

NINE AMUSING TALES

Greg Strandberg

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Nine Amusing Tales

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Introduction

Thanks for signing-up for my mailing list. If you're reading this then that's what you did (unless you got a pirated copy, which I highly doubt).

Anyways, this is the free collection of short stories I give out to my fans. Now, as I write this I have 20 fans on my mailing list. That's a lot more than the 7 I had a couple months ago, and hopefully when I wipe the dust off this volume in a few months I'll have quite a few more.

There's nothing ground-breaking in this collection of short stories, but there are lots of different genres for you to sample. Think of it as an updated Reader's Digest, just with a better cover.

In fact, some of these stories go all the way back to 2008. Yeah, this is some stuff I wrote in China back before I was "famous." And of course there's some new stuff too. I've edited the older stuff, and perhaps you'll spot the differences.

Enjoy!

Cookie-Cutter Characters

"Merve, a cold one!" Harland shouted as he pushed the tavern doors opened and stormed in.

“Comin’ right up, Captain!”

Captain Harland Vickers nodded and surveyed the room. It was a typical run-down tavern with splintery benches and watered-down ale. There was no blood on the floor – it wasn’t yet 5 o’clock – so Harland nodded and started across the room.

He was an overweight man in his middle years with graying hair fast-disappearing on top. His gut hung out quite a ways, something that ensured the tanner needed to make him a new belt nearly twice a week now.

“Well, how’d it go?” he called out before he was even halfway across the room.

There sat a washed-up old wizard with two empty ale mugs in front of him and another halfway there in his hand. He lowered it and looked over at Harland as he approached, blowing out his long, grey mustaches to better get at his drink.

“It went about as bad as I figured it would!” Jeremy High Hand said. “Now all I want to do is enjoy a few cold ones after having instructed that bunch of good-for-nothing young apprentices at the Magical Academy all day.”

“Aye,” Harland said as he plopped down on the bench across from him. “I’ll take a good number of beers after ending the especially long shift I had.”

Jeremy harrumphed to that and a moment later the waitress came over with Harland’s ale. Both wanted nothing more than to forget about their day and to not think about the next one in the morning.

Suddenly a young guard burst in through the tavern doors.

“Captain!” he shouted, moving around the benches and tables to get across the room.

“Fuck’s sake, Abner!” Harland shouted. “Can’t a man enjoy an ale in peace!”

“Another fight’s broken out near the gate between a young adventurer and a wizard. The two are ripping up the streets with their battle!”

Harland sighed, finished his beer, and got up from the table.

“This shit never ends, Jeremy, let me tell you.”

Jeremy waved his hand in the air. “Just don’t send ‘em to me at the damn Academy!”

Harland shook his head and turned to the guard and nodded. Within moments they were out on the street and heading toward the city gates.

“What’s he look like?” Harland asked as they moved along.

“Which one?”

“The new one you’re dating.”

Abner looked over his shoulder. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Harland.”

“Listen, Abner,” Harland said, grabbing hold of the back of the guard’s tunic, “that’s my niece you’re sleeping around on, and I don’t much like it!”

“Which one?” the guard asked, his chin quivering a bit.

“Why, Dolores!”

“I thought she was your cousin!” Abner shouted. “I’ve been giving it to Dorothea!”

“I don’t know that one,” Harland said with a frown. He smoothed out the guard’s collar and motioned down the road. “Carry on.”

Within another few minutes they were approaching the gates. Once there they saw that the other guards had already managed to subdue the two combatants after they’d come to a draw. Both were bruised and bloodied when Harland drew near.

“What’s all this nonsense about!” he shouted.

The young man tried to tell Harland about his vendetta against the wizard for killing his family, while the wizard just tried to feign ignorance about the whole affair.

“I’m in no mood for this shit tonight,” Harland said to Abner before turning to the wizard. “You got some magic left?”

“I do,” the wizard said hopefully.

Harland nodded. "Break his right hand, his spell casting hand," he said to Abner.

"I've got to have blood – he killed my family!" the fighter shouted.

"Alright," Harland shrugged, "cut off his arm," he said to Abner while pointing at the fighter.

"Why, no...no...you can't do that!" the fighter said as they got him to his feet.

"He can and he will!" the wizard laughed, until Abner moved up and snapped his hand. After that he just swore real loud.

Content that neither would be causing trouble any time soon, in his city at least, Harland turned to leave. He was halfway up the road when he heard the fighter begin to squeal, but he really wasn't interested enough to look back.

It took just a couple minutes and he was back in the tavern, moving across the room to sit across from Jeremy.

"Ha!" he laughed after he picked up his mug and took a drink of ale. "Still cold!"

"How'd it go back there?" Jeremy asked as he drew circles in the table from his mug's runoff.

"Oh, just another case of two typical characters going at it."

"What happens to the adventurers that survive to old age?" Jeremy asked.

"Ha, you're looking at it."

Jeremy looked off at the wall, shook his head, then nodded in agreement. Both went back to their drinks.

THE END

Malaysian Airlines Flight 370

"All right, goodnight."

First Officer Fariq Abdul Haamid slipped off his headset and stared out the vast blackness that was the Gulf of Thailand below.

“It’s in Allah’s hands now,” Captain Zaharie Ahmmad Shah said as he reached over and flipped off the Boeing 777’s transponder signal.

Fariq looked over at him, his eyes narrowing in distaste.

“Allah has nothing to do with it, never did!”

“Oh?” Zaharie laughed. “Then how’d we bring down those towers the first time?”

Fariq scoffed. “There’s only one now.”

“Putting up one where there used to be two doesn’t make the Americans any smarter.”

“No,” Fariq said with a sigh, “no it doesn’t.”

The men fell into silence after that and the Gulf unfolded below them. They’d just passed south of Kuala Terengganu a short time ago, meaning Malaysia was behind them. And that meant their former lives were behind them as well.

Zaharie glanced over at Fariq. His co-pilot was young, just twenty-seven, and he’d had a full-life ahead of him. The man was staring off into the blackness out the windows, and Zaharie just hoped the doubts he was having weren’t too bad.

The pilot smiled slightly, and would have chuckled had he been alone. *Doubts?* he thought. *I’ve been having doubts for years!*

While Fariq was young and living with his parents, Zaharie was fifty-three. Flying was his life, but he wouldn’t be able to do it forever, that was for sure. And it certainly wouldn’t fill the holes in his life – the holes put their by the rich imperials American dogs!

Since 1981 he’d been flying for Malaysian Airlines, and they’d been good to him. But his country hadn’t.

Why did Anwar have to get arrested today? Why couldn’t they have waited?

Why–

“We’re coming up on Pulau Redang,” Fariq said.

Zaharie was pulled from his thoughts and looked to his right. Sure enough, there were the lights marking the distant island off the Malaysian coast.

Fariq was looking at him, and Zaharie gave him a firm look.

“Are you ready for this?”

Fariq held his gaze for a few moments more.

“Don’t you want to at least warn the stewardesses?” he asked.

“We’ve been over this, Fariq – it’ll be easier with them gone.”

Fariq nodded. “Then I guess I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

Zaharie reached over and clasped him on the shoulder. He didn’t expect much more than that from the young man, and was honestly glad he’d gone along as far as he had. He knew what to do if that changed, and didn’t for a moment plan to hesitate if that eventuality should occur.

Zaharie brought his hands back to the controls.

“Brace yourself,” he said, then pulled up.

The Boeing 777 shot up quickly and gasps could be heard coming from the passengers. Banging could be heard next, though whether that was from the stewardesses, the food and drink cart, passengers, or baggage was unclear.

“40,000 feet,” Fariq said, his eyes locked onto the altimeter.

Zaharie gritted his teeth. He’d always made it hard for himself on the simulators back home, but shooting the plane straight up at such high speed was proving more difficult than he’d expected. At that deadly height the low oxygen level was barely enough to keep the engines running, creating the possibility for a stall.

“43,000 and climbing,” Fariq said.

Zaharie’s knuckles whitened on the control handles and all he could think was ‘don’t stall, don’t stall...don’t stall!’

“45,000 feet!” Fariq said, an edge of excitement in his voice, but also fear.

“Level her out!”

“Turning west,” Zahire responded.

“Allah be with us!” Fariq shouted as the plane finished its turn west.

“Diving!” Zahire shouted

He pushed the controls forward as far as they would go, and beside him Fariq did the same. The plane shot forward as if someone had grabbed it by the nose and jerked it down. Within moments they were diving at a nearly 90-degree angle.

“37,000!” Fariq shouted.

The ocean waters rushed up at them, although all they could see was blackness. Zahire was thankful they were flying at night, lest the sight of the ocean rushing up could possibly have given him a heart attack.

“32,000!” Fariq yelled out.

They were getting closer, but the plane was beginning to shake. Deafening screams came from the 239 people onboard. Both pilots drowned them out as best they could.

“26,000!” Fariq’s voice came.

They were moving faster now, and the screams from the passenger cabin lessened as many passed out or simply died, either from the shock of the dive, the g-force involved, or a combination of both.

“21,000!”

Zahire and Fariq pulled at the controls with all their might. Out the window the plane’s lights could faintly be seen shimmering on the water below.

“Pull!” Zahire shouted out as sweat beaded his forehead.

The plane’s nose began to come up, and then a few moments later they had the aircraft leveled out.

“20,000 on the nose,” Fariq said, nodding toward the altimeter.

“A move like that could only be a highjacking,” Zahaire said.

Fariq nodded. "We're coming up on Kota Bharu."

"Roger," Zahire said. "How long?"

"Wait for it...wait for it...and...we're over."

Zahire nodded. Bang Lang National Park was just over the border with Thailand and about the emptiest place over land they were going to find. And empty places meant empty spaces – no radar.

"Everything as we planned," Zahire smiled a few moments later as the lights beneath them vanished away into the high hills and undulating plains of the park.

Fariq frowned. "How many do you think are still alive?"

He nodded his head back over his shoulder towards the door to the passenger cabin. Screams and now increasingly crying could be heard coming from there.

"Hard to say until–

"Captain, what's going on?" a woman's frantic voice suddenly filled their ears.

"People are hurt...people are dead...captain we need–

Zahire pulled the headset from his head and tossed it down to the floor behind him.

"Do the same," he said to Fariq.

"But we need–"

"Do it!" Zahire shouted.

"Alright," the young co-pilot said as he slowly slipped the headset from around his neck and dropped it on the floor near Zahire's. "It's just that we need to know if anyone's trying to contact us!"

"Why? Why does it matter?" Zahire said. Already he was getting tired of this young fanatic he'd been paired with.

"Because I don't want some loose thread coming back to haunt me a month from now," the copilot sneered.

Neither do I, Zahire thought as he looked out the corner of his eye at Fariq.

Fariq frowned. "Are they *really* going to be sold into the sex trade?"

"The women, I don't know what'll happen to the men."

"And the children?"

Zahire shrugged, and was about to say that it didn't matter again when Fariq's hand shot out and pointed at the navigation system, a blip from their instruments catching his attention.

"There's Bang Lang," he said, referring to the large body of water 20,000 feet below them.

"Turning north by northwest," Zahire said.

He started the turn that would take them up through the unpopulated and dense jungle areas of Thailand, each well out of radar-range. They'd simply skirt along the northwestern border with Malaysia all the way to the Andaman Sea, coming out south of Hat Chao Mai National Park.

Zahire had put the course together months before, nearly a year ago in fact, when he'd first started planning the mission seriously. When his backers had gotten involved they'd gotten him that flight simulator he'd always wanted. After that the pieces just fell into place.

"Setting course," Fariq said as he reached over and pressed the button on the plane's navigation system.

Zahire watched his co-pilot's hand move back, as if in slow-motion. He smiled at him, and Fariq smiled back. *Now!*

Zahire reached his right hand down to the side of his seat and then under. His fingers lit upon the hilt of the knife there and he pulled it up and stabbed it at Fariq.

The blade bit into the young man's throat, and Zahire pulled it out quickly and plunged it in again, then a third time before ripping his hand back.

Fariq's hand's immediately shot up to his throat and the blood shooting out all

over the cockpit controls. The man's eyes fell upon Zahire with a frantic look, then they began to glaze over as the loss of blood took effect. Within moments he was slumped over to the side, his seatbelts the only thing keeping him in his chair.

Zahire smiled. Now it was just—

“Hey!” someone shouted from the other side of the cabin door at the same instant fists began pounding on it. “What’s going on in there? We’ve got people hurt out here!”

Zahire reached down and took the earplugs from his pocket. He didn’t intend to be bothered for the rest of the five-hour flight – not until they landed at Pothana Bay.

To Be Continued...

Florida Sinkholes

“Hey, Ashley!”

Ashley Crane spun about and saw Jeremy Thompson standing there at her locker. Jeremy was the hunkiest football player at Rotura High School, and Ashley was already beginning to feel the butterflies enter her stomach.

“What are you doing tonight?” Jeremy asked, all white teeth, smiles, and dimples.

Ashley did her best not to blush, but she failed miserably.

“Oh, I don’t know...” she said.

“Well, did you know Ricky Jay is having a party at his house tonight? His parents drove up to Talahassee for the weekend.”

“Really!”

“Yeah,” Jeremy smiled. “We’re all headin’ over there around 7 tonight, and I just wanted to let you know.”

Ashley smiled. "Alright, Jeremy – thanks!"

"Anytime," he said with a mischievous smile, and then started back down the hall.

The bell rang, and Ashley grabbed her books and ran off to class.



"Ashley, you know there's going to be nothing but trouble at that party tonight," Veronica said as she and Ashley sat in the crowded Rotura High lunch room and picked at their food.

"You know how much I've wanted to be invited to a party this year!" Ashley nearly shouted.

Veronica frowned. "I know, but..."

"But what, Veronica? You're always saying that one day we'll be cool, that one day those jocks will take a little interest in us. Well, today's that day, can't you see it!"

"Alright, Ashley...we'll go."

Ashley smiled, and was already trying to figure out what she'd wear that night.



The house on 967 Paradise Lane could be heard before it could be seen.

The bass was stretching all the way to County Road 1, three blocks away. When you turned onto Paradise Lane you'd begin to see the pulsing strobe lights, and then when you parked out front you could hear the dozens of teenagers inside. No doubt the neighbors on Serenity, Carefree, and Peaceful Lanes were pulling their hair out.

"Sounds like a party," Veronica said as she rolled her eyes and turned the Range Rover off.

“Well...duh!” Ashley said. She was all smiles and excitement, ready for her first big high school party.

“I still think we’re making a big mistake here,” Veronica said.

“Oh, live a little, will ya!”

Veronica frowned to that, but there was little else she could do – Ashley opened the door and hopped from the car, heading up the walk to the front door.

“God help us!” Veronica said, then did the same.



Across town near Edgewater Park the Saturday regatta was just finishing up. Captain Monty Doolan was standing on stage, the music blaring out good old time favorites, a large trophy in his hands.

He raised it up, and the crowd of hundreds cheered their hometown yacht captain, a man that’d pulled-off his third victory in the boating race in as many years.

The ground began to tremble. No one paid it much attention at first, but then the trembling started to turn to a shaking.

“Earthquake!” someone yelled out, but few were able to hear over the pounding music and roaring cheers for Captain Doolan.

It didn’t matter. The ground opened-up as if there were nothing beneath it, and the whole stage, crowd, and a good portion of the concession stands were swallowed up into a forty-foot deep hole.



Inside the house on Paradise Lane the party was raging. Ashley was on her third hard lemonade, and Veronica had lost count of the number of belly shots she’d taken.

All in all, it was a great party.

“God, isn’t this great!” Ashley said.

“What?” Veronica shouted as she danced nearby. “I can’t hear you!”

“Isn’t this great!” Ashley shouted in her ear.

Veronica gave her a sideways look and smiled.

“Totally!” she said. “I mean, like, this is better than—

“Hey, Ashley!”

Ashley turned and saw Jeremy coming up. Her heart nearly skipped a beat, mainly because she’d been looking for him all night. Where he’d been she had no idea, but there he was now, and that was all that mattered.

“What’s up?” he said when he got close.

“Nothing, what’s up with you?” Ashley shouted back.

Jeremy shrugged. “Nothing.”

Ashley smiled. *Jeremy was so cool!*

“So,” Jeremy said, edging in closer to her, “I was thinking of showing you Ricky Jay’s dad’s safe upstairs.”

“Wow, that would be awesome!” Ashley said, then turned to Veronica. “I’m gonna go upstairs with Jeremy, I’ll see you later.”

“What?” Veronica shouted, but Ashley was already being pulled away.

~~~~

“What happened here, Fred?” Sheriff Dante Mitchell said.

Officer Fred Morris shook his head. “It looks like a sinkhole, sir.”

“God damn!” the sheriff said. “I thought we had those damn things on the run!”

“Nope,” Fred said as he twirled the toothpick around in his mouth, “and you know how they travel in packs.”

“All too well,” the sheriff said as he shook his head.

Just a few months before they’d had a boat swallowed in someone’s backyard. Thank God no one had been hurt in that, like what’d happened over in the town of Seffner last Christmas. What he was looking at now, of course, made that all seem like child’s play in comparison.

Dante walked around one side of the massive hole, then turned to Fred.

“How many dead?”

“At least 178,” Fred said.

“God damn,” the sheriff spat. “And what was the cause?”

“We think it was the loud music and the noise from the crowd,” Fred said. “It may have had some kind of acoustic effect on the unstable bedrock below the limestone layer of the—”

“God damn, Fred – talk American to me.”

“It’s pretty bad, sir.”

Dante chewed on his lip. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. And you say loud music triggers them too, huh?”

“We think so, sir.”

“Well that’s dandy, that’s real damn dandy, that’s what that is!” the sheriff said.

“Here’s it’s the weekend all the parents head to Tallahassee for that damn... what kind of meeting they got up there, Fred?”

“Backgammon, sir – it’s the annual tri-county backgammon competition.”

“And that means all those damn high school kids are cuttin’ loose.” The sheriff turned to his deputy. “Fred, we’ve got to get cars out and find which parties are out of control.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want you to get right on the—”

“Sheriff!” someone shouted out behind them.

Dante turned to see Officer Willard rushing up to them, his long hippie hair trailing behind him. Dante had never liked the undercover bastard, but he had no choice but to put up with him.

“What is it, Willard?” Dante said with irritation.

“We just keep getting calls about this outrageous party over on Paradise Lane,” he said, nearly out of breath as if he’d himself run from the party across town to tell the sheriff personally, “I’d say we’ve got—”

“Don’t say another word!” Dante said, his hand up. He looked to Fred. “Let’s get over there, fast!”

~~~~

“Isn’t it cool?” Jeremy said as he pointed at the two foot by one foot safe.

“It’s so cool!” Ashley said.

“Yeah,” Jeremy said wistfully.

They stood staring at it for a moment before locking eyes. They lunged at each other and locked lips, and were soon struggling out the door and toward an empty bedroom down the hall.

~~~~

Downstairs Ricky Jay stepped up to the bong and gave it a good once-over. He was a washed-up stoner repeating his senior year, but having a fun time doing it. His unwashed hair was covered by a Jamaican hat as he turned back to the crowded room, scoffed, and climbed up on the couch.

“Ri-cky Jay! Ri-cky Jay!” the crowd began to chant.

Ricky Jay grabbed the eight foot bong with both hands, put his mouth on the top,

then nodded. Below him Bobbie did the honors and lit the bowl. The pot crackled to life, and the chanting grew louder as the smoke being sucked-up the tube could clearly be seen.

“Ri-cky Jay! Ri-cky Jay!”

The smoke touched Ricky Jay’s lips, but he kept his eye locked on the bowl. Bobbie finally let the lighter go out and he stepped back. The chanting grew louder as Ricky Jay started to suck up the pot smoke.

~~~~~

“There it is!” Fred said, pointing toward 967 Paradise Lane.

“Is it on fire?” Dante asked, his eyes narrowing on the house.

“No sir, I think those are just strobe lights.”

The sheriff scoffed at that and pulled the car up in front of the house.

“Well, let’s get up there and start passing out the MIPs (Minor in Possession),” he said with a laugh as he opened his car door and got out.

~~~~~

Ricky Jay stuck up his arm.

“Pull it!” someone shouted, and a party-goer came up and grabbed the pull-carb from the bong, allowing Ricky Jay to suck up fresh air.

“He’s not gonna make it!” someone yelled out, and the crowd fell silent as the huge cloud of marijuana smoke slowly got sucked up the bong.

“His face is turning red!” Veronica shouted at the top of her lungs, and almost threw up her last few shots because of it.

Ricky-Jay sucked for all he was worth, but already his lungs were filled-to-

capacity with the harsh smoke. There was just a little bit more in the bong, if he could...just...

“He did it!” someone yelled out, and Ricky Jay took his mouth from the bong and began to exhale a gargantuan cloud of thick smoke over their heads.

The crowd erupted in cheers, and then there was a loud snapping sound.



“What was that?” Ashley said as she rolled off Jeremy.

“What was what?” Jeremy said, pulling her back on top of him.

“Didn’t you hear that?” she said, looking down into his face with concern. “It sounded like a—”

There was a loud snapping noise, and the bed beneath them shifted. Ashley and Jeremy looked at one another with wide eyes and horror, and then they were falling.



Sheriff Dante Mitchell was just turning to the house when he heard the noise, a cross between steel beams snapping and what he imagined a dragon’s roar would be.

He and Fred stood in amazement as a huge sinkhole, at least sixty feet wide, formed from nothing and took the house right into it, a good portion of the yard and garage as well.

“God damn!” Dante shouted. “Fred, Fred, get on the horn and call this in! We’ve got to—”

There was a loud groaning as if the earth’s stomach was growling, and then the sinkhole began to widen. Before Dante could get another ‘God damn’ in the earth gave way beneath them and they and their car were sucked down into oblivion.

THE END

## **Tears on Christmas**

Sven stared out at the North Sea, then turned back toward Vlieland, the small island town just north of Holland.

“It looks rough out there,” he said to his sister.

“It’s Christmas Eve,” Tessa laughed, “I’m sure the ocean’s just a little angry at not getting any gifts this year.”

Sven smiled at his sister’s wise words. “I’d probably be angry too if I had to sit out in this weather all day.”

“So what are we doing?” she laughed, looking back at her younger brother.

“Let’s get back home and see if mom will let us open one of those gifts yet.”

Before her brother could say anything, Tessa had broken out in a run. Sven cursed under his breath, smiled, then started after her.

~~~~

Gustav put his glasses down and stared out at the churning sea and storm clouds gathering quickly to the west. He shook his head and turned to Gunter beside him.

“We’re not going to make it.”

Gunter nodded. He’d been at sea for much of his thirty-two years and seen it all, but never a storm like they were seeing off their stern.

“God help Holland,” he said after a moment, then headed back to the bow, a thin sliver of hope with him that he’d see land still.

~~~~

“Where have you been!” Merel shouted.

Tessa’s face immediately went red at her mother’s tone.

“Mother, we—”

Merel fell to her knees in the mud and reached out to hug her young daughter.

“There’s a storm coming,” she said through clenched teeth, “a big one.”

Sven came up hesitantly, scared by the look on his mother’s face. “Is it bad?”

“Your father said it’ll rip away this whole island,” she replied, tears coming to her eyes.

“The docks, we can get to the docks and—”

Merel shook her head, silencing her daughter. “The boats have left already, filled with as many as they could hold.” She shook her head. “Not that it’ll do them much good – Groningen is going to get it bad too, and they’re miles inland.”

“Why is God doing this to us...and on Christmas!” Tessa wailed.

“I don’t know,” her mother said consolingly, “I don’t know.”



“She’s on us!” Gunter shouted from the wheelhouse.

Gustave frowned and looked behind him. Walls of water were descending, and he knew this was the end.

“Hard to port!” he shouted. “Bring her about before we get a broadside from one of these waves!”

Gunter nodded and started turning the wheel. The boat moved slowly, but after a few moments Gustave had a clear view of the other side. His eyes went wide at what he saw – a rushing wall of water at least fifty feet high bearing down on them.

“Mother of God!” he shouted, and then the boat was gone.



“Here it comes!” someone shouted from outside.

Tessa put her hands to her ears, trying to block out the sound of the howling winds. Beside her Sven was shaking and whimpering while their mother held him close.

That’s when the first wave struck. Tessa could hear it, like some boat being dropped into the water from a hundred feet high. It pounded the beach hundreds of yards from them, and then there was a rushing sound.

Impossibly, just moments later they could hear water rushing outside, then the small house was shaking. A moment later it caved-in, and water was all about.

“Mother!” Tessa shouted, but she could no longer see her or her brother huddled on the floor, which was now covered with water flowing in where one wall had been and out where the other once was.

A loud rumbling noise sounded behind Tessa and she turned about. A wall of water was rushing toward her, and her eyes went wide.



Mayor Jan Ruben walked the streets of Amsterdam, the stone cobbles still standing, but not much else. Beside him his advisor jotted notes as they stepped over bodies.

“How many so far?” he asked.

The advisor scrunched up his face and flipped through a few pieces of parchment.

“It’s hard to say, this early and all, but...”

“Out with it man!”

“But we think at least 10,000 perished all along the northern coast.

Jan shook his head. “And the towns?”

“Groningen, Zwolle, Doddum, Haarlem, and of course Amsterdam,” he said.

“Some of the worst was between Tønder and Emden. There we’ve got thousands unaccounted for.”

“We’ll never find all the bodies in that part of East Frisia,” Jan said with a deep sigh. He shook his head and turned back to his advisor. “Thirty percent of the population, it just can’t be!”

“Not much of a Christmas, is it?”

Jan frowned. “No, no it’s not. Let’s just hope 1718 is a better year.”

THE END

## **Yangshuo**

We were woken by a man yelling something at us in Chinese which we took to mean that we’d arrived back home in Shenzhen. There was a torrential downpour, and for the first time on the trip I was happy I took the umbrella instead of the sandals. It was just past five in the morning, and the buses wouldn’t start running again for another hour and a half, so we had to get a cab back to Nanshan.

It was a short ride, and the girls insisted I *not* pay, which was good since I only had twelve Yuan left, having chosen just the right amount to take with me. For about ¥1200 I had been able to take two ten-hour sleeper bus trips to the province of Guangxi, two nights in a hotel, all kinds of meals both western and Chinese, a bamboo raft trip on the Li River, a tour of the Buddha caves, a rented bicycle to ride

around the country, and the time to take all kinds of wonderful pictures, the majority of which my cheap camera erased.

Still, for less than \$200, I had a wonderful vacation away from Shenzhen, which is very boring in comparison to Yangshuo.

I was invited by Sara and Jenny on Sunday night, right before the National Day holiday began, to accompany them to Yangshuo. I'd never heard of the place, but it seemed like something to do, so why not? I didn't have my school's permission to leave Shenzhen, but how would they know? So the next day we went to the bus station in Louhou to get tickets, but were informed we couldn't leave until Wednesday night. The tickets were ¥290 each, and they'd be for a sleeper bus. I went out and bought a backpack since that would be the best way to travel, and on Wednesday we headed back down.

Our bus didn't leave until nine, and was comprised of three rows of rickety metal beds, two high. It quickly became apparent that this was more like a try-to-sleeper bus, as all of the shaking, coupled with the street lights shining in, made it very hard to catch a wink. At times when we got onto side roads it felt more like a rollercoaster, but I thought it was fun, and you really felt alive when the driver careened into the opposite lane to overtake a slow vehicle, the oncoming traffic honking furiously. I managed to doze off a few times, not for long, and when we did arrive in Yangshuo at around 5:30 the next morning, all three of us just wanted to find a hotel.

That proved harder than expected, and we wandered the streets for nearly two hours before we decided on a spot to have breakfast. They served western breakfast for ¥25, and we were able to get a room at the same place when some people checked out. We were informed it would be a single room with three beds, for ¥160, plus ¥100 key deposit, for two nights, not a bad deal. We were also told that the music in the bar would be loud until midnight. Sara and Jenny decided to go upstairs and get some

sleep and shower, and since I wasn't that tired I decided to rent a bike and go explore.

Established as a county in 590 AD by the Sui Dynasty, Yangshuo has a long reputation as a place of residence for Han, Zhuang, and Yao people coexisting with similar customs and traditions. There are over 20,000 hills, known as Karst's in the county. More than 1.5 million tourists flock to the area each year, and English is widely spoken, since that's how many of the locals are able to sell their wares and live very good lives for South China.

I got a bicycle for ¥40, with a ¥200 deposit, and went off toward the city of Guilin, specifically to the Dragon Bridge, which is more than 2,000 years old. A sign said it was 9km away. The road was very busy with bikes, motorcycles, vans, minibuses, and large buses. The continuous sound of honking quickly gave me a headache. I thought they honked quite a bit in Shenzhen, but nothing compared to this. Later I was told that Shenzhen banned minibuses and motorcycles last year to relieve some of the traffic problems that plague areas like Yangshuo.

It didn't take me too long to find a turnoff, and I was flagged down by a woman on a motorcycle who told me which way to go. I wound through some small streets and came upon a small river, with a bridge not too large. It was made of stone, and didn't look too special. I was continually hounded by locals to take a bamboo raft, which would start at ¥100 (US \$14), but which could be bargained down. I declined, and went off the way I had come to check out other areas. I took lots of photos, but was hard pressed to get some from the road that didn't contain power lines.

I went back to town, and past it, to look at the other side of the river and poke around, taking more pictures. By this time it was almost noon, and I was supposed to meet the ladies for lunch.

We went to a Chinese restaurant, and I got some fried hot peppers and rice, and had some dumplings as well, costing about ¥25, and then we strolled about the street

stalls looking at all of the stuff for sale. The ladies bought a lot of skirts and blouses and lots of bracelets and necklaces over the three days, but I didn't have too much to spend, even though there were some very nice silk scarves which would have made good gifts. They started at ¥100, like everything, but you could quickly get them down to ¥30, if you bargained.

People continually shout hello to you, for that is your name to them, "Hello." After hours of that treatment and constant hawking I began to detest the whole tourist mentality the city had adopted. It seemed like the whole local culture had been corrupted by the opening to the West and that capitalism was steadily eroding any semblance to what this place might have been. As they sold pictures of Chairman Mao in some shops, I couldn't help but think what he thought of this place. Certainly a sense of animosity which I was quickly adopting wouldn't be too far off.

It didn't help that the streets were jammed pack, especially the area we stayed at called West Street. Countless westerners were around, all types of nationalities from the languages I heard, and many Chinese tourists. The area was so small I saw several of the same people many times a day. At night it became very crowded, and loud music blared from the bars from eight to midnight. Walking was very slow.

After lunch we rented some more bikes and headed back to the bridge. More pictures were taken and we ate some fruit there. I had to get my bike back by six, so we headed back around five o'clock in rush-hour traffic, more headaches from the cars.

We had dinner at a western place, mainly because Sara wanted their cheesecake, and then wandered around for a while. We stopped at a café and ordered some tea, and next door a bunch of westerners, perhaps English teachers, were having a good time stripping down to their underwear and dancing around. A large crowd of Chinese were constantly taking pictures, like paparazzi. My picture was taken a lot, but Sara

was constantly assaulted, and resented it. She would often turn away or cover her face. We went back to our room around midnight, but the music continued well past three, and I had a hard time getting to sleep, even though I had barely any the night before.



The next day I got up late and had some toast for breakfast. The ladies were already up, which was nice, since that meant that I didn't have to wait downstairs while they took their showers, which could take a while.

We wandered around a bit looking at the stuff the street vendors were selling. Both of them bought a lot of stuff in my opinion. Jenny is really good at bargaining and got lots of jewelry and clothes. After a while we decided that we would go and check out one of the underground caves that dot the area. We decided on the Buddha cave because it was one of the cheapest, I was worried I would run out of money, and it'd just about everything that the larger water cave tour had, just a shorter duration. We took a bus to where it was for ¥3, got our tickets, and took a smaller bus through some winding town streets until we got to a drop-off point. We walked up some stairs built into the hill, and were at the entrance to the cave. We had to take our shoes off and put on sandals and helmets.

Some more people showed up, so we ended up having us three, about four Germans, and two Israelis. I could pick up some of the German, but I didn't know there were people from Israel until Jenny told me later. So we all set off. It was a lot like the Lewis & Clark caverns back home, but unfortunately I lost the pictures, but Sara has some. There was one point where we had to crawl through a really small crack, and I banged my knees but made it through. Since I was one of the more fit, I

figured if I can't do it, no one can. The ladies were not about to do it, and they were both wearing some new clothes, so they took a minute to walk-around, and were surprised that everyone else crawled through. I told them that's what's fun about the place.

We got to the end of the tour where there was a mud bath that the Israelis went in and threw mud around, and a water pool to clean up in. None of us had swimsuits, so we walked back and out. I didn't think it was too exciting. We walked back to the bus stop, and got a ride back to Yangshuo.

We had lunch/dinner at a Chinese restaurant. They ordered a cold cucumber salad, which I am now in love with. Just cut up cucumbers in a cold soy sauce, but really good. They also ordered a whole fish in sweet and sour sauce. I helped them eat both, as well as my hot beef dish with vegetables, and of course rice and tea. I was surprised around Yangshuo how many places only had tea bags, and the other places that didn't, where they just threw the leaves in the cup or pot, no straining whatsoever. Damn western influences eroding the culture again.

After dinner we walked around the town, crossed a traffic bridge, and checked out the other side of the river, taking pictures and watching the bamboo rafts and boats go by. It gets dark very early in China, Yangshuo being no exception. 6:30 and it's dark out, every night I've been here, very weird. So we walked back, took showers, and then split up. They wanted to do some more shopping, and I was thinking that I'd have a few beers. Unfortunately when you go out, beers are about ¥25 for a 12oz bottle. I really lucked out when I found a street cooler selling 22oz Tsingtao for ¥6. I had a few, then met up with the ladies at the cheesecake place again. I told them I was thinking about taking my backpack and filling up on the cheap beer, then just going to the room and listening to my ipod to drown out the horrible techno

music from the bar below. We agreed to meet up at eleven, at which point we walked around, and me and Jenny drank beer. Sarah doesn't drink, and we eventually settled back at the bar waiting for the music to die down while drinking our cheap beer outside, no doubt angering the bar waitresses. I had no problem getting to sleep that night.

The next morning we had to check out of the hotel by noon, so I got up a little before ten to take a shower and change and let the ladies get their stuff together. I went downstairs to have breakfast and a western guy started talking to me. He asked where I was from and by this point I learned you just say US, but he wanted more so I told him Montana. He was from North Carolina and did business in Shenzhen. He gave me his number and started talking to the ladies as well when they came down. He was interested in meeting more westerners; though I found it odd he didn't know more being in the country for six months. I figured I'd call him sometime in the next week. I actually ran into the same guy on the street in Shenzhen three years later. Crazy.

After breakfast we went to the travel place and booked a ticket to take a bamboo raft down the scenic part of the Li River for ¥90. We took a forty-five minute bus ride there, then a long walk to the river and rafts. There were a lot tied up, and we found ours and were off. They have motors attached to the back to go, but Sara mentioned it would be a lot nicer if they didn't so you could hear the river. The river itself was only a few feet deep in the middle, and there were a lot of tourists on it. We went down a few miles for about forty-five minutes, stopped at a river restaurant, or more like umbrellas set up with woks to cook. I didn't have anything except a really overpriced coke, and we headed back. It was at this point that my camera decided it didn't want to hold my old pictures any longer. I was really bummed when I found out it erased all

of them, and Sara got a good picture of my expression.

On the walk back we passed a bee hive area that cultivated honey, and they bought some for a really good price of ¥20, when in stores here it's about ¥80. It was much more of a liquid consistency than honey is in the States. We took the bus back, and had some cheap lunch/dinner, before we got a call that our bus would head back two hours earlier than expected. So we got our bags from the hotel where we stashed them, and went to wait.

I decided to get some street food. They had this stand where a woman would put down some liquid batter, spread it on the griddle, let it harden, throw an egg down and spread it, then throw down some green onions, cilantro, and some yellow stuff, fold it over, then put a brown sauce, chili pepper, a tortilla strip thing, some meat, lettuce and fold it into a wrap. Wow, really good, and I was so glad to see a place here in Shenzhen selling them on the street the other day.

So we got to our bus, this time a luxury sleeper, and I actually got some sleep. We took a cab ride home in the rain, and I got back at 5:30 AM. It was a good trip. When I went to school for breakfast on Monday, right when I walked into the Cantina one of the teachers blurts out to me, "Didn't I see you in Yangshuo?"

How could I deny it? So I said yes, and she said, "I thought I saw you, I wanted to say hi, but you were walking by so quickly."

So my cover was blown. The cat was out of the bag that I had left town without permission. My contact teacher asked me if I went somewhere during the flag raising ceremony, and I told her. But no one seemed to care. China.

THE END

**Two Dwarves Bartering Over an Axe**

Beldar Thunder Fist had been working at the Warrior's Emporium for more than thirty years, and in all that time he'd never had a more troublesome customer than that which stood before him now.

"Thar ain't no way this here axe could've lopped off three orcs' heads in one swing," the surly dwarf said.

"I made that swing meself!" Beldar bellowed, his beard blowing forward with the force of his words.

"Here," the dwarf pointed eagerly, his eyes lighting up, "look at this chip! Thar's no way ye could have swung this axe in the arc ye be saying!"

"I'll have you know," Beldar said furiously, coming around the counter to grab hold of the axe himself, "I made that thar chip by swinging at an ogre over on Lemi Pass!"

"Bah!" the dwarf shot back. "Thar's no ogres over on Lemi Pass, ain't been since me and me clansmen cleared them out two decades ago!"

"Two decades, why..."

Beldar trailed off as his words turned to splutters. Never in all his years had he heard such hogwash, not even from an elf.

"I'll have you know as well," the dwarf continued as Beldar grasped hold of the axe and narrowed his eyes at it, "that this here shop is known for selling shabby goods."

That did it. Beldar had been accused of many things in his time – carrying an unwanted stench, wanton drunkenness, and public urination to name just a few – but this was uncalled for.

"How dare ye!" he bellowed, pointing the axe toward the door. "I'll have ye out of me shop this instant!"

“Yer shop?” the dwarf spat. “This here land belongs to the Broken Knuckle clan, has for generations!”

“Me pappy started this shop more than seventy years ago!” Beldar shouted.

“Aye, right after we let ye have it!”

“Ye gave it to us for fightin’ the ettins that were here then, ye blasted fool!”

“Oh, and I suppose next you’ll be tellin’ me that ye used this here axe on those very ettins, is that it?”

“Aye!”

“And where’s your chips to prove that?” the dwarf said, grabbing hold of the axe once again and yanking it back to make a closer inspection.

“Thar ain’t no chips, ye damned fool!” Beldar shouted again. “Everyone knows that an ettin’s head comes off clean!”

“Aye, I was just testin’ ye,” the dwarf said after a few moments.

He looked down at the axe and narrowed his eyes, scrunched up his face, and generally every other expression of distaste known to man or dwarf.

“So two gold, ye said?” he asked finally asked.

“Aye, two gold, and after the tirade ye’ve given me, not a shaving less!”

The dwarf dug into his pocket and pulled out two gold coins, each nearly as grimy as his hand.

“Pleasure doin’ business with ye!” the dwarf said as he handed the coins over and took the axe.

“Aye,” Beldar said, “come again soon!”

THE END

## **Ramblings**

It was a single moment’s temerity which caught Steven off guard, nothing less.

Not to say that the moment was anything special, of course; no, it was just that it was unusual.

He'd grown used to the quietness of the evenings, the unobtrusiveness, the thorough-going peace-of-mind which encouraged quiet, introspective thought. So it was all the more disheartening that that particular state of affairs was broken.

It was evident with the "knock, knock" on the door, the hesitant, unknowing expression on the inhabitants face (for the cleaning lady only came during the day, and it was well past that time), that Steven got himself up off his chair and endeavored to the door, opening it ever so slightly, with hesitation.

It was of course a Chinese person, a woman in this case, and yet she spoke English rather well.

"Hello," was her immediate answer upon the door swinging inward toward her intended target, and Steven was struck by the fact that she seemed rather more off-put and ill-at-ease than he himself.

"I don't mean to bother you, but can you tell me please which way is the office?"

She said the last in Mandarin, and Steven was knowledgeable just enough to catch the word office.

"I think it's too late for the offices to be open," he replied.

She frowned, and at that said, "Sorry to bother you, it was just I saw the light, thank you," and with that she was off. My how agreeable she looked to Steven's lonely countenance.

Of course Steven had thought about the young lady that'd knocked upon his door that night quite a bit afterward. Indeed, it was the first such knock the door had seen in these many months, aside from the cleaning lady, so it was with a keen reluctance that he didn't see her again for many days afterward. He was so shocked and taken aback by the incident that he didn't get her name, nor she his.

One grew accustomed to the habit of routine, and Steven's routine had in fact been one of solitude for these many months. The days and weeks, and in turn, the months, had followed a quiet, unspoken rhythm. He would awake each morning to the sound of his alarm, mere seconds before the school bell sounded, and proceed with the morning routine.

It was the same all around the world, the morning routine: shit, shower, and shave, as the American military like to put it, at least in movies Steven had seen.

Shaving he saved for after his afternoon run, and showering was once again coming back, the weather proving warm enough after this winter, if in such it could be called, to create enough sweat during the evening's respite to induce such an act every morning.

It all had to happen in one half-hour's time, of course, which included a complete French press of tea, and the necessary cooling time (for Steven had stopped buying bottled water shortly after the new year), and a morning without a complete two cups was one ill-appreciated, and best avoided.

It came as quite a surprise when a tray was set down opposite Steven at dinner on Monday evening, for indeed, he was so used to dining alone.

"Hello again," she said with a smile, "I want to apologize again for disturbing you the other evening."

The other evening had in fact been four days since, a Thursday, but however prominent in Steven's mind that thought had been, and why she had waited so long to reveal herself, it did not come up in this conversation.

"Hello," meek at that, was all he managed.

At her smile he was somehow able to collect himself enough to ask if she had in fact found the office she was looking for. "

Oh, yes," she eagerly replied, "and they directed me to my room."

“So you’re staying at the middle school, then, I take it?”

“Yes, and happy for it.”

“Capital, capital,” said Steven in reply. She did not catch his drift, but did comprehend the approving nature of his comment. My how her smile agreed with her face.



They lay next to each other in bed after quite a few weeks of laying alone.

“You missed the smell of my favorite shampoo,” he said.

“Oh, really, you have a favorite shampoo?”

“Yes, I have two different kinds.”

“You’re not wearing...no that’s not right. You didn’t use your favorite today?”

“No, I save that for just special occasions.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I used my favorite shampoo, and I have to admit, I didn’t know it was my favorite, until last week. I used to use it everyday. But then I started to use this big industrial-strength bottle my co-worker gave me after sports day. Really no smell at all to that one. But anyway, I used “my favorite” last Saturday, and realized it was my favorite, because I kept having my hair hand down into my nostrils, smelling it all day, and damn, it smelt good.”

“But you’re not wearing it tonight?”

“I said it was just for special occasions,” he said.

“And last week was a special occasion?”

“I wanted it to be.”

She had been lying on her side facing him this whole time, while he had been lying on his side facing away from her.

“Well, I’m sorry I didn’t call you last week,” she said.

“So am I.”

“You said it was going to be a busy week, and that you would see me on the weekend.”

“I thought so.”

“What? Busy week, or you would see me?”

“Both.”

She turned onto her back, an exasperated sigh piercing her lips. A long period of silence ensued, where either could have fallen asleep if they’d wanted to. Both chose not to.

“I’ve been listening to those songs you gave me,” she said at last.

“Oh yeah, which ones?”

“The Paul Simon, the David Bowie.”

“I knew you liked Bowie, and were happy to get him.”

“Yes, but like you said, sometimes what you get the album for, the songs, you realize the other songs, the ones that were not hits, are better.”

“So what have you been listening to,” he asked?

“Well, I’ve been playing the Paul Simon everyday.”

“And what do you like, the fast songs, or the slow ones?”

“The slow ones.”

“I like those ones too.”

He turned over to face her, and she turned to face him. They both looked into each others eyes in the dark, and silently said they were sorry.



She said she couldn’t see me tonight because she had to study. I told her it was

no problem. We've all been there before. Is the test tomorrow? Or next Monday? Sometimes you will be more nervous a week out. I certainly remember being nearly immobile when it came to studies the weekend before a big test. Of course that is all overcome with experience. Worry can indeed immobilize. Perhaps the deconstructionist historians should take that into account when contemplating their battles. I've known many an undergraduate quite immobilized the weekend before a test, final or not, or of the date an important paper is due. Immobilized to the point where all they could do was constantly worry while lifting a beer cup/glass/bottle to their mouth. Hell, I've been there. I've known a few graduate students to suffer the same fate.

Was she just saying that, or did she really feel the need to study? She was one of the top students in her class last term. Hell, she was awarded a certificate by her professor. I remember asking if it was worth framing, and she assured me that it was not. It had been a week Friday, and a week since seeing each other yesterday. Certainly I was feeling the pangs of separation to a much greater degree than she herself was. It worried me.

I told her it was no problem, and a few minutes later I reminded her to get me a textbook this week, if she had time. As if that was too much to ask. Hell, I had already asked her several times. I couldn't count the times, but it did stretch back to the previous term. My textbook had always proven inadequate, and I had been running out of useful characters to copy for a week now.

I know it was last Friday that did it. I was not up to par, pure and simple. Not up to par, while trying too hard. What was I thinking? Let's see, I told her Wednesday that I was getting tickets to the symphony, and asked if she wanted one, and she answered in the affirmative. So I got her one, never complaining when she didn't pay

me back, for indeed, I always mention how little money means to me. I knew she liked Mahler, she was listening to him when I came over a week before. She told me she would be late, but did she have to sit a few rows above me, surely in clear view (how many blonde heads were in attendance), without coming down? She said she got there only half an hour late, after all.

My was it rainy that weekend. The bad thing about the rain is pants and tennis shoes; they make a bad combination. For one, when the rain is coming down like it was, the water seeps into the shoes. On the other hand, half your lower pant-leg is soaked. This creates great discomfort for the remainder of the day that it takes the humid air to dry the pant leg. And God help you if you go out into it again. I need to buy more pants.

I get up much earlier than she, and we both know this, living arrangements being what they are. She told me it was OK because she knew I was tired. But did she have to rub it in by coming back after I was nearly asleep, proffering a sleeping mask, urging that I put it on. She wanted to read, the living room being too cold. I took some consolation in the fact she was reading a book that I had given her, Leonard Elmore's *The Hot Kid*. I paid \$94 for it in Hong Kong a few weeks earlier, on a trip we were both to attend.

"I thought maybe it was because of your experiences, and perhaps they're bit more devoid of emotion. Or maybe it's that you're still not ready. Or maybe just the usual early relationship jitters."

Something like that. I was feeling rather open the night I told her that, to express how I felt about her lack of emotion. American girls like to cuddle in bed, after all, and certainly enjoy kissing on greeting and saying goodbye. But with her it always seemed to be a "See Ya" on my part, and a look of fruitless exasperation. There are worse things than being alone.



We headed toward the Starbucks after the concert. She is still allowed to drink coffee during Lent.

“There is no restriction against caffeine?” I ask.

“No, I just can’t put milk or sugar in it.”

This causes a bit of a problem during the order. The coffee comes just fine, but communicating to the barista that she wants soy milk is a little difficult. The problem sorts itself out fine, however. I don’t drink coffee, so we head out of the shop.

“Isn’t there a bookstore over here,” she asks.

“Yes, it’s over across the street.”

I feel a little superior in that moment. She has been here five years, and I’ve only been here five months, but I know which side of the street the bookstore is on.

“I used to live in this part of the city,” she says as we dodge the taxis.

“Well, it looks like they’re closed,” I say as we approach the bookstore within the bookstore. English titles sell far fewer copies, as is to be expected in a country where English is a second (if that) language.

“The sign says 10:30,” she says. “What time is it now?”

“It’s only 10:20.”

“Guess they decided to close early. I always liked to close early on a Friday night when I was in the service industry,” I say.

I really wanted to buy her a book, too.

“I really wanted to buy you a book too,” I add. “John Irving. Nobody writes better elephant comedy than him.”

That was two weeks ago, now. I had actually thought about buying the book for her when I got back from holiday, but I didn’t. I think she would be more suspicious

than thankful.

“You bought a book for me...*ok.*”

I imagined it sitting behind the glass doors of her bookshelf, staring out at me while I sat on the couch waiting for her to get done with the bathroom in the morning before we left her apartment. The book would be mocking me, laughingly sneering, and confident in its lambasting way that it had not been read, not even been thumbed through. Perhaps I could buy the book, read it, then give it to her, I thought. Then it wouldn't really be like I bought it *for* her. Yes, that is what I would do, but at another time.



“You didn't wash your hair today,” she declares as we lay in bed.

“No, it's Sunday.”

“You don't wash your hair on Sunday?” she asks quizzically.

“No, only Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, after I work out.”

She makes a sort of acknowledging harrumph, and stairs up at the ceiling. I don't go into the fact that, with such fine hair, shampooing tends to cause it to hang down into my face. I find that one or two days after shampooing is ideal for me to be able to comb it back, for the natural grease tends to make it stay in place. It seems there are many things that separate us in bed, but my hair was not one of them. I guess that has changed.

THE END

## **Mike Fink's Last Shot**

Mike Fink put his rifle down and that's when John Carpenter found his

confidence.

“That squaw is mine,” he said in a no-nonsense tone.

Mike closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. He was hoping it wouldn't come to this, and he was hoping the look on his face made that clear. He turned around so John could see it.

John frowned and crossed his arms. “There ain't no two ways about it, Mike!”

Mike nodded. “Then let's settle this like men.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let's get drunk.”

John shrugged. “Isn't that a given?”

~ ~ ~

“Listen, listen...listen,” John said with a huge grin as he staggered over to Mike.

“No, you listen,” Mike laughed, throwing back another tin cup of whiskey. The two men had been drinking for the better part of two hours, and the lack of food in their stomachs and overall penchant for alcohol was making them both a bit silly.

“I'm listening!” John slurred.

“We need to settle this,” Mike said, nodding to himself. “We can't have a woman tearing us apart.”

“I agree!” John said as he threw back his own cup.

“Well, then here's what we'll do,” Mike said, motioning for John to come closer.

When the other man was up to him he laid it out.

“We'll shoot cups off each others' heads, just like always.”

“I can't think of a better way to solve this problem!”

“Good,” Mike said, and wobbled to his feet.

He headed over to one of the buildings of Fort Henry, the far northern outpost on

the Missouri River, and banged on the door.

“Talbot! Talbot, get your sorry-hide out here!”

There was some shuffling from inside the barracks building, and then a moment later the door opened.

“Talbot!” Mike said.

“I’m right here you drunk fool!” Talbot said as Mike yelled in his ear.

“Talbot, John and I are shooting cups!”

Talbot shook his head. “Oh, Hell!”

“No, no...it’s not that bad,” Mike said with slurred speech while also somehow latching onto Talbot’s arm to pull him outside, “we just need a judge is all.”

“Damn it, Mike!” Talbot shouted as he was dragged along by the tall and burly mountain man. “Didn’t you get that out of your system last week? I mean, how many more dead Injuns you think we need around here?”

“A helluva lot more!” John yelled as he filled up his cup with whiskey once again.

Talbot frowned. “All right, let’s just get this damn thing done with so I can get back in there and get to sleep. Now, who’s going first?”

Mike and John looked at one another.

“Oh, Hell!” Talbot said, pulling a coin from his shirt pocket. “Call it!”

Talbot tossed the coin up in the air.

“Tails!” John called out.

The coin dropped into the muddy ground of the fort and Talbot leaned over it.

“Heads,” he called out, “looks like Mike gets the first shot.”

John frowned, but then a moment later began digging into his pockets.

“Here, hang on to this for me, Talbot,” he said as he fished out some worthless possessions – a broken watch, some bullets, a bit of tobacco, and his gun – and handed them over.

“Seventy paces!” Mike shouted as he took another drink.

“Aye,” John said under his breath as he started walking across the fort’s grounds.

“You be careful now, Mike,” Talbot said as he watched Mike load up his rifle.

“Don’t you worry about me,” Mike said as he pulled the rifle up and took aim.

Across the fort John was looking nervous as he put the tin whiskey cup on his head.

“Alright!” he shouted. “Let’s get this over—”

Mike fired his rifle and the bullet sped forward, hitting John right in the forehead. The man dropped like a sack of potatoes falling from a keelboat into the river, the whiskey cup hitting him on the way down.

“God damn, Mike!” Talbot said in disbelief. “You killed him!”

“Bastard wanted my woman!” Mike said as he shook his head and began seeing to his rifle.

Talbot frowned. “John was my friend, you bastard!”

Mike frowned and looked over, then his eyes went wide as he saw Talbot raise up John’s gun. He didn’t have a chance to say a word before Talbot shot him twice in the chest, whereupon he fell to the ground dead.

“Ain’t so talkative now, are you, you bag of hot air!” Talbot called over his shoulder as he began walking back to the barracks.

THE END

## **The Detective**

Jim awoke forcefully from his dream, covered in sweat. He stared off into the darkness of the bedroom seeing the images that’d just been moving through his mind. It took some time to adjust to the reality that it was a dream, one that he’d been

having a lot lately, but which he was sure was a dream nonetheless. A dream because the outcome, although different from what it had been in life, was still horribly bad.

Jim got up and grabbed a towel from the bathroom to wipe off with as he walked to the window and stared out. The streets below were slick with a fresh rain, and the lights of the neon bar sign a few doors down reflected red and blue light back at him from the street. Jim figured it must be just an hour or so before sunrise, and a quick look at the clock confirmed his suspicions. At least these recurring dreams of his happened around the time he usually got up. He was never able to get back to sleep after one.

Before he headed into the small bathroom for a shower, Jim flipped on the coffee machine and turned on the radio. Classical piano began to filter into the small apartment as the shower began to run. With the sweat washed off and a razor to the face, Jim looked fresh and ready to face the world again for another week of whatever life could throw at him next. He was ready for anything now, had seen it all, and nothing was going to surprise him.

Nothing could be further from the truth.



Jim turned the key in the old lock and pushed open the door to his office. Like his apartment, it wasn't much. There were two windows set into the brick wall opposite the door, both covered by thick blinds. A large brown desk sat in front of them, a reclining chair pushed into it. There were two hard-back chairs in front of the desk, and a small leather sofa against one wall. A file cabinet was against the other wall, a small table with a coffee pot next to it. Some framed pictures of sailing boats, cheap prints purchased at a second-hand store, dotted the walls. A floor lamp set next

to the sofa offered the only illumination in the room besides the windows. A plant was slowly dying atop the filing cabinet.

The door was set with an opaque window, so you could only see the outline of a person on either side. Etched into it was name "Jim Broadbent" in black lettering, with "Private Detective" below it. Atop the desk were scattered bills, most unpaid and destined for the small metal wastebasket on the floor. A thin coat of dust covered nearly all of the surfaces of the office, evident from the occasional fingerprint showing. An old black rotary phone sat atop the desk, one of the few items not afflicted by the dust, but most definitely by the ravages of time.

Jim liked the office, felt at home here. It helped that it was just a few blocks from his apartment, so the whole downtown neighborhood felt like home to him. Jim started the coffee and sat down at the desk, taking out the morning paper he'd picked up on the way. He scanned the headlines, nothing of interest as usual, some minor incidents that had called the cops' attention over the weekend, but mainly just the usual university angst. Nothing much happened in the small college town, certainly not enough to keep him busy on a regular basis. These days he was mainly called on by jealous wives to tail their husbands, or else to look into the occasional financial impropriety of a business partner who was spending too much time at the rackets, and not enough at the job. The coffee announced its readiness with a high whistle, and Jim poured some into his chipped cup with a crayon-drawn figure on it. The caption below read "World's Best Dad." Jim opened the lower right-hand desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of whiskey, topping off the steaming brew. It looked to be another slow day, and Jim wasn't going anywhere.

It wasn't always like this. Jim had once been a member of the local police force, a detective no less. He'd climbed the ranks the hard way, graduating from the police

academy and putting in his time with the squad car, slowly moving up one moving violation at a time. His willingness to work double-shifts, weekends, and holidays endeared him to other officers, and didn't escape the notice of his superiors either. It was obvious Jim liked the job and wanted to advance in it, and he was willing to do the work to get there. It certainly didn't hurt that he had no family, at least in the beginning, which made his decision to make his work his life all the more respectable.

Jim reflected back on those early days of his youth as he sipped his coffee that overcast morning. Had it really been twenty-five years since he'd graduated from the academy and first donned the uniform? My how time flew...and how those times had changed.

The city was much different then, smaller, and certainly friendlier. The most common problem in those days were drunk drivers, easy enough to handle, and on many occasions simply given a warning if the police knew them. Hell, everyone knew everyone else back then. Now, though, things were different. The idyllic scenery hadn't escaped the notice of the thousands who had driven through it on the highway which skirted town, and the population had steadily increased over the decades. The university had also saw its reputation increase in that time, going from a small state college training the future bureaucrats for the capital, to a well-respected liberal arts college in the middle of the Rocky Mountains. It certainly didn't hurt that the college football team was the best in its division for the past ten years running, either. And with that outside success came the unwanted outside influences. Drugs were now replacing alcohol as the main problem. And not just marijuana, which was barely even on the agenda. No, the real problem was coming from out of state, like most of the athletes now in the small university town. They brought more than their sports talents with them, they also brought their drugs. Cocaine was the choice for the college

crowd and the more upper-class citizens, while methamphetamine had become the bastion for those with nothing else. Yes, how times had changed.

But not much of that concerned Jim since he'd left the police force more than three years before. Sure, sometimes his cases would be linked to drugs in some way, but he never came into contact with them directly, except when he stumbled into the bathroom to see someone getting their kicks. Sure, the money was no longer as good, and his housing left something to be desired, but these days Jim didn't worry much about that anymore. He poured himself another cup, topped it off with the bottle, and flipped to the sports section, content to idle the day away.

A knock on the door interrupted the morning routine. Not another typical day after all, Jim thought to himself as he loudly said "It's open."

In walked a woman right out of a movie. She was tall, over six feet without the heels she was wearing. Jim thought it weird he didn't hear them "click" down the hallway's tiled floor. She was blonde, and her hair tried to burst out from under the cloche hat she wore, and some strands were succeeding. She wore a beige business skirt with a matching top, a white blouse peeking out of the neckline. Her legs were striking. She wore a faint red lipstick on lips which begged for attention without advertising it. Oh yes, she was some kind of woman, Jim could see that right away. He pulled his feet from off his desk and put the paper down.

"Good morning, Miss," Jim began, "What can I do for you."

"You're Jim Broadbent, the private detective?" the woman asked.

"That's right, Miss, what seems to be the problem." Jim stood up and motioned for her to sit down in one of the chairs opposite him. "Please, have a seat."

"Thank you," she said as she sat down, legs crossed. Jim watched her like a hawk as she adjusted her hat and straightened her umbrella, wiping a few drops off her clothes. She was beautiful; there was no doubt about that. *Must be here to figure*

*out who her husband is cheating with*, Jim thought, although he couldn't imagine what fool would cheat on this woman. *Everyone gets tired of the best dish after awhile it seems.*

"So, Miss, how can I be of service to you today," Jim said as he sat back down in his chair and leaned back, watching for any hint of the innuendo to register with her.

"I need you to find out about my son," the woman said, "he's been missing for two days now."

Jim was a bit taken aback. He never would have guessed this dame would be old enough to have a son. She looked to be only in her late twenties, possibly early thirties. She certainly didn't wear enough makeup to warrant anything older than that. She just seemed too fresh and new to have had a child.

"Forty-eight hours is all you need to file a missing persons report down at the station," Jim advised. "Have you done that yet, miss?"

"My name is Evelyn," the woman offered, "Evelyn Reed, and no I haven't filed a missing persons report."

"May I ask why?" Jim said, already suspicious of the woman's motives. There was something she was keeping from him, he could tell.

"I wouldn't want to cause Billy any trouble. Bill is his name, my husband and I call him Billy," Evelyn offered.

"Trouble is it? There any reason why the police would be interested in Billy?" Jim asked.

"Well, you see Mr. Broadbent..."

"Call me Jim."

"Well...Jim, Billy has had a few run-ins with the law before, and we're afraid, my husband and I, are afraid that any mention of him to the police will only cause him more problems down the road."

“I see,” Jim took out a notepad and pen and began to write. “And when did you see him last, Mrs. Reed?”

“Please, call me Evelyn. I saw him on Friday night. He had come over to the house to move some things for me. You see, I’m in the process of moving out of the house.”

“How old is Billy?”

“He’ll be nineteen in three weeks.”

“Nineteen,” Jim exclaimed. It was obvious he didn’t believe Mrs. Reed could be the mother.

“Yes, nineteen. He’s the son of my husband, from a previous marriage.”

“I see, so he doesn’t live with you?”

“Oh no, he lives with some friends. They rent a house in the University District. They’re all students. Billy is about to start at the pharmacy school next fall.”

“Is that right,” Jim said, feigning that he was impressed.

“Yes, Billy is such a fine student and upright young man, this just isn’t like him to not call or show up for two days. He was supposed to meet me last night for dinner, but he never showed up, and when I called the house, his roommates told me they hadn’t seen him since Friday night.”

“Well, Mrs. Reed, sounds like the boy has met a nice girl and simply lost track of time. I bet he’s in class right now as we speak.”

“But I called the house again this morning, and his roommate Chris said that his bag, which he always carries to school, was still there, and that his bed hadn’t been slept in either! Oh please, Mr. Broadbent, I’d like you to look into it. I’m sure it’s nothing, but you understand the concern of a mother, don’t you?”

Jim leaned back and thought for a moment. *Seems normal enough, mother, even if by marriage only, concerned for a son she clearly cares about.* He was sure the kid

had probably just had a wild weekend. Kids were great at hiding how much of an animal they could be on the weekend behind good grades come Finals. He'd probably be home tonight nursing an extended hangover.

"I'll tell you what Mrs. Reed, I'll look into it."

"Oh thank you, Mr. Broadbent, that's all I ask."

Jim nodded and got up as she did, then showed her to the door. He walked back to his desk, a sense of foreboding crawling into his stomach. He reached for the bottle of whiskey once again to top-off his coffee, then picked up the phone.

To Be Continued...

## About the Author



Greg Strandberg was born and raised in Helena, Montana, and graduated from the University of Montana in 2008 with a BA in History. He lived and worked in China following the collapse of the American economy. After five years he moved back to Montana where he now lives with his wife and young son. He's written 30+ Amazon books.

## Connect with Greg Strandberg

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