

Weeds

by H. W. Moss

The interior of the church smelled of frankincense and people, an odiferous masala of several hundred perfumed bodies wearing their finest apparel. The congregation sat silent as the priest in his chasuble intoned prayers from a text lying open on a pedestal before him.

The words were a soporific for Robin who began to drowse. Lest she lean on her four year old to the left, she nudged closer to Mike on her right and pressed up against his body hoping no one in back thought the move improper. Mike, meanwhile, was so attuned to the lector he took little notice of the slightly intimate contact.

“And in Joshua,” the priest intoned the words languorously. ““This then was the lot of the tribe of the children of Judah by their families; even to the border of Edom the wilderness of Zin southward was the uttermost part of the south coast.””

If everyone else could keep their eyes open this early Sunday morning, Robin thought, they must be on more than caffeine. And then Robin spread her arms and flew toward the ceiling.

It was a trick she learned when she was her son’s age, the ability to loft toward the highest place inside a room. She freed herself from responsibility for a few minutes of refreshing aerial dynamics, like a bird or a butterfly. The trick allowed her to watch from afar whatever bored her and to comment on the situation without being observed. She had complete control of her flight pattern and could swoop and dive, hover around a light fixture or squirrel herself inside the corner where ceiling met wall.

The priest was unwavering in his delivery and only Robin's athletic twirls and barrel rolls kept her from dropping off to sleep completely. She climbed and dove, climbed again and looked down upon the congregants in the nave. She shook her head in dismay at the unenlightened many.

She studied the heads of worshipers and picked out friends. She wondered who it was beneath a particularly wide garish hat. No one saw her take off and none having looked up, she was free to do as she pleased. In a corner two altar boys waited in white chemises and black baggy culottes while on the other side of the aisle a priest in a tailored surplice waved a round incense burner back and forth, up and down on a chain causing a billowing grey smoke to flow like fluid through its grill.

Robin played a puckish trick and floated down toward the smoke. She cupped her hands to contain it and blew with a soft breath into the man's face. He sneezed.

She lifted herself up from this diversion and rose toward the stained glass windows she often admired from her pew. The scenes in lead frames represented the fourteen Stations of the Cross. She picked up speed as she approached the clerestory that held these beautiful works of art, then in a test of skill came to a sudden stop just prior to colliding with the glass.

An arrow whizzed past her head and struck the plaster between three, His first fall, and four, where He meets His mother. The arrow shaft shuddered as it became imbedded. It sounded almost like a living thing dying.

"What in hell was that?" Robin said as she flew up close and examined the still quivering bolt. Its fletches were the colors of the rainbow; then they turned white. Her head angled around to follow the arrow's trajectory and she was startled to see an archer

with bow bent lowering it into position, another projectile knocked, hanging in the air on the other side of the church in front of ten, He is stripped of His garments.

Robin reacted instinctively and quickly. She kicked away from the wall, jumped off to one side from where she hovered near the ceiling, performed a half summersault and landed a dozen feet away upside down. Her feet were glued to an arch with her head hanging toward the chapel floor.

She shook in fear when she realized all she had accomplished was to create a more inviting target. The archer was again ready to fire. Robin leaped and this time sought higher air on the other side of an arch that supported the dome of the apse. She waited several seconds before she peered over the arch rail, ducked just in time to hear the barb whiz past mere inches from her head.

“Who the hell are you?!” she screamed as loud as she could as she cowered behind her safety barrier.

The only answer she heard was the thwack sound made as another arrow plowed into the other side of the wood beam.

Robin decided to take the initiative and make a run for the entrance. Whoever or whatever her assailant was, they were apparently bound by the laws of archery if not physics. But unlike Robin whose only thought was to flee, the archer seemed monomaniacal in his quest to shoot her out of the sky. To that end, another arrow cut the air in front of her nose as she flew in the opposite direction from the altar where the monotonous priest continued his speech oblivious to the activity above him. She flew toward the front doors and what she hoped was safety.

At the overhang where ambulatory met nave, she was about to lunge down into the opening toward freedom when she felt a burning sensation in her chest that grew to become an agonizing pain centered above her heart. She looked down to see the razor blades and point of a shaft, its silver metal luster dulled now by having torn through her back and pierced the spongy flesh of her lung, sprout from the middle of her breast.

Her brain had time to think, “My god, I’ve been shot,” before she collapsed and fell from the air.

At that moment the parishioners all stood and some filled the aisles preparatory to taking communion. Mike rose, looked down toward his wife who sat beside him and realized she had not followed his lead. Her head was bent as if in prayer, perhaps napping, so he gently touched her shoulder. She fell away from his fingertips and her body slid to the floor.

He did not immediately realize his wife had died.

* * *

Detective Tom Hayde was in a bad mood before he entered the medical examiner’s office. He left in a worse mood.

In between he had to take in far too much information in too short a time on subjects he knew very little about. He knew the human body, he knew it in life and, due to his job as a San Francisco homicide investigator, he knew it in death. When Dr. Maybeth, the chief pathologist, pulled the sheet back to reveal a lovely female face with slightly Asian features and what must have been a beautiful glowing smile in life, he blanched. It was never easy seeing someone so young so dead.

“What killed her?”

“Heart stopped,” Maybeth said laconically.

“I mean, what’s so suspicious you had to call me down here when I have to be in court in half an hour?”

Doctor Maybeth resigned herself to a fast run through while trying to tell a compelling story. It would not be easy.

“This woman, her name is Robin Skye, 26, the mother of a four-year-old and a happily married church goer until yesterday when she died in the middle of the morning service at Old St. Mary’s. She was leaning against her husband, Mike, when she just slipped away.”

“Kelly, I told you I don’t have time to waste this morning. What’s suspicious about this person’s death?”

“It’s not so much how she died that causes suspicion. A number of things don’t add up. Or, rather, they add up when they shouldn’t.”

“This is not a math test. Tell me.”

“There are at least four distinct differences between this woman and the rest of the human race.”

Hayde scratched his head, ran his hand down the front of his face from forehead to chin. “All right, I’ll bite. What are you talking about?”

The doctor pulled the sheet down to the waist revealing a Y shaped incision running up the breast from the navel and branching outward toward the shoulders. She separated the rib cage, reached into the chest cavity and pushed aside a lung.

“Take a look at the heart.”

Hayde peered in, gave a two second examination, drew back with a grimace and said, “I don’t see any wounds, no shredding, nothing out of the ordinary. What am I supposed to be looking for?”

The doctor aimed a laser pen light at the heart muscle. “It’s backwards. The lower half of the heart, the ventricles, are on the wrong sides. The left ventricle here is on the right,” she pointed at a lobe at the bottom, “and the right is now the left.”

The detective said, “HmMMMM,” and left it at that.

“This is not an unheard of condition,” the doctor continued. “A perfectly good human heart positioned like a mirror image of the typical human heart. But that’s not all. I pulled out the intestines.” She reached into the deep trough of a steel sink beside her and retrieved a glass jar. Again, she pointed with the laser light. “There’s no appendix.”

“People have them removed all the time, Kelly. What’s so unusual about that?”

“I found no evidence of any surgical procedure laparoscopic or otherwise minimally invasive. There would be scarring if it was ever removed, even as a child.” She did not give Hayde enough time to take this in before she added, “And that’s not all. “Given these oddities, I began looking for more.”

“Seek and ye shall find. What else?”

The doctor pried open the deceased woman’s mouth and pointed with the ruby light. “There are only 28 teeth.”

Hayde exhibited annoyance. “Twenty-eight teeth? You’re making a big deal out of the fact she had some teeth removed. What’s unhuman about that?”

“Again, no signs of surgery.” She held up an x-ray of the woman’s skull and pointed at the hinge end of the jaw. “This person was born without the seeds for wisdom

teeth. Sometimes they simply never erupt. In this case, they were not there to begin with.”

“So she was weird. Nothing wrong with any of this if you ask me.”

“My brother’s a dentist. I called him and asked. While it is common to find supernumerary or extra teeth, especially mesiodens singly or in pairs which creates a common crowding condition, it is practically unheard of not to have some wisdom tooth budding. But no evidence of them at all, completely missing teeth in third molars, that is a truly rare condition.”

“And that’s the end of it or did you find anything else?” Hayde asked with a skeptical tone.

The medical examiner turned the body on its side and pointed to an incision in the lower back. “There’s only one kidney. It is somewhat larger than normal and nearly centered anterior to the spine.”

Hayde was still not convinced there was anything too out of the ordinary and said as much. “A few odd physical attributes, that’s all.”

“All congenital,” the doctor said. Then she looked him directly in the eye, crooked and wiggled a finger for him to follow. She crossed the room and approached another gurney where she pulled back the sheet to reveal an adult male.

“Meet Robert Hall, aged 27, who died unexpectedly yesterday afternoon approximately an hour after Robin over there.” The man’s body had similar autopsy incisions on the chest as the woman. “Thing is, Mister Hall here has the same four physical attributes, or lack thereof. His heart is flipped, he has no wisdom teeth, no appendix, and only one big kidney.”

This caught Hayde's attention. "What are the odds of that? Two people with the same unusual anatomical characteristics?"

"Waaaayyy beyond calculating."

"And do you know what killed them?"

"Like I said, their hearts stopped beating."

"Sounded like a line from Dashiell Hammett. I thought you were joking."

"You ought to know me better than that by now. I never joke."

"Can you be a little more specific?"

"The heart is essentially an electromechanical pump. The muscle contracts with an electrical current that originates in a specialized part of the heart known as the sinoatrial node. Something turned the juice off in both these patients."

"And you believe it was intentional? Doesn't that sort of thing happen all the time?"

"No, this does not happen to healthy young people for no reason. The heart may skip a beat and people have been known to die of fright, although most of the accounts are anecdotal. I mean, no one has ever been hooked up to an electrocardiogram with the intention of frightening them to death to test the theory. I can't tell you how this was done nor can I prove someone did this to two perfectly healthy individuals within minutes of each other on purpose, but death was so sudden it is almost as if a switch were turned to the off position."

"Not just a coincidence?" he sounded hopeful.

"You know what I think of co-inky-dinks? To paraphrase Charles Fort: there's no such thing."

“Yet you can’t explain this in medical terms. If it’s not a coincidence, what is it?”

She pondered his face for a moment as if considering the question, finally said, “Do I know what the hell happened to these two people? Hell no. Do I believe in a spirit world? Hell no. Were my parents Jehovah’s Witnesses who thought the world was coming to an end every few years? Yes. But I went on to medical school despite their best efforts to get me to become a holy roller. That being said, until I see a technique for shutting off the electricity your heart runs on, I’m open to anything. You have something to add or can I get on to my next examination?”

* * *

Hayde sat in the living room on a couch and sipped from a glass of water the boy brought him. The child wore an orange bath towel like a cape, tied at the neck with a safety pin.

Opposite, Mike was slumped forward in a brown La-Z-Boy, head nearly between his knees. He gave a huge sigh, righted himself. As he sat up, Hayde looked into the red rimmed eyes. The man had probably not slept since yesterday and certainly must be wearing the same clothes he wore to church.

“I’m sorry, detective. I just don’t believe this happened. I mean, one minute she was snuggling up against me and the next, she was gone. Poof. Just like that.”

“It was good of you to see me on such short notice, Mr. Skye. I know this is difficult, but can you remember anything unusual in the minutes before your wife passed away? Something you may have just thought of that you might think important, but didn’t tell the paramedics?”

“Nothing. Why? Was there something suspicious about . . .” his voice trailed off and he glanced at his son. Hayde realized he should speak cautiously in front of the child.

“Nothing we can identify. This is just a routine house call. Can you walk me through the events of yesterday morning?”

“We were at morning mass, Father Coughlin was reading his lecture which was long and tedious and pointless, so I was paying close attention trying to get the gist of it. Then everyone rose for Communion except Robin. I saw her slump to the floor and I screamed for help.”

During this part of the interview, the boy ran around turning figure eights, his arms spread, his tongue between his lips making a sputtering humming sound. Abruptly, he stopped playing and stood in the center of the room between the two men as if he wanted to contribute to the conversation. He wore a sullen expression. He turned to his father who asked, “What is it Timmy?”

“Daddy,” the child said insistently. “Mommy was up there,” and pointed to the ceiling.

“What do you mean, up there?”

“She was flying and she fell. A man was chasing her. He made her fall.”

Hayde did not wear the same skeptical expression on his face the father had. In fact it was almost as if he heard something important in the child’s statement.

“Please, Timmy. Daddy doesn’t want to hear your fantasies. Okay?”

Admonished, the boy turned and began walking away. Hayde raised his hand. “Just a minute Timmy.”

The child turned to face the detective.

“Can you tell me what this man looked like?”

The father stared at the police investigator as if he had lost his mind. “You’re not telling me you believe him, do you? There were several hundred people in there with the priest and altar boys and nobody saw anything except Timmy? You think he saw something nobody else saw? That’s ridiculous.”

Hayde shifted his attention from the boy to the father. “We won’t know unless we ask, will we?” He turned to the boy. “Describe this man for me, Timmy.”

“Well, he was sure big even from away up there. He had long white hair and wore all white and I think he had wings like an angel. I looked up when I saw Mommy spread her arms and float away. And I watched her for a few minutes and then this man started shooting at her.”

“A gun, Timmy? He had a gun?”

“No. He shot a bowanarrow. He missed and then he shot again and missed and Mommy tried to get away and I saw her hide from him and then he shot again and Mommy tried to get down from the ceiling and then she got shot through the back with a arrow. Is she coming home from the hospital soon? I miss her.”

Hayde looked at the father. “You haven’t told him?”

The man rocked back and forth in his chair and hugged himself. He sobbed loudly, and said, “How could I? I couldn’t even talk until this morning. I moaned.”

“Should I tell him for you?”

“I’d rather do it in my own way. No. Not yet.”

Now that his story was told, Timmy turned around and flew with sputtering lips out of the room.

Hayde said, “I agree with you, Mike, Timmy’s imagination is running overtime. You were in church which probably explains the angel wings. I thought I’d find out what he believes happened. No, I don’t put any credence in his story. What I wanted to know from you, Mike, is if you saw anything or heard anything or can offer any insight into what may have contributed to your wife’s death.”

“Nothing. But I wouldn’t believe anything Timmy said, if I were you.”

The detective stood and stuck out his hand. “I don’t. You should get some rest. I’ll call if I do learn anything.”

* * *

The air smelled yellow to the touch and Carlos’ breath came slow. That was because he was walking without any breathing apparatus on the ocean floor. A playful porpoise nosed up against his hand so he patted its brow.

“You have come from very far away,” the porpoise said in his head.

“Not really,” the human replied, bubbles billowing and rising with each word. Carlos took a deep breath of water. “We’re only a few hundred feet from the coastline. It’s nice down here. Are you hungry? I have a piece of candy left over from Hallowe’en.”

Carlos opened his palm and a brown caramel wrapped in clear cellophane spilled out. The dolphin said thanks and swallowed it whole, wrapper and all.

The smell of water falling in the wind combined with a bird trill that reached his ears. “Over here, over hear, over heart.”

Carlos followed the voice he recognized as that of his imaginary wife, the woman of his dreams, which lead him along the sandy ocean floor. A flashing neon sign

appeared in the distance and, as he got closer, he read “Sunken Treasure” with “X Marks the Spot” beaming on, off, on, off and an arrow pointing downward.

As Carlos approached the blinking sign he felt an aura of insouciance that would have been truly abnormal if he were not breathing underwater and talking to fish. Suddenly, the X began to move and he realized it was alive. He was no longer alone. A gargantuan man in a white diving costume, fully clothed in baggy bleached canvas with a bell shaped hard hat connected by two lines, a rope and a hose, sat up on the sandy ocean floor holding a spear gun in his lap. The man rose to his feet as Carlos drew near. Carlos stopped in mid-stride when the man raised a hand as if in greeting. Or it could be he was indicating Carlos should stop where he was and approach no further.

Carlos halted ten yards away. The spear gun came up and centered midway on his chest. He had time to realize he was being aimed at and his legs wanted to get him out of the way, but he was held back by the thick sea which made running impossible. Before he could turn to flee, the gun fired and a metal dart pierced his heart.

* * *

The phone in Hayde’s pocket chimed the first four notes of Beethoven’s Fifth. He snapped the clam shell open. “Hayde. What’s up?”

“You better come down here. Two more just arrived. I did a quick survey and popped open their chests. Same as the others: Hearts are reversed, no back molars, one kidney. Want me to check for an appendix?”

The detective held the phone away from his ear, squinted at it as if it was a three legged dog. “How many does that make? Six or seven?”

“Another ambulance is due here in fifteen. That’ll be number nine when it arrives. If it doesn’t turn out to be a normal cadaver, that is.”

“Why do I have to come down?”

“I want to show you something even more unusual about one of the new arrivals.”

“On my way, but do we have some kind of epidemic here, Kelly? I mean, is this something we can control or not?”

“There is no such thing as control when we don’t even know what it is that’s killing these people.”

Hayde had to agree. “Still, I do not want the press getting hold of this, you hear me?”

A second of silence before the doctor said, “Believe me, I have a tight lid on it.” He knew her delay in responding was due to her thought process which must have been torn between admitting defeat and contacting the Center for Disease Control to ask for help or continuing her efforts to identify a pathogen, a common murderous thread, some explanation for the sudden deaths of so many young people.

A few minutes later, Hayde stood over a corpse in the county morgue and said, “He’s black.”

“I am always impressed by your grasp of the obvious,” Dr. Maybeth replied. “Bert Yout is his name. He fits the profile. He’s roughly the same age, in his late 20’s, seemingly perfect health. I did a prelim, found one other thing in addition to the four oddities I found in all the others.”

“Go on,” Hayde said, his impatience showing.

“He has water in his lungs.”

“The man drowned?” Hayde looked truly surprised.

“Actually, no,” she said. “See those feather-like features in his lungs? He seems to have done perfectly well withdrawing oxygen from liquid. They’re gills. He could breathe under water.”

Hayde tried to remain standing, decided it would be better to sit down instead. The doctor followed him to her desk and took a chair as well.

“You know,” she said by way of preamble, “to an outsider there is no difference between one human and another. Unlike salamanders, for example, which are either five toed or four toed and of the four toed variety there are 46 distinct sub groups, there is no human subspecies despite many attempts over centuries to prove one peoples’ superiority or inferiority. Skin color is purely a function of how much Vitamin D your body should absorb. Around the equator, you have a lot more sun than in Scandinavia, so skin color developed to block D. As a matter of fact, racial differences really do not exist. In part that’s because we haven’t been around for very long, oh, maybe a couple hundred thousand years. You need more time than that for evolution to kick in. Also, it’s partly because we all come from the same stock if you buy the ‘Out of Africa’ theory. Thus, variability is in the eye of the beholder and not on a DeoxyriboNucleic acid level.”

“An alien would think we look and taste the same?” he asked wryly.

“Sorry. I can’t answer to the discriminating palate of an intergalactic traveler. What I’m driving at here is these corpses are pointing at evolutionary change as never seen in humans.”

“Evolution? This is Darwin’s work?”

She sounded enthusiastic as she said, “I believe we are looking at a true subspecies of Homo Sapiens. And I intend to publish a paper on the subject using these examples when this is all over.”

“Right. Hold that thought and don’t go publishing anything about this until we figure out what happened to these people. After all, everyone you’ve identified as having evolved is dead. Doesn’t sound like a very good survival mechanism to me.”

“Yes, a pity that. I certainly hope it isn’t catchy. And I hope you can do something about that turn of events. After all, you’re the cop.”

* * *

Laurence Kenyon snapped open his eyes. He was alone in his bed. He threw the covers away from his body and realized he had been sweating. It was not hot in the room, but his bed clothes were soaked.

He glanced at the alarm clock. Seven oh one a. m. and he had to go to the bathroom. He put his feet in a pair of slippers, waddled to the toilet where he lifted the lid and did his business, washed his hands and returned to rearrange the pillows before he plopped down under the covers again.

Another glance at the clock told him the time was now 6:45. He had jumped back fifteen minutes and could feel the warm glow in his breast, a gentle heartburn, that accompanied the time jerk.

Should I go back to sleep or take advantage of the extra quarter hour? Instead of answering himself, Kenyon reached for the phone beside the bed and hit a stored speed dial number. A voice at the other end picked up within two rings, but sounded annoyed.

“Kenyon. It’s not even seven. What the fuck you calling me for now?”

“Checking my time, Martin. You said I should call when next I went back. I just went back, okay? You wanted me to call when that happened, so I’m calling. Don’t get edgy.”

“All right. I asked you to call if you jumped back. How do you know you jumped?”

“The clock. I checked it just before I took a piss and it’s earlier than that now. That’s when I phoned you.”

The voice on the other end was quiet for a second. “Good.”

“That all you can say? Good?”

“Hey, I’m not the guy doing the time traveling. What do you expect me to say?”

“Maybe you could say something reassuring like, no, Laurence, it really isn’t quarter of seven. It’s quarter after seven. That way you would be reassuring me I have not gone backwards again.”

Silence for a second or two. “Making notes.” Silence. “Hang on.” Then, “Good. I’m sitting up now, staring at my reflection in the mirror. Laurence, do you feel any different?”

“What, from before I used the toilet? Yah, I don’t have to go to the bathroom any more.”

“No, I mean, if you traveled backwards, do you feel younger?”

“Martin, I’m not even going to dignify that with an answer.”

“Well, are you thirsty or hungry?”

He patted his stomach in reflex. “Both. About as much as I am every day at this time. When I get up I want a cup of coffee.”

“You told me you have no control over this time travel business and it does not occur every day or even every week, but sometimes several times a year. You usually have a compelling reason for going back even though I told you watering the plants is far too mundane a reason. However, you haven’t told me what the reason was for this jump. Do you know what the reason is now, at this moment for what we shall for the sake of argument call this backward event?”

“Ummm. No. Not really.”

“Think Laurence. Tell me why you might have gone backwards in time this morning?”

The quizzical expression on his face was reflected in his own dresser mirror. It was one of astonishment mixed with annoyance. “I’m getting kind of tired explaining this to you, Martin,” he said with impatience. Still, he began iterating what his friend supposedly already knew. “I go back in time when I least expect it. I travel a few minutes or an hour or two and arrive to find it’s the same me, there aren’t two of me, but the clock has turned back. Sometimes I do things I remember having just done, so I do them again, but I invariably do something different and often it is a way of correcting a mistake, of doing things more efficiently or of making a decision I overlooked and going back allows me to go the way I could have gone by accepting the other decision.”

Martin said, “What’s the decision tree doing for you now? Are you at a fork? Have you a choice to make?”

Laurence pondered this for a second. “Good question, Martin. No. I can honestly say I was asleep until I awoke and I only noticed I had gone backwards when I got back into bed after going to the bathroom.”

“So between waking and going to hit the head, you jumped? Do you feel any different from when you went to bed last night? Did you have any alcohol to drink?”

Laurence considered the questions in a different light. After all, Martin was doing him a favor by listening whether or not he believed what Laurence told him happened to him once in a while, more often lately. Experience was not always the best teacher. He went through his days rarely, if ever, doing a job straight through from beginning to end, found himself repeating the task with an option to do it different if he traveled backward.

Trouble was, he could not will the time travel to happen. It just occurred. Or it did not.

It was a carry over from his childhood and he had become used to doing things in a desultory manner, in increments, a little here, a little there, wandering off to something new while in the middle of one task which was dropped in favor of another half done, which he would still not complete before his attention was directed to something completely different.

Making his bed, for example. He changed the sheets weekly. He stripped them from the top mattress, pulled the cases off the pillows, put the lot of them in the dirty laundry container, then with the mattress fully exposed in all its dingy grey glory, he drew water for his plants.

While the gallon container sat under the open tap, he would grind coffee or look in the fridge for breakfast until the container nearly ran over. At that point, he shut the valve off and went around collecting the sometimes overflowing trash canisters, one from under the sink, one from the bedroom and one from the computer room. This might be his cue to return to the bed and put on the pillow cases. Before he watered the plants, he

washed what few dishes had accumulated in the sink. At that point he might take the water pitcher around the living room and pour its contents on whichever plant he came upon first. This depended, of course, on whether he looked left, right or center as he exited the kitchen. If the middle route were taken, he frequently emptied the entire contents of the pitcher into two large potted plants at the far end of the room, one a dieffenbachia climbing toward the ceiling which had three long thick round stems that each supported a cluster of wide green leaves with white striations at their ends, and the split leaf philodendron look-alike which had already reached the ceiling, spread along the wall where it flattened itself against the high window there to branchiate a dozen times, throwing out pencil thin brown aerial roots and developing pods that burst in preparation for propagation. If he decided, instead of watering, to turn on the vacuum, which he did at least a dozen times a day, the machine was out and ready for him to wander around with the wand sucking the carpet of the detritus dropped by the plants or carried from outside by his footfall.

After which he went back to making the bed. And if he jumped back an hour in the process, he had to do it all over again, usually in a different order. Infuriating, but something he lived with in silence, at least until recently.

Martin worked with Laurence at a university laboratory where he operated a mass spectrometer and Laurence studied the results. They were looking for a new protein in fruit flies. One day Laurence casually told Martin he time traveled.

“Yah, where do you go?”

“Usually backward so I can correct a mistake.”

“Like the one you made right there? We sequenced that protein last month, remember?”

Laurence sat on the edge of his bed and tried to recall what his dream involved. Perhaps he sweated so much because he was exercising. Or was he afraid? He had been running, he could remember that. He began to piece the episode together. There was a young man named Pueo, which he knew to be Hawaiian for owl, the most revered aumakua or ancestor spirit in animal presentation, and this Pueo wore all white, head to foot with white hair even though he was not old, but his hair was pure white and somehow Laurence knew it was not colored or bleached, it was natural. Pueo was also very large, twice his size and Laurence was not small. This Pueo was friendly at first, and then he raised a Hawaiian spear with an obsidian blade which he threw at Laurence and that’s when . . .

“Martin!” he shouted into the phone. “I know exactly why I jumped back fifteen minutes. Some guy was going to kill me and I had to jump out of the way. I was supposed to wake up. I was being chased, this guy who was really a white owl tried to kill me in my dream, so I jumped when he threw a spear at me. I’m telling you there was a very good reason for me to jump backwards in time. I had to get out of the way of this spear coming at me, and going backwards accomplished this.”

Martin sighed into the phone. “You need counseling.”

“No, seriously. I remember now. It was a flight reflex. I jumped so I wouldn’t get killed.”

Martin sounded exasperated. “You going to make it to work today or call in sick because you think an assassin’s trying to kill you in your dreams?”

Laurence made a decision. “I’m not coming in,” he said stridently. “And Martin, I’m scared. It was for real and you may never see me alive again. Think about it. I have to go to sleep some time. I can’t stay awake forever. What do you think I should do?”

Martin heard the fear in Laurence’s voice, realized he should not take his friend’s situation lightly. “Calm down, buddy. There’s got to be a plan here. How about a psychiatrist? I have a friend of a friend who sees this great counselor, she says nothing but wonderful things about him.”

“You don’t believe me, do you? You don’t believe I time travel and you don’t believe I’m being hunted when I go to sleep!”

Martin decided that honesty was not the best policy here. So he lied. “I believe you, I do. And here’s the thing. You’ve got to get help. I can’t be of much use, but a doc or hey, how about what do you do when someone’s trying to kill you?”

“I don’t know, what?”

“Call the police.”

For a few seconds Martin thought Laurence had hung up the phone. Then he heard, “Martin, I gotta go,” and the connection was, indeed, cut. Laurence slapped the cell phone closed and sat on his bed and began to weep.

* * *

The desk sergeant covered the mouthpiece and yelled across the room, “Hey Manny! You want to take this lunatic? Says he’s afraid to go to sleep because he’s being chased by a giant white man who’s really a white owl. Or vice versa, I didn’t exactly get which.”

There was an ironical tone in the sergeant's voice. Hayde looked up from his paperwork when he heard the word "white" shouted across the room.

"Lemme get that, okay?" He picked up the handset on his desk and pressed a lighted button. "Hello, this is Lieutenant Hayde. Who am I speaking with?"

Laurence gave his name, asked if he could be assured of confidentiality, then explained his dream. "But it's real, Lieutenant, no matter how incredible it sounds, it's real. This guy was going to kill me."

"Well, this may sound hard for you to believe, but I do believe you. Can we meet?"

Laurence agreed to come down to the Bryant Street station in two hours. Hayde gave him his direct phone line and a third floor room number. When he arrived, they had a half hour discussion of Laurence's unusual ability to travel short distances into the past which Hayde at first discounted as a delusion. But the young scientist was quite earnest in his assertion. He had no other blots on his escutcheon, had a normal childhood with that one exception, a good education and an impeccable career so far. Hayde called Dr. Maybeth and asked if he could bring someone down. Then he escorted Laurence to the morgue.

* * *

"So this is how you look. I've only had third party descriptions until now, and one of those was from a child."

The figure was tall, nearly half again Hayde's height, and wore white just as Timmy and Laurence had said. This time it was a pair of shiny white leather pants and a soft split-leather white shirt. White cowboy boots into which the pant cuffs were tucked

completed the outfit. Hayde stood two feet away with a cocked 9 m.m. pistol aimed at the man's head. "I assume you are not impervious to bullets at this range."

The giant man took one disdainful look at the gun, swept his arm and the firearm disappeared from Hayde's clenched hands only to reappear in the creature's palm. "You may be correct," he said in a booming echo of a voice that reminded Hayde of thunder, "but now you will never know. However, it was clever of you to set a trap and be able to spring it so cleanly. Still, it changes nothing."

Hayde felt like a fool. He had put them all in jeopardy, and now he was quite afraid. The initiative had been taken away from him. The frightened scientist who was sleeping, Dr. Maybeth who was herself nodding out in the chair at her desk, and he were all quite possibly going to die. Hayde had to know why.

"Okay," he said with the resignation of defeat in his voice. "Now what? You going to turn my heart off too?"

"Why would I do that to something so valuable?"

"Because I've seen you, because I know about you and might tell others."

This elicited a small laugh from the creature who bounced the pistol up and down twice before it vanished completely. "You didn't believe the child, did you? Who's going to believe you?"

"I believe him now."

"Yes, but convincing anyone else you're not insane will be your first order of business. Convincing them of my existence, that's a whole other order of magnitude, even when you learn the truth."

"And the truth is?"

“Wait a moment while I attend to some business.” The creature bent a claw-like hand and touched the comatose figure on the makeshift bed. There was a shudder and then it was apparent Laurence was dead.

“Just like that, hunh? You killed him like he was a gnat, an insignificant insect. Is that how you think of us? As ants to be squashed out of existence?”

“Hardly. You’ve seen the anatomical differences. Technically, this one and those lying all around us are a separate species of human, a subspecies in your taxonomy, for whom you should feel no particular affinity, as neither do I.”

“Why? I mean, what is this all about? You only kill humans who have evolved? Is that it?”

“Not exactly. You see, yours is a hybrid race we developed eons ago as a protein source. As with any hybrid, sometimes you don’t breed true. From time to time we cull the herd of those which are not desirable. We differentiate based on any number of factors much like your butchers do with marbling, the cut, the area of origin. For example, it’s not as if there is as much distinction as, say, between chocolate and vanilla, but Asians taste spicy and Americans are the fattest, so we ask a premium for them.”

“You’re ranchers!?” Hayde said incredulously.

“Well, in my case, not exactly. I’m more like a herder, the hired hand who does the dirty work for the boss who makes all the money.”

“Why are you dressed like this?”

“To have a little fun, of course. Diversity and entertainment in an otherwise boring job. In fact, talking with you is a supreme diversion. It just isn’t done, primarily because

no one besides you has been able to sneak up on one of us. My compliments. You ought to be allowed to live because of that, if for no other reason. Still, it changes nothing.”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“Well, we sample the product from time to time, take a few to see how they taste, to test the ripeness. We tend to disguise large crop reductions with an event so you won’t become overly suspicious and begin committing suicide before it’s time. Hiroshima, we picked up 45,000 and ran them through a taste test. The tsunami in late 2004, another 225,000. I don’t need to go back further in your world history of war, do I?”

“Why tell me this?”

”Basically, you want to know, so I explained. To show you I have no intention of turning you off. I mean, individually you’re quite valuable. Why reduce the herd before it’s time?”

“Time?”

“Why, yes. You might make the comparison to chicken or cattle. You have been raised for slaughter and the harvest is about to begin.”

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