

Twisted Times blurs the lines between the 21st and the 17th centuries. The journey through Puritanism, Native American ways, witchcraft, and piracy challenges you to look again at a contemporary world "twisted" by corporate greed and separation from nature.

Twisted Times -- A Call Back to Eden

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Twisted Times

...A Call Back to Eden

John Wasserman

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Prologue

Sharon sat up with a jolt. She had been in a deep sleep, but she heard a noise in the back yard. She moved her arm to feel Jack's side of the bed. He was not there. She checked the time; it was 2 a.m. She got up and quietly went to Stephanie and Lisa's room. Both were still sound asleep. Sharon heard a car running. She moved the window shade slightly to the side so she could peer out. The car was parked outside the garage, and the engine was still running. The back door was open on the passenger side. Jack walked from the garage carrying the girls' red wagon. He carefully slid it sideways into the back seat of the car. "My God, what is it now?!" she thought to herself. "What is he up to now!? What can he possibly be up to now!?"

Sharon watched Jack go back into the garage. He came out with a long-handled shovel. He slid that, too, onto the back seat. He closed the car door, got into the driver's seat, and backed the car out of the driveway. Sharon quietly but quickly ran to the front of the house so she could see which way he was going. She saw him turn to his right. "Where the heck could he be going now?" she quietly mumbled to herself. "It's a peninsula! How far could he go? ... Half a mile!! Ohhhh Jack, I thought that we had all the secrets on the table!! If my mother were here, I would follow you right now!" Sharon went back to bed, but she did not sleep. She tossed and turned, waiting to hear Jack's car pull back into the driveway.

Jack drove up the slight incline in the road that led to the plateau where the Massat village once stood. He crossed the median of the narrow road and parked on the left side of the road, next to the braided wire fence that separated the road from the cliff. He left the car running. He looked around, and he thought. From this spot, he had watched the Massachusetts Bay Company brigantine anchor, and he had watched Leonard Scoggins stand in the bow of the longboat as his Puritan comrades rowed him to shore. From this spot, he had watched the Massat people cheer the arrival of the Puritans as if they were

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messengers from God. At the front of the celebration was Scoggins' half-brother, John Blackstone, who waved his arms wildly in the air like an orchestra conductor. At the back of the celebration was Mantoos' grieving wife and children, apparently forced to join the celebration despite their loss.

From this spot, Jack remembered stealthily sneaking to the large rock where he had crouched in anticipation of John Blackstone's ascent up the narrow cliff-side path. From this spot, Jack remembered scampering down the cliff and to the canoe that enabled his narrow escape.

He looked all around quietly now, his engine still idling. He backed his car up a few feet, and he pulled his car back across the median and into the right lane. He drove toward the tip of the peninsula. He passed the location where he had shot John Blackstone. He passed the area where the village was located, and he looked at the place where Blackstone had murdered Mantoos.

He drove up the incline that led to the tall granite promontory at the very tip of the peninsula. He pulled into the very small parking lot next to the children's playground. There were no street lights in the area and the nearest home was about a quarter mile away. He turned off the engine.

Jack grabbed a flashlight from the glove compartment. He reached into the back seat to pull out the long-handled shovel. He closed the car door as quietly as he could. The ground underneath the swing set and the slide and the climbing apparatus was covered with wood chips. Jack quietly walked over to the huge wall-like granite outcropping on the south side of the playground. His eyes had quickly become accustomed to the dark; he no longer needed his flashlight. The path that Mantoos had used to show him the shipwreck site was still there. The rock that Mantoos had used to cover the pirate's treasure, however, was not.

Using the granite wall and the path opening for perspective, Jack estimated where the treasure had been buried. With his hands, he

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brushed aside the wood chips in that area. Beneath the wood chips was a coating of black plastic. Using the shovel, he made a 6-inch tear in it. Using his hands, he ripped the plastic to form a two-foot by three-foot opening. He started to dig, as quickly and as quietly as he could. He occasionally interrupted his digging to look around. Then he looked down and dug some more. Suddenly, he heard the sound of shovel hitting metal. He bent over close to the ground and he carefully pushed the shovel horizontally across the surface of the chest. He put down the shovel, got to his knees, and brushed aside the remaining dirt from the top of the lid. He knew what he had found; it was the chest that Mantoos had retrieved from the rigid grip of the dead pirate.

Jack tried to lift the lid, but the hinges seemed to be rusted shut. He pulled harder. His body lurched backward as the hinges snapped. He leaned forward onto his knees and looked down. He had seen them only a few days before, but the glittering coins and pieces of jewelry seemed far more spectacular tonight. "I can't believe it," he muttered to himself. "I just can't believe it." He scrambled onto his feet and ran over to the car. He removed Stephanie and Lisa's little red wagon from the back seat as quietly as he could. To minimize the noise, he did not close the back door completely. He quickly carried the wagon over to the hole, and he placed it there with the handle facing toward the car. He carefully dug around the edges of the treasure chest, and he pulled the chest from the ground. He could hear pieces falling from the bottom of the chest, so he quickly placed the chest directly into the wagon. As he did, pieces of silver and gold clunked against the metal wagon. Then, he turned on the flashlight and propped it so that it shone directly into the hole. He got back on his knees and feverishly felt around the bottom of the hole. He pulled out the coins and jewelry that had fallen from the rotted portion of the chest. He quietly placed these pieces aside the chest in the wagon. He reached again into the dirt hole, hoping to find other coins that had fallen. Instead, he found a rotted piece of parchment. He held it to his eyes to try to read it.

He was about to shine the flashlight on the parchment, when he heard a noise behind him. His heart nearly stopped. Before he could turn

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around, a man spoke in a deep voice, "... that's a good boy. That's a very good boy! Find it all, Mr. Johnson. Pick it all up for me, would you, Mr. Johnson?"

Still on his knees, Jack spun around in horror. He sat back on the ground by the side of the hole, and he looked up in horror.

"I'm very grateful to you, boy, ... very grateful to you, indeed, for finding that for me. I've been looking for that since 1632, boy. Now, pick it all up nice for me, like a good boy, would you now?"

Jack grabbed the flashlight and pointed the light toward the man. The light shone eerily on the face that needed no extra frightening effect. It was pale white, with deep wrinkles, and nearly half of it was covered with a huge red discoloration.

"Mr. Scoggins?"

"...so good to see you again, Mr. Johnson."

"My God!" Jack said. He exhaled so forcefully that his strength seemed to leave his body with his breath.

"Ohhhhh, no, no, noooo, Mr. Johnson. I am far-r-r-r-r from your God ... far, far, farrrr from your God, Mr. Johnson. Don't confuse me with anything about your God! I gave up on your God in 1629."

Horrified, Jack said nothing.

"You see, Mr. Johnson, we were persecuted in England. ... Still the Catholic influence, you know? It was still there, still cropping up on the isle. We did a short stint in Holland, Mr. Johnson, but it was here that we wanted to worship the way we chose. We came here, Mr. Johnson ... settled north of the Plymouth colony, Mr. Johnson ... north of where your celebrated Pilgrims had settled, Mr. Johnson ... in the area that you people now call Boston or Salem. It didn't take many of us long to

ask ourselves, though, Mr. Johnson, an important question, ... namely ... for what, Mr. Johnson? ... why settle here? ... for a hard life with no pleasure, Mr. Johnson? ... so we could all die in these hard winters, Mr. Johnson? ... a stark life with no joy, Mr. Johnson? ... hard work all day so we could sit in a church on our day of rest, Mr. Johnson? ... so we could be a shining 'city on a hill,' Mr. Johnson? ... is that what our great God had to offer us, Mr. Johnson? ... that was the payback for the sacrifices we made, Mr. Johnson? ... oh no, no, no, ... somehow that didn't seem very appealing, Mr. Johnson." Scoggins nodded toward the wagon. "What you have in your wagon there, Mr. Johnson, ... now that is appealing, ... it does shine, Mr. Johnson, ... certainly a lot more than some holy 'city on a hill,' and it can buy a lot more happiness, Mr. Johnson ... it can buy a lot more pleasure, Mr. Johnson ... that is what it's about, Mr. Johnson," Scoggins said pointing to the chest of treasure. "... some glitter, some flash, some pleasures of the flesh to go along with it, Mr. Johnson ... comfort, enjoyment, ... don't ever minimize it, Mr. Johnson ... that's the real heaven, Mr. Johnson. You have to find it here, on earth, Mr. Johnson ... and there is a way to enjoy it after earth as well, Mr. Johnson, as you see today." Scoggins lifted his arms out to the sides, as if to say, "see, here I am."

"But you were a key member of the church? ... probably a stockholder in the Massachusetts Bay Company as well."

Scoggins laughed a deep, hoarse laugh. "Ohhhh, that I was, Mr. Johnson. That I was, ... a church leader ... and a shareholder in the great Massachusetts Bay Company. I was part of the original General Court, Mr. Johnson. ... part of the original representative government that you 21st-century Americans all worship now. But being around all these red-skinned heathen, Mr. Johnson, with all these natural resources all around us, Mr. Johnson, ... natural resources that could be translated into shiny gold, Mr. Johnson ... that wears on you, Mr. Johnson ... it wears you down," he said, nodding toward Jack. "These heathen had all these natural resources, like a little Garden of Eden, Mr. Johnson." He nodded again at Jack. "While we had to struggle for our lives ... we were God's people, Mr. Johnson, and they were the heathen, Mr.

Johnson. They had the Garden of Eden, Mr. Johnson, and we had suffering and painful death. That showed us something, Mr. Johnson. Many of us decided that we didn't have to live such a hard life, Mr. Johnson ... that showed us that there was more to life than hard work and hard pews ... you know what I mean, Mr. Johnson? It showed us that there was more than just God, Mr. Johnson."

Jack simply stared back with a blank face. "But you spoke before as if you were a God-fearing person," he muttered. "You served your Church."

"... all of us were God-fearin' persons, Mr. Johnson. ... all of us were. ... but the woods, the stark life, surrounded by savages, danger, no signs of civilization, Mr. Johnson. Many of us asked, 'why? ... why endure all this? ... so we could live simply, serve God, and give back to the Massachusetts Bay Company, Mr. Johnson?'" He again nodded at Jack. "We wanted more, Mr. Johnson. The savages had better lives than we did, Mr. Johnson. God should have given us more. He turned His back on us, ... so ... so we turned our backs on Him, Mr. Johnson, ... we went elsewhere, Mr. Johnson, ... and we took what we wanted ... we didn't have to ask for it from an unmerciful God."

"Elsewhere?" Jack sputtered.

"Ha-ha-haaaaa!" Scoggins laughed. "C'mon, Mr. Johnson. Don't be so naïve, Mr. Johnson. You're a history buff, Mr. Johnson, right? ...Elsewhere! ... we went elsewhere!"

"The – the Salem Witches' Trials weren't until the 1690s," Jack muttered.

Scoggins smiled a broad smile, and he looked condescendingly at Jack. "Very good, Mr. Johnson. ... Very good! Ahhhh, yes, I never saw those trials, Mr. Johnson, but fortunately, I was able to read about them in my visit to your world, Mr. Johnson. ... a very sad occurrence, wouldn't you say?"

“Yes ... yes, it was,” Jack said quietly.

“Yes, of course it was, Mr. Johnson. And your world still attributes these trials to all sorts of psychological and sociological forces; don’t they, Mr. Johnson? ... repressed sexual desires? ... overly rigid social controls? ... all of that, Mr. Johnson. Ha-Haaaaaa!” Scoggins laughed mockingly. “... anything to hide the stark reality of what really happened, Mr. Johnson! Your world can’t really deal with the reality of it, Mr. Johnson. The reality is, Mr. Johnson, that many of us chose, ... very consciously chose, Mr. Johnson, ... to take what satan offered instead of what your God delivered, Mr. Johnson. It was really a very rational decision, Mr. Johnson, ... one based on very solid calculations, Mr. Johnson. You know about cost and benefit analysis, Mr. Johnson. ...It was a wise decision, Mr. Johnson. And we made that choice long before the Salem trials, Mr. Johnson, ... and certainly in many places other than Salem, Mr. Johnson, ... including around the Connecticut River Valley and right here, Mr. Johnson, ... yes, including right around here, Mr. Johnson. Of course, I wasn’t around to see all that happen, Mr. Johnson, as you know, Mr. Johnson, because you helped put an end to my stay, Mr. Johnson, but I have other ways of knowing. In any event, Mr. Johnson, forget about the psychology and sociology. We made a cold, calculating decision, Mr. Johnson. There was no payoff with your God, Mr. Johnson. ... no reward ... we left Him behind.”

Jack stared in silence at Scoggins. “I-I don’t believe in satan,” he said.

Scoggins snickered in a high pitch. “Of course, you don’t, Mr. Johnson. Of course, you don’t. I think you told me that before, Mr. Johnson, didn’t you? There aren’t many in your world that still do, Mr. Johnson. Your world is too sophisticated for satan, Mr. Johnson,” he said sarcastically. “You’re too well educated, ... too wise, to believe in satan. You think of him as some cute little red creature with a tail and a spear; don’t you, Mr. Johnson? ... a creation of your uneducated ancestors? He’s a mascot for your sports teams, isn’t he? Ha-ha-haaaaa, very good, Mr. Johnson. Very good-d-d-d! ... shrewd! ... You’re smart

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... your world is very smart, Mr. Johnson.” The cynical smile vanished from Scoggins’ face. “What you don’t know, though, Mr. Johnson, is that my lord and master is a little more shrewd and a little more sophisticated than your world thinks he is.”

Now trembling, Jack continued to sit on the ground next to the wagon containing the treasure.

“Anyway, it’s been nice chatting with you again, Mr. Johnson. I’d like to ask you now to take a look at that little piece of parchment in your hand. Can you make out what it says, Mr. Johnson? Can you read it to me, please, Mr. Johnson?”

Jack looked at the parchment. Then, he looked up at the figure of Mr. Scoggins. He said nothing. He directed the light from the flashlight onto it.

“Would you please read what it says, Mr. Johnson!” Scoggins commanded in a threatening voice. “I really don’t have the patience to ask you again.”

“It, uhhh ... it has two names on it,” Jack said, squinting to focus his eyes.

“Precisely, Mr. Johnson. ... precisely, Mr. Johnson, ...two names. ... And I believe that those two names refer to the owners of all that treasure you have there.”

Jack looked at the treasure and then again at Scoggins.

Scoggins pierced the quiet of the night with his command. “THE NAMES, MR. JOHNSON!! READ THE NAMES! ... OUT LOUD, MR. JOHNSON!”

His voice quivering, Jack meekly read the names, “Leonard ... Leonard Scoggins, and ... and ... John Blackstone.”

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“Exactly! Exactly! Very good, Mr. Johnson! ... Very well done! Seeee, so you can read that old colonial writing after all, Mr. Johnson! You didn’t need to rely on me after all! Very good! Very good! So I think you see, Mr. Johnson, that you are filling your little red wagon here with something that rightfully belongs to me, ... me and my brother, that is. Actually, while I had been trying to figure out who had killed my brother for all these forty years in your world, Mr. Johnson, I had another little hobby to keep me occupied. I had been trying to figure out where this little treasure might be. That was my little hobby, Mr. Johnson. You see, Mr. Johnson, my brother and I were businessmen. We invested in a little venture to take money from those Papal fools, the Spanish. We planned to use that money to finance a little nicer lifestyle for ourselves, something more than hard work and prayer could bring, Mr. Johnson, ... something for our older years, Mr. Johnson, ... of course, we didn’t plan on you and your Indian friend taking those years from us, Mr. Johnson.”

Jack simply stared back at him.

“What you are looking at, right there, Mr. Johnson, ... that’s our share ... our rightful share from this little venture. It was being delivered to us, Mr. Johnson ... but you and your Indian friend had to destroy that, as well. We invested in that venture, Mr. Johnson, and what you have there is our rightful return on our investment. It’s just a little business transaction, Mr. Johnson. ... you understand business, right, Mr. Johnson?”

Jack nodded.

“Don’t feel bad, Mr. Johnson. It’s probably taken from some heathen Aztec or Inca tribe, Mr. Johnson ... or maybe from some other people that the Spanish tried to convert to Christianity by pointing their guns at them. I ask you again, Mr. Johnson, did you ever consider why all these heathen would have all these riches, while good Christians had so little, Mr. Johnson?”

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Still sitting silently, Jack shook his head “no.”

Scoggins ignored the “no.” “Little did I think, Mr. Johnson, that in finding my brother’s murderer, I would also be finding the treasure that was rightfully mine. My lord is good, Mr. Johnson. He’s very good to me.” Scoggins paused and looked deeply into Jack’s eyes. He pointed one of his crooked, knobby-knuckled fingers directly at Jack. “Of course, Mr. Johnson, he could be to you as well ... to you, too, Mr. Johnson.”

Jack shivered at Scoggins’ words.

Scoggins ignored Jack’s response. “And how did you find my little pot of profit here, Mr. Johnson? ... your friend, Mantoos, I presume?”

“You are sick!” Jack said defiantly.

“Sick?! ... Ohhhhhh, no ... no ... noooo, Mr. Johnson, I beg to differ. It is you who are sick, Mr. Johnson ... you and your 21st-century liberal ideas. You continue to subscribe to this warped notion that the poor Indians were defiled by Europeans’ greed and lust. Quite the contrary, Mr. Johnson, these poor Indian victims of yours were only too willing to take part in this game of money, jewels and human pleasure. They’d steal from each other; they’d deal with the Dutch to try to get the best return they could; they’d play us off against the Dutch. The noble Indians weren’t always so noble, Mr. Johnson, and the noble Indians were not the innocent victims you make them out to be. They were eager to surrender their Garden of Eden for more, Mr. Johnson. They eagerly joined with us in this quest for material pleasures, Mr. Johnson, and who can blame them for that? Your liberal views are too black and white, Mr. Johnson, too simplistic to describe the reality of it all, too naïve to understand what really happened.”

Jack blinked and swallowed hard, as if he were trying to swallow Scoggins’s words. He changed the subject to one that was no less sensitive, “I thought that you were killed on Owanu Island.”

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“Yes, you thought correctly, Mr. Johnson. I was. I was killed, at least from your world I was. It was not a fair death, Mr. Johnson. There was a little intervention there, Mr. Johnson, ... by your cursed God, Mr. Johnson. That kind of intervention is a little against the rules of the game, Mr. Johnson. It’s not too often that your God pulls that kind of stunt. Of course, the normal rules have not applied to the interactions between you and me very much, have they, Mr. Johnson?”

Jack frowned and shook his head.

“Nevertheless, I have a little power on my side as well, Mr. Johnson. Let me just say that my body was killed there on Owanu Island, but those of us who have really committed ourselves to our lord and master can live on, Mr. Johnson, ... forever. You just don’t see us very often, Mr. Johnson ... like you are today. You don’t see us the way you can today. We usually have more subtle ways of having an influence.”

“And was that Mantoos who shot you?”

“Yes, ... yes, of course it was, Mr. Johnson ... your noble savage shot me. I thought that you knew that. You and he seem to have a talent for shooting people. It’s really too bad that he did that, Mr. Johnson, isn’t it? ... because I was about to send you to meet your Maker, and maybe your beloved Mantoos along with you. I was about to send you to your little afterlife celebration ... such as it is to be with your God.”

Jack said nothing.

Scoggins continued, “It’s not really yours to know, Mr. Johnson, but let me just say that what your boy, Mantoos, did, Mr. Johnson, was also a violation of the rules. He is not supposed to appear in this life to do something like that – not after his death. He caught me by surprise with that little stunt. I guess there was an exception made because of who I am. As I said, you just can’t trust your God to always follow the rules, Mr. Johnson. I guess that my being allowed to be here is a little payback for that, ... a little payback from my lord, Mr. Johnson. You

see, Mr. Johnson, I am not supposed to appear like this either. I guess that you could say that I have some special permission from my lord.”

“And what now?” Jack asked. “Will you disappear from my life?”

“... from your life, Mr. Johnson?” He snickered condescendingly. “You mean if you have a life after this, Mr. Johnson? Let me answer your question in this fashion, Mr. Johnson. You see, ... actually, I am on a little mission tonight. There is a reason why I have been given special permission to visit you in this manner. I am authorized, and I am willing, to let you have that money there, money which is rightfully mine, as you know, ... if you enter in league with me and my colleagues. For as much as you and I have been adversaries, Mr. Johnson, as much as you have wrecked our well-laid plans, ... I have admired ... I and my colleagues have admired ... your grit ... your spunk through the past few days. You have shown that you have some loyalty and some courage. And you are certainly not one of those holier-than-thou church-goers. We could use some of your attributes.”

“And how do I do that?” Jack asked. “How do I get to keep this money?”

“Well, Mr. Johnson, first of all, you are in a good place already. You work in a large corporation. It has a major impact on a lot of people’s lives. We like corporations, Mr. Johnson. The Massachusetts Bay Company was small potatoes compared to the modern day corporation, Mr. Johnson. You’ve really got some global reach today, Mr. Johnson. Today, big corporations are everywhere, and they are powerful. They often get great riches for doing very ungodly things, Mr. Johnson. We like that. In turn, they can reward their employees for doing things that make your precious God shudder, Mr. Johnson. Frankly, my people find that whole arrangement quite titillating.”

Jack simply listened.

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“Now, we know that you are in trouble with The UPROSEC Group, Mr. Johnson. We can fix that ... very easily. Or we can fix you up in some other company with a nice lucrative job, but you need to follow our values, our rules, our policies, Mr. Johnson. You need to subscribe to our mission.”

“Your values,” Jack repeated, “... your mission?” He looked at the coins and jewelry in the wagon, “...and this treasure? ...what happens with this treasure?”

“Why ... it’s yours, of course, Mr. Johnson, ... so long as you choose to join us. From me, and of course from my brother too, Mr. Johnson.” He pointed his knobby finger at Jack again, “... to you, Mr. Johnson. ... to do with as you please. ... maybe a new car, Mr. Johnson? ... a new boat? ... a new house? ... maybe some pretty ladies on the side, Mr. Johnson? ... some sharp clothes? ... tickets to any entertainment event you want? ... some travel? ... see some glamorous places, Mr. Johnson? ... It’s all up to you, Mr. Johnson. It’s called freedom, Mr. Johnson. ...Sound pretty good, Mr. Johnson? ... lots of reward for not much risk, Mr. Johnson. As a financial analyst, you surely can recognize a sweet deal when you see one.”

“And if I don’t, Mr. Scoggins? ... if I don’t take the deal?”

“Are you crazy? Why would you not take it? Well, let’s see, Mr. Johnson. Do you care about your family at all? Do you want your kids, your spouse, to have a good life? ... fun? ... happiness? ... relief from worry about bills and debt? ... Hmmm, this sounds like a pretty tough decision, Mr. Johnson ... a real dilemma ... a real tough one, huh? ... Mr. Johnson?”

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