirely different

direction than it was near the ground.

Next, the sun moved in a peculiar way, and the clouds and the sun converged on the same desolate spot in the sky and the day abruptly grew a whole lot darker.

Thinking it might rain and they better hurry along, both Jon Tinweed and Samsuch eyeballed their chances of upward progress on the side of the mountain. They ascended without delay, Samsuch leading and the little man lagging behind. Unknown to either of them, the shadows on the trail, which normally fell to the left, had shifted to the right. These odd shadows hid the fact that the trail just up ahead forked. The way they should follow appeared to only go to the left when it also went to the right. The stone marker pointing out the direction was obscured in near darkness.

As soon as they entered the leftward trail, the clouds shifted back, the sun came out, shadows realigned themselves and the fork to the right was again as plain as day. Samsuch and Jon Tinweed had no idea that this had happened, for they'd already progressed a ways up the left branch in search of their traveling companions. The rest of the party had followed the trail to the right. In this matter the two parties became separated and went down different paths in history. The pack of warriors heading off to the right was never seen or heard from again.

Little did it matter to the bigger party heading farther and farther down the right fork in the trail, because they were bound and determined to arrive at a mountain

cave by nightfall where they knew shelter from the rain awaited them. The way the clouds were dashing and bumping into each other, a rainstorm of the fiercest kind was imminent. The lead warrior spoke aloud these thoughts and his crew hastened onward, surviving the twists and turns in the trail at the cost of a scratch to the back of the calf by a thorny bush and the occasional foot banging against an oddly placed rock.

Although it sounds like they were on the best path to the Spring of Truth, they weren't. They were taking the longer route. The branch to the left was far shorter. But they'd never seen the fork to the left before, or the stone marker, because it was normally hidden in shadows at the time of day when they always arrived there.

Survival was all that mattered to these warriors who'd ventured farther than anyone could imagine into the woods in this sparsely inhabited part of the world. In the night when they were fast asleep in a cave, they were discovered by a troll who came along and devoured them. This was a troll who hadn't had a decent meal in years. He enjoyed every bite.

When Samsuch stopped at a turn in the trail to wait for Jon Tinweed, he got the idea it would be fun to scare the pants off the little man. He bent down on all fours, in which case the little man would be looking right in his deranged eyes. He practiced making a face like a fierce imaginary beast. As he waited he practiced a variety of other faces as well, thinking he might be even scarier to behold if he imitated his mother-

in-law. He finally settled on the appearance of the fiercest imaginary beast that roamed the woods, the kind that ate selfish warriors who took innocent people and threw them in the deep end of the Spring of Truth. Doing his best, he imitated a hungry troll.

About this time, Jon Tinweed was really starting to enjoy himself, as the walk up the mountainside had done his health a bit of good. His sore back had stopped hurting and his heart was pounding like a horse. The fresh oxygen to his brain was a novelty. The little man came around a bend in the trail and stopped short, staring right into the face of Samsuch. It appeared to him that Samsuch was squatting down, probably attempting to take a shit, and the look on his face, the agony when things don't come out as smoothly as one would like, confirmed Jon Tinweed's assumption. He knew just the solution for a nasty bout of constipation.

"What you need is a lot more fruit in your diet."

What Samsuch heard was this: "Boo pity bee pity bop." It was all in a foreign language to him.

Looking around the clearing, the little man spied a cluster of long-thorn berries. Whatever long-thorn berries are we might never know, because Jon Tinweed tended to name things he found in the woods whatever sort of name he desired. He grabbed a thorny branch with plenty of berries on it and handed it to Samsuch, who was groaning by this time, disappointed that his surprise had failed. He knew he would never make a great warrior, if he

couldn't even scare the pants off someone like the little man.

Samsuch rolled over on his back, looked up at the sky and shrieked like the wind. This worried Jon Tinweed terribly, thinking the problem with the warrior's bowels might be much worse than he had originally anticipated. He continued to offer the berries to Samsuch, pointing out that he should only eat the sweet part and spit out the seeds, if ever he was to regain control over his bowels again. Samsuch took the berries and was about to toss them into the wind, when he screamed again. It was a scream of such magnitude that it shook the foundations of the earth, a scream like none he'd ever emitted before, with such deep, venomous poison in it that Jon Tinweed took a quick step back. He tripped over an earthworm inching by and fell down on what might be called his butt.

Both men stayed that way, laughing for a good while, at their good fortune of having met each other in a world full of evil, a world full of people who would have looked down on them in shame. Samsuch shared the berries with the little man. It had only been the long thorns on the long-thorn berry branch that had caused him to scream, when they had pierced his hand. As they looked up at the sky above them, the rain decided it was time to return to their neck of the woods and depart from the clouds. Making its way earthward, pouring out in abundance, the downpour sent both men scurrying for any form of shelter they could find. Samsuch hid under a tree and Jon Tinweed hid under a toadstool.

As they hid from the rain, a creature of the most curious nature came ambling past them, appearing out of nowhere, from just around the bend in the trail. This was one of those rare things, a creature that appears to be invisible in broad daylight but becomes plain to see whenever doused in rainwater. The creature is so rare that no one had ever seen one before. Scientists hadn't even had a chance to classify it, because the science of classification of creatures in the deep woods hadn't been introduced in this part of the world yet.

This creature, which wanted to be called by the name of Hunk, but wasn't actually ever called by that name, because no one had ever called it anything before, had one terrible fear. That was the fear of rainwater. Not only did water from the sky make the creature visible to the human eye, it also had the reverse effect on the creature's vision. Suddenly, what had looked clear as daylight to Hunk became blurry. Being at a point of extreme vulnerability, Hunk sought for shelter, any shelter he could find. This is how he pushed Samsuch back out into the rain and took over his hiding place under the exact same tree.

As Hunk settled down to wait for the rain to stop, his vision cleared, but only by the least amount. It cleared enough for him to spy Jon Tinweed under a toadstool nearby. But his vision hadn't cleared much at all, as rainwater was still dripping down on his blotchy and ill-patterned fur. Thinking the little man might be a toad, he attempted to eat Jon Tinweed, because Hunk loved to dine on fresh toad. He picked up the lit-

tle man by his leg and put one of Jon Tinweed's feet into his mouth and proceeded to suck off his shoe.

The shoe came away from his foot and slid smoothly down Hunk's coarse gullet without much resistance. It might have been something in the creature's saliva that had caused the foot to shrink or the shoe to swell, but we'll never know, because we'll never meet a creature like Hunk, which means we won't be able to analyze him scientifically. In any case, the little man had now managed to lose a shoe twice, both times taken away from him by one of those strangest of creatures only found in the deep dark woods.

Little did Hunk know that some of Jon Tinweed's excrement still clung to the crevices in the bottom of his shoe, now hard as a rock. And when that hit Hunk's stomach and dissolved, magical creature or not, the resulting combination was unpleasant to Hunk's inner workings in ways unimaginable. Out came the shoe in a hurry, flung through the air at a tremendous velocity, hitting unsuspecting Samsuch in the face. The application of Hunk's stomach juices and the little man's feces didn't give poor Samsuch much of a fighting chance. He was knocked out in a flash.

The sun shone brightly, the rain dried up and Hunk went back to being invisible. Eventually, with a good kick to the gut from the little man, shoe intact, Samsuch woke up. They regrouped and returned to the path, in search of the Spring of Truth, for whatever that was worth. Hunk fol-

lowed after them. The thing about Hunk that you have to understand is that his kind of species wasn't vast in numbers. In fact, he might be a one-of-a-kind. And that meant he had no friends. And everybody needs friends, don't they? He followed the pair up the mountain path, jumping from rock to rock, happy as a kitten living in a shoe box.

The day passed in a flourish. The path they were on was much shorter than the path the other party had taken. They arrived near to the Spring of Truth by nightfall and set up camp. Jon Tinweed had never camped in the wild before, although he came from a race who knew an encyclopedia's worth about such things. He had ventured into the woods from time to time, in search of a new home, but he always returned to his shoe box by nightfall.

He sat and watched as Samsuch worked. Samsuch, still sore in the gut from being kicked, didn't like this arrangement much. He'd been the laughing-stock of his tribe for many reasons, one being his outdoors skills. He couldn't catch an animal and skin it. Samsuch couldn't collect the right medicinal herbs to treat wounds. But this warrior could build a shelter. And he knew that to build a proper shelter, you needed to two pairs of hands. Idle hands are better shoved into the fire, so a local saying goes.

"*Bee bop bitty bitty bop!*" he yelled at the little man to no avail.

The little man didn't understand a word of what he was hearing. It looked like Samsuch was doing a mighty fine job at

putting a roof over their heads. Why the sudden animosity?

Hunk, watching from a distance, had no idea what to think. He thrived day after day more on pure observation and experimentation than any textbook theory about social integration. If he saw something that looked good, he ate it, such as a shoe on a foot. He saw no need to help either Samsuch or Jon Tinweed in whatever folly they were pursuing. Hunk didn't need a shelter for the night.

Samsuch became so disillusioned with the current arrangement that he wondered if his colleagues had been right. Maybe he should pick up the little man by his stinking shoe and toss him in the Spring of Truth by himself? The fact that the other warriors weren't here hadn't surprise him. They'd probably turned around and were sitting around a warm campfire by now, with the rest of the tribe, having a good laugh and a drink of berry juice. They must have hidden in the trees along the side of the trail, and since he wasn't much of a tracker in the woods, he hadn't noticed them there.

If Jon Tinweed was really worthy of joining the tribe, he'd float, not sink, in the Spring of Truth: the thought festered in Samsuch's brain and grew to a raging boil. He'd been finding branches for the roof of the shelter for over an hour and his visible companion was only sitting there and watching. Samsuch wasn't aware that Hunk was also watching, something that would have irked him to no end.

Hunk wasn't much of a thinker, but he

did have a taste for things, edible things. Possibly it had only been the one shoe that had caused his indigestion? Maybe the other one would go down much better? There was only one way to find out. Putting off the inevitable would only make his hunger grow more demanding. Why not just try the other shoe? It couldn't hurt to try it, could it? Just a taste would do. He'd never know, just by sitting there and observing, if the clean shoe tasted good. He had to experiment. It was in his nature. In this case, observation wasn't enough.

"Ho hum," Jon Tinweed said and let out a yawn.

That was enough to set Samsuch on fire. Not literally on fire, not like when he'd fallen into the fire and burned off his eyebrows. It was enough to make him explode. But not literally explode. It was enough to, to, well, to make him think about what a terrible world this was and how life wasn't fair and how his colleagues had been right about not trusting this no good little man from the Old World.

Whatever "ho hum" meant in Old World talk, it didn't go over well with Samsuch. He was a savage, an animal of the wild, and poor hunting skills or not, he would demand that the little man do more than just waste the last remaining rays of daylight watching him work. To him, watching was observing, and observing was idleness. This was a time for action.

He screamed. Samsuch let out such a primal scream that it shook the leaves on the trees on the other side of the planet. The earth's tilt changed, his scream was so

deep. The little man thought Samsuch might have seen a spider on his head, so he brushed at his hair, but in fact he had no hair, already forgetting it had been chopped off the day before. Samsuch may not have been a great warrior, but he could scream.

Hunk was on a path to intercept the shoe, looking so tasty and delightful in the setting sun. His vision had adjusted, working better in the twilight than in the day, and he zoned in on the shoe without hesitation. But he was too late. Samsuch grabbed Jon Tinweed by the shoe and lofted him into the air, flinging him far out over the Spring of Truth. Hunk went sailing through the air after him, invisible to Samsuch and Jon Tinweed, and not noticing the clean shoe had come off. It was still in Samsuch's hand.

Jon Tinweed rarely took a bath. He hated water. And when he did bathe once a year, his shoes never came off. His shoes never came off when he slept. They never came off at all. Shoes were a sign of civilization.

Inside his shoes, his feet were downright filthy. They were more like a pair of roots settled firmly in the dirt than something that one would call appendages. In fact, if he hadn't worn shoes, he might have become planted in the earth. That's how dirty his feet were.

Hunk grabbed hold of the little man mid-flight and shoved the squirming foot into his mouth as far as it would go. But there was no shoe there to suck off! He'd been robbed. There was only filth there on the length of Hunk's tongue. With a splash

they hit the water in unison, attached together as they were.

The wood nymph, long ago having left her tree with the help of the little man, had no idea where to go next. She'd never been outside her tree before. Having no clue about the real world, being a magical creature that had no place in reality, she'd decided to follow Jon Tinweed across the ocean. He was rather handsome, especially since he'd recently cut his hair. And now she was there, hiding in and among the trees in the grove that surrounded the Spring of Truth. When she saw the little man submerged beneath the water, she paused to consider if she should do anything about it. She thought long and hard, because he hadn't come up back up after a long time.

When he'd hit the water, pulled down by something hugging his foot, something he couldn't shake off, the first thing that happened was that years of filth on his body came off, forming a slick on the surface of spring. The Spring of Truth wasn't really a Spring of Truth at all. It was just a place the elders went to in search of answer to questions they already knew the answers to. They used it to trick the young members of the tribe into doing things they wanted. If the answer had come from the Spring of Truth, how could anyone question it? This was a fun joke the elders played on the youth, just for sport.

The Spring of Truth had a good deal of sulfuric gas in it, often bubbling up to the surface. If you listened closely, you'd swear you heard someone talking, as the bubbles

burst. And if you breathed in deeply and didn't pass out, you might start to really imagine you'd been told the truth from spirits of another world. You'd see things that weren't really there.

As soon as Hunk hit the water, he became visible and his eyesight went all wrong. He was holding onto something that was moving, and he hoped that something could swim, because he couldn't. He spit out the foot underwater, not having found any shoe there and being disgusted with the taste of the little man's dirty foot. But he wouldn't let go of his one chance for survival. If he sank to the bottom alone, he would be lost from scientific classification forever.

The tree nymph finally made up her mind and went in after Jon Tinweed. Samsuch stood with the shoe in his hand by the water's edge, watching, waiting, wondering how short his life might become if he played the hero. Then he jumped into the water to save the little man, his only friend in the world, since his comrades had abandoned him.

The gas in the spring, the unclassified creature Hunk and his mysterious saliva, and years of filth from Jon Tinweed's feet, a nymph from a tree in the Old Word, and a native with no eyebrows from the wild, it was all much more than nature was ever meant to handle at one time. In that combination, never concocted in such a way before, the mixture was likely to explode at any minute, if someone threw in a match, or even just a spark, into the spring.

The wood nymph was just such a spark.

She was of a normal color for the most part, but sometimes glowed a deep bluish color when she was pondering the deepest mysteries of the universe, such as why Jon Tinweed was so self-absorbed all the time. Deeper into the Spring of Truth she dived, in a sincere attempt to help save the little man, the savior who had freed her from the confines of the tree she had grown up inside. Down he sank and down she went. She pondered his true nature as she dived and began to glow.

Samsuch, thinking the little man had not yet sunk to the bottom, let go the shoe in the water. It was causing a strange color and making it difficult for him to swim.

The Spring of Truth had had enough, too much, in fact. There was a rift in time. The curved nature of space split open. It curved and curved and then couldn't curve any farther and then it was rent in two, creating a paradox, a hole into another dimension, a backward curve in time. All the water in the spring exploded in a flash.

The four creatures were left on the bottom, dazed, covered in mud. The landscape they saw when they regained their senses resembled Hell, steam rising everywhere. The old thin bones of souls long passed away after their bodies had been bound and thrown into the spring stuck out of the walls of the pit at odd angles, without pattern or purpose.

Hunk, being wet, was fully visible. The nymph had gotten her wings covered so thick with mud that she couldn't fly. Samsuch was rattled, unable to open his eyes for long due to his internal state of

fear. Only Jon Tinweed who had experienced many odd adventures in his life was in the least bit disconnected from reality.

The little man scratched his head where his hair had been and noticed his missing shoe in the mud, not far from him. He thought the shoe might be useful in plugging the hole where the spring was starting to fill up again. He thought about it in earnest, because he'd never had time to learn how to swim. What good was swimming when your arms only stretched out so far?

Try as hard as they could, none of them could get out of the pit. Not one of them was able to climb uphill through the steaming mud. They all gave up, exhausted.

Hunk tasted a bone on the bottom of the spring and discovered it wasn't as brittle as it looked. Somehow the water had petrified it. He nearly broke his teeth before spitting it out. The bone stuck in the side of the pit and Jon Tinweed grabbed it, using it to pull himself back on his feet. The others looked at him, one shoe on and one missing. He nearly fell over, being unstable in that condition. More mud slide down into the spring and his companions hugged each other in panic. Reality was hitting home for them hard.

The cave troll, the same one that had eaten the comrades of Samsuch, had heard a tumultuous sound when the spring exploded into the atmosphere. The troll liked to use the spring, not to bathe, but to urinate. When the troll arrived, he couldn't see the bottom, as the steam rising up cov-

ered any signs of what might be going on down there. Little did it matter. The troll had to pee. He pulled out his member and let go a strong shower, raining down a toxic mixture of his own on the heads of the four creatures below.

Troll piss is strong enough to discombobulate your DNA for eternity. What happens is things deep inside your body start to grow. Like tumors. Like extra appendages. Like acne. And those things don't all grow in a uniform way. Some parts grow faster and some not at all, leaving you looking much like any other greatly feared troll.

Samsuch, already tall, grew a lot taller within the blink of an eye. And his eyes did brink, stinging by the burn of troll pee raining down on him. Hunk grew and transformed into another creature never before mapped out by science, but that wasn't anything to write home about because he'd already been one such creature, one of a kind. The tree nymph fought back against the overwhelming power of the troll's piss and managed to stay beautiful, even though her feminine features were now three times too big. Jon Tinweed noticed that transformation with glee. And even then, as he smiled, the little man grew to a size he'd never before imagined. He became the full height of a man, a regular man, and not the shortest of all the creatures in the rest of the world. Without warning, he was in heaven.

The troll up above slipped, as the side of the spring was muddy, and fell. He slid all the way to the bottom, where he met up

with four other trolls, one quite beautiful. Together they were stuck and together they would have to get out. They pushed and pulled against each other. They used old bones to climb, a great team building activity often recommended by CEOs trying to resurrect failing companies, until they were standing on firm ground, far away from the edge of the spring. The spring, under great pressure, forced Jon Tinweed's shoe out of the hole and filled up again.

These creatures became the legendary gang of Five Trolls that roamed the wild

long before anyone from the civilized world came to live permanently in the New World. They were greatly feared by the tribal people who inhabited the land. They ate whatever they wanted and terrorized children when mentioned in bedtime stories.

Today, we can find images of them carved in caves in the wild. Archaeologists, after inspecting the images, have often wondered why one of them is always depicted missing a shoe. ❖

END TRANSMISSION