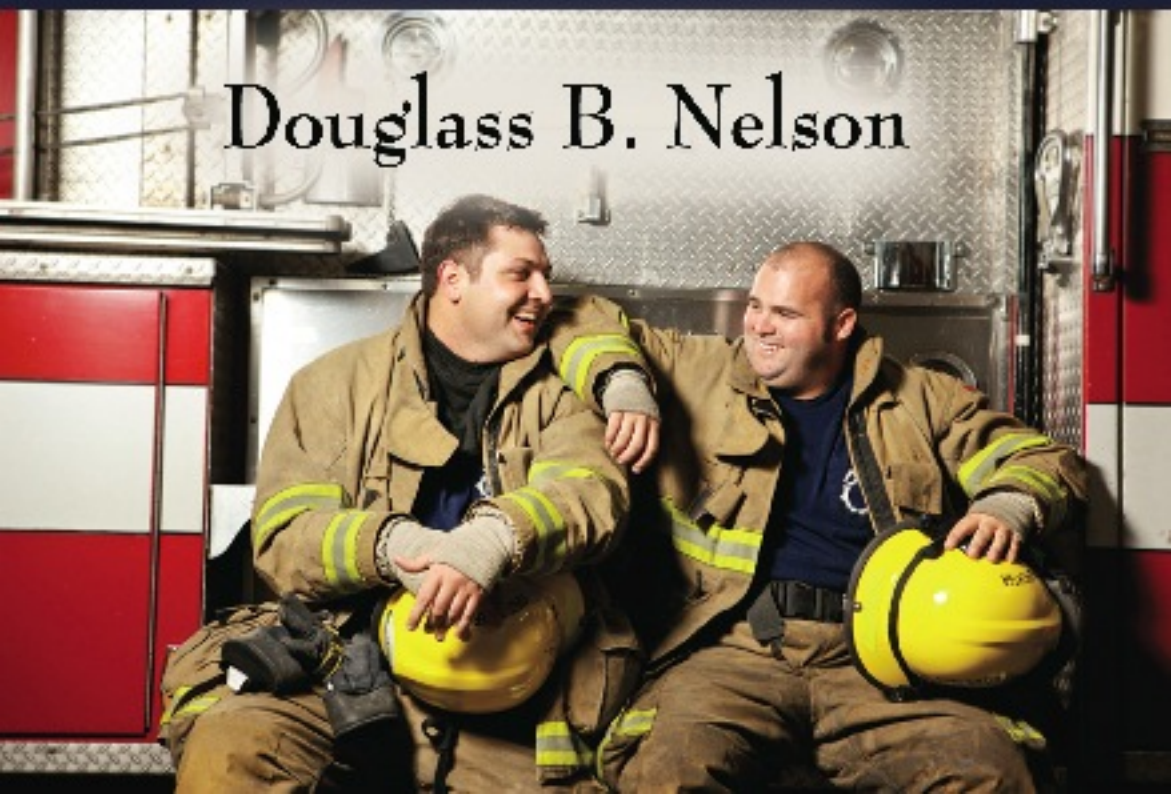
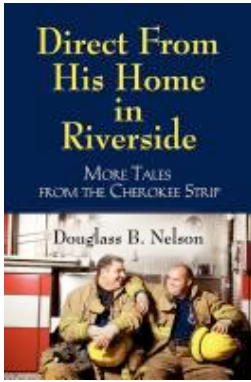


Direct From His Home in Riverside

MORE TALES
FROM THE CHEROKEE STRIP

Douglass B. Nelson





Small town America in the 60's was not all picket fences and elm trees. There were also fires and the firemen who fought them. Most of them were men who fought in the Second World War. This time, however, they fought not for their country, but for their neighbors, and against one of man's most ancient enemies. It could be grim, but not always. There was also laughter, love, and a touch of boyish madness.

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Douglass Nelson

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Chapter 2

The Weather Makers

It was now the second week of the new school year. ‘Colonel’ Ed Dawson stood before our class, and my childhood fears about monsters and scary movies slipped away. Unlike them, this one was for real. My two friends and I had now realized that the snowball incident of last year had been a great mistake, and the fates had arranged payment.

He dominated the room like a Tiki god come to life. A pair of tiny glasses fronted beady eyes, mounted in a blockish head covered with short, gray bristle. His teeth were horse-sized and slightly yellow. Wedge shoulders anchored arms big as cranes, and his torso and legs looked like something out of a dinosaur movie. And yet, oddly enough, his white, bushy moustache made him entirely familiar. Indeed, it was just as if Teddy Roosevelt had stepped fresh out of a history book.

We all knew him by voice and reputation. Radio personality (WHAV’s weatherman), Retired Army Colonel (Armored battalion), Amateur scientist (He made his own weather instruments and hooked up his home to the radio station), and Bakery Delivery Driver. It was said that he often went over to the high school to assist the coach when the football players got out of line.

He also had a few pursuits we could never prove, but we were certain he did. Waterfront bouncer. Lumberjack. Mafia enforcer. Slaver. TV wrestler. Shark hunter.

In point of fact, as the days and weeks went on, we found out that he really wasn’t that bad of a guy.

Oh, he bellowed a lot, and he had a habit of throwing his arms as if launching a spear at you when he made a point. There were also numerous times when he would drop in some archaic word or phrase from bygone ages, forcing us to haul out ponderous dictionaries once we got home.

He had an unnerving habit of striding up to your desk while talking, and looming over it like a ship over a rowboat. It guaranteed attention. But all in all, he was still one of the more interesting teachers

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I had encountered. Often, with his rolling eyes and windmill arms, he made us laugh, which is pretty amazing for an English instructor.

Even today, I can still close my eyes and hear him, underlining the words in mid-air.

“Every poem is a STORY!” He would pronounce. “The words rhyme so you’ll keep the story STRAIGHT! There is a pattern and a rhythm in EVERY line, so the story will never CHANGE!”

Then he would make us memorize and recite obscure, horribly long poems like ‘Gunga Din’, or ‘The Cremation of Sam McGee’. I can still remember standing behind my chair and pushing it like it was a dogsled, and cracking my whip over the huskies. Meanwhile, he made the rest of the class look up at the ceiling and try to see the Northern Lights.

He would describe Shakespeare himself, and how he and his actors had to be actual swordsmen, since the audience would heckle them if they made clumsy moves on the stage and didn’t get the lines right.

Don’t get me wrong, though. On most days, we feared his arrival. Historians might argue over the ancestry of Ghengis Khan, but we knew who his great-great-great grandson was.

He was merciless on spelling.

He was evil on punctuation.

He would foam at the mouth over our grammar, and he used to produce a magnifying glass with a flourish to decipher our homework or test scrawls.

“You might hate me for the rest of your lives!” He would proclaim, stabbing a blunt finger to the ceiling. “But you WILL understand the difference between a predicate normative and a gerundive phrase!”

Special attention was given to Dave, Carl, and myself. The Three Musketeers. He hadn’t forgotten the snowball incident. Often, he would pause in his musings to sweep a hand in our direction and say, “Perhaps we can get the answer we seek from Athos, Porthos, or Aramis, over there in the corner. Gentlemen, would you care to provide?”

Most times, we couldn’t, and there would be sniggers all around.

Worse yet, the rest of the school began to take up the nickname as well, changing it to suit the humor of the moment. The Three Jerkateers

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was one of them. Then there was the Three Dumbateers, or the Three Foolateers, or The Three Stoogeteers

History books go into complex and detailed reasons about the origins of war. Economics, lack of resources, overpopulation, religious differences, or what have you. None of them mention what I think is the most basic reason of all: Payback.

We owed him.

One afternoon found us sitting morosely at the lunch table, still wincing over the morning's session. Frost was appearing on the ground nearly every morning, and now the leaves were falling. So were our spirits.

"Diagramming sentences!" Growled Dave, stabbing a green bean with his fork. "Whoever heard of taking a sentence and making a blueprint out of it? And for what?"

I was poking at something in the main square in my tray, still trying to figure out if it was meat. It had the size, shape, and texture of a tire patch. School lunches were never mistaken for haute' cuisine.

I nodded my agreement. "Whoever invented the idea, they gotta be feeding him under the door!"

"Blueprint, nothing!" Carl was peering at the writing on his milk carton. "They look more like spider webs. What's the sense of it anyway?"

Dave threw out his chest and sunk his head down into his shoulders, squinching his face into that famous leer.

"Everything that works must be broken down into its component parts for UNDERSTANDING!" He intoned, giving a passable imitation of our tormentor. "This is true of automobiles! It is true of jets and rockets! It is especially true of the English Language. To work, scivlings!"

He cracked an invisible whip.

It was close enough to make us laugh and groan.

"I wish there was something we could do about him," I said, chewing on a piece of the tire patch. "We can't go through the whole year like this."

"It's a shame we're not commandos like that TV show," nodded Carl. "It'd be fun to blow him up like some Kraut tank!"

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“Yeah, wouldn’t that be something!” I made motions like lighting a match to a fuse. “A bundle of dynamite sticks just under the rear axle. –Boom!” We both chuckled, and then subsided. Mr. Jucas, the lunchroom monitor, was looking our way. His summer job was a mortician’s assistant.

Carl suddenly raised his head, his eyes glowing.

“Hey guys!” He breathed. “A commando raid! Why not?”

“C’mon, Carl. Where we gonna get the dynamite?”

“No, no, no!” He rejoined, shaking his head and his finger. “We don’t blow up his tank. We don’t blow up his car. What we do is raid his house!” He leaned forward, close to the table’s surface, motioning us to do the same. His face twisted into one of his grins. “And then, comrades, we blow up his broadcast!”

Dad was never easy when Carl was around.

Just over a week and a half later was Saturday night. It was cold, cloudy, and misty. Almost ready to rain or even snow, but not quite. Our three bicycles ghosted their way across Groveland Street.

Well, maybe they were bicycles to some observer, but to us, they were modified Cessna Raiders, engines off and swooping down to an abandoned pasture next to the Nazi base. The guards were dozing off the French wine they had stolen from the village. Still, it was necessary to move quietly, and follow the rehearsed plan to the letter.

Once we landed, we carefully positioned our craft for a quick, clean getaway. When the fuel tanks, the ammo dump, and the weather station were all blown, we had to be away quickly.

It didn’t take any make-believe to make me nervous on this mission.

An integral part of any boyhood is a lively imagination, but there is a touch of insanity as well. Dad was on duty at the fire station, and thought I was at Dave’s house with Carl, playing a popular board game that was called, ‘Risk’. I was ashamed and fearful, for no boy likes deceiving his sire. It is morally wrong, and more importantly, dangerous. Very dangerous.

If Dad had the slightest notion of what we were doing, the next morning would find a Doug-shaped hole through the kitchen wall. This,

my older brother often told me, is what proves Darwinism again and again.

Gladys and Andrea, my sisters, would agree.

We approached the fence, and I held up my hand for a final check. Carl was the leader, but I was the organizer. Driven by fear as well as my extensive readings of World War II, I had insisted on rehearsals. Now, I was doing it all over again, in spite of the snarls of my companions. Nothing could be left to chance. Especially if Dad might get involved.

“Okay Carl, what have you got?” I whispered.

“C’mon, Nelson. Don’t be stupid! I’ve got the canteen and the funnel, right here!” He sloshed it for emphasis, and then reached into his pocket and showed me a length of heavy twine. “I fill up the rain gauge, and then I tie up the weather vane.”

“Which way?”

“Straight at the church steeple!”

“Okay. Dave?”

Dave snorted his own impatience, and reached into the haversack that was slung over one shoulder and snugged against his waist with another piece of twine. It was actually a woman’s purse, salvaged from a trash can, but ideal for the mission. He reached in and held up his stuff. “Two candles, one for backup. My mom’s cigarette lighter, and matches for backup. One length of copper wire, and here’s the rag for a handle. I light the candle, heat the wire, and hold it against the sensor for the thermometer. I keep the candle flame against the wire.”

“Right. And don’t forget to keep between the candle and the edge of the roof. We don’t want Dawson to see the glow!”

Carl prodded my arm. “How about you, genius?”

I reached over my shoulder and into the light pack I used for Scout hikes. I held up the Flit gun I had obtained just for this very night. The tank of bug spray was removed and left at home, giving me a light, easily held piston that would deliver a healthy puff of air every time I pumped the handle. “I take care of the wind speed and watch for the sentries!” I stated.

“Don’t forget the radio!” Carl hissed.

“Not at all!” I reached back into the pack and brought out the transistor radio I had ‘borrowed’ from my brother’s drawer. Wrapped around it was a long, thin wire with the earplug attached. I held it up. “Fresh batteries and the needle’s set spang on AM 1490. Station’s so close we won’t even have to extend the antenna. WHAV is loud and clear!”

“Great. How about the ladder?”

“Back of the fence. Stashed it there last night.”

“Okay. Let’s get it.”

I held up my hand. “Hold it! Let’s put our socks on now.”

Both of them nodded, and we all took our spare socks from our pockets. They were large, heavy, winter socks normally used for ski boots. We slipped them over our sneakers. Not quite as good as moccasins, but good enough to mask the sounds of our feet on the roof.

I was proud of the idea. We had done several rehearsals on my garage roof, with one of us standing inside and listening. After a while, we could make our way along without a sound.

We finished putting on our socks and stood up. This was the moment. Up till now, we could get back on our bikes, ride away, and nothing would have happened, and nothing would be said. We could even have a game of Risk for real. But Dave broke the spell and pushed us over the edge.

Putting his hand on his chest and tucking in his chest, he pointed to the sky, assuming a well-known pose.

“English is the language of EMPIRE!” He intoned. “Empires are founded by leaders of vision, drive, and purpose!”

We both joined in, keeping it all at a whisper, but voicing the shout of a warrior horde. “To conquer the VISION, you must conquer the LANGUAGE! Forward!”

We dashed down the length of the fence, sniggering laughter and delighting in our mad courage. After all, it was his own words that led us up to this, so you could say it was his fault.

The ladder was where I had left it. It was a simple affair of salvaged two-by-fours and a few old tomato plant stakes, sawed off and constructed in just a few minutes. It was rough, but sturdy and expendable. Within moments, we had it over the fence and resting

against the edge of Dawson's roof. Last to climb, I took a final look around. The Resistance had done their work well. The German sentries were all deep in their wine-sodden slumber.

The roof had a shallow slope, and the shingles were rough and reassuring in their grittiness. There would be no slipping with our feet. Just to be sure, we made our way up the roof's slope on hands and feet like cautious spiders, and we were soon at the peak, among the guy wires and struts of Dawson's array. A light breeze was making the chill all the more colder, but it was still bearable. It was dark as well, but there was enough illumination from a streetlight.

Carl pointed at me and then down towards the edge of the roof. I crabbed down the slope and looked over the edge.

"Perfect!" I whispered back. "The light's off in his den window. We got plenty of time!"

Carl nodded and motioned, and I scrambled back up to the mast, which was topped by the short, broad arrow of the weather vane, lazily swinging from one side to another. Below it and off to one side on a small branch or yardarm, the slowly turning cups of the anemometer were visible. Grabbing the mast with one hand, I reached back into my pack and turned on the radio, placing the tiny earplug to my ear.

Lawrence Welk had all the oldsters of Haverhill firmly in his grasp. Right now, he was driving them to the height of passion, tapping their feet and humming along with his four daughters, sisters, or whatever. Had to be 1930 or so. Just about the time the last of the dinosaurs had been hunted down.

Sighting on the church steeple that was visible against the horizon, Carl spun the arrow around to point right at it, and then passed loops of twine over its center. Seconds later, he had the ends of the twine wrapped around the supporting shaft, binding them tightly and making the arrow rigid.

Meanwhile, it took Dave four tries to get the candle lit.

"Some Boy Scout!" I whispered.

Dave answered with a sailor's advice on my future love life, and then held the flame itself up to the short, stubby cylinder of the sensor, instead of using the copper wire. I cautioned him about holding the

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flame too close, and he gave me some more nautical wisdom, but he complied.

Abruptly, Carl pointed down. We could see a sudden rectangle of light on the fence as Mr. Dawson entered his den. I stood up and leaned to the left, pointing my flit gun at the anemometer and pumping furiously. The cups began to spin. I grinned and whispered, "This is it!"

Carl reached over and plucked away the radio, yanking out the earplug wire. "We gotta hear this!"

"Don't make it too loud! He'll hear us!"

"Naw he won't! Keep pumping!"

"Don't forget the water!"

"I'm doing it!" There was a slosh and gurgle as Carl spilled some of it from his canteen, but he soon had a good flow going down the funnel. After a few moments, he stopped, peered, and nodded. He was holding the radio at chest height.

There was a fair amount of hiss, but we could clearly hear the sad state of the world. Many people were saying the new President was too young for the job. Castro had taken over Cuba, and it looked like he really was a Communist. Russia had launched Sputnik, and they would soon be on the moon.

Then came the magic words.

"AND NOW, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, DIRECT FROM HIS HOME IN RIVERSIDE! HAVERHILL'S OWN ED DAWSON WITH THE WEATHER REPORT! WHAT HAVE YOU GOT FOR US, ED?"

Even with the dinky little speaker, Ed Dawson's rich, mellow voice was easy to pick out.

"GOOD EVENING, FRANK, AND HELLO OUT THERE, FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS OF OUR FAIR CITY OF HAVERHILL! THE WEATHER LOOKS UNUSUAL TONITE..." There was a long pause. "YES, YES, VERY UNUSUAL INDEED..."

We covered our mouths and choked. Momentarily distracted, I went back to pumping.

"MY, MY, MY! VERY UNUSUAL, FRANK! THE WIND'S FROM THE SOUTHEAST, GUSTING AT, GOOD HEAVENS! IT'S GUSTING AT 55 MILES AN HOUR! THAT'S VERY UNUSUAL!"

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AND THE TEMPERATURE! IT'S OVER 84 DEGREES AND STILL RISING! I HAVE NEVER SEEN THAT AT THIS TIME OF YEAR!"

Now his voice had a small, gobbling quality, as if he had just swallowed a life saver candy.

"MY STARS! THE RAIN! ER, ER, THAT IS, THE PRECIPITATION! SEVEN POINT THREE INCHES! IN THREE HOURS! BUT... BUT...!"

"IS THERE SOMETHING WRONG, ED?" The radio announcer was sounding worried.

Doubled over, Carl almost toppled, due to the angle of the roof. I was blowing my nose messily over my hands, which were firmly clamped over my mouth. Dave was in silent hysterics, his shoulders heaving with mirth. We were making weather for the whole Merrimack Valley!

Regaining his leadership, Carl pointed and whispered, "Come on! We've accomplished the mission! Let's get out of here!"

Giggling and chortling, we made our way back to the ladder.

In his haste, Carl nearly knocked the ladder over, but managed to grab it and bring it back upright. It made a horrid, grating rasp against the roof's edge. My hair stood up.

Ed Dawson was still talking.

"NO FRANK, I GUESS NOT. THE WIND'S JUST NOW DIED DOWN TO ZERO! THE DIRECTION'S HOLDING STEADY AT SOUTH, SOUTH EAST, AND THE TEMPERATURE'S JUST NOW STARTING TO DROP. STILL HIGHLY UNUSUAL, THOUGH. AND THE PRECIPITATION! I CAN'T BELIEVE IT!

SURELY WE WOULD HAVE HEARD IT... WAIT A MINUTE! THERE'S SOMETHING ON THE ROOF! I CAN HEAR..."

Oh Oh.

Carl went first down the ladder, then me. Dave stomped on one of my fingers as he followed, and I cussed.

"Never mind! Never Mind! Come on, let's go! Go! Go! Go!"

Carl still had the radio on, and things were getting dire.

"FRANK, I THINK WE HAVE TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES! I THINK SOME SQUIRRELS HAVE GOTTEN INTO THE

INSTRUMENTS! I'LL BE IN TOUCH! THIS IS ED DAWSON, SIGNING OFF FOR NOW!"

Well, the ammo dump was blown, and there were flames and exploding mayhem all over the base. Gray-clad soldiers were swarming out of their barracks, machine guns and bayonets held high. We hopped over the fence like gazelles and pelted to our bikes.

Start engines! Clear for take-off! Everyone strap in! Don't stop for the wounded! Airborne! Airborne! Let's go! Full Throttle!

A new glare of light sprang up around the corner, and we could hear the back door slam open with a crash. Ed Dawson was on his way, and the panzers were with him.

We split up as soon as we hit the sidewalk, avoiding the search lights and the radar represented by the street light. I headed down towards Race Street, Dave angled on down Groveland, and Carl swung on up Golden Hill Avenue.

"HEY! YOU KIDS! GET BACK HERE!"

The bellow was loud enough to crack the boards off Mr. Vandelli's fence as I whizzed by. A tank's cannon bellowed.

"Hey!" Came the second salvo. "I SAID GET BACK HERE!"

Lights were coming on from both sides of me, and more doors were opening as alerted neighbors investigated the hubbub. It meant that tracers and searchlights were reaching for my plane. I snapped a hard right turn and poured on the coal. My legs were like the blurs you see in those cartoons.

"GET BACK HERE!"

The flak was still loud, but it was fading behind me. I had gotten away without a scratch. The General would be pleased. Now if only the other guys had made it out. I looked up at the clouds and felt the wind against my face. It was a night to remember.

All during the following day, I see-sawed between triumph and fear. Sometimes in mid step, I would grin. We had pulled it off! We had changed the broadcast history of Haverhill! Then with the very next step, my heart would thud. I would turn my head around every time a car come down Spruce Street. At any moment, I expected a police cruiser to swing into our driveway.

Then came Monday.

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The school day was normal. Ed Dawson covered the blackboard with diagrams and definitions, obscuring the original sentences. I still didn't know how this became part of the language arts, but I was pretty sure the King or Queen of England would have hanged whoever came up with the idea.

The other classes all proceeded as usual as well, but when the final bell rang, Mr. Dawson dropped the bomb.

"Class dismissed. Mr. Barth, Mr. Bonnel, and Mr. Nelson, you will remain here for a few minutes."

We shrank in our seats and felt the vibrations of his tread through the floor. There was no escape, and the hangman stood before us, his eyes glittering behind his spectacles.

"Let us dispense with accusations and denials," he rumbled. "Three sets of bicycle tracks leaving my property. Three bicycles parked together in the recess area, a little bit apart from the rest, the way three comrades do. One with grass stains on the front tire, two with mud on the back treads. I also found some candle wax on my roof." He held up a small machine bolt for our perusal. "-And there is this! A common holding bolt found only on the struts supporting the baskets that are mounted on bicycles!"

There was a theatrical pause while he grabbed his chin and looked down at us. "It didn't even take one pipe's worth of deduction to come up with the answer: -My Three Musketeers!"

He leaned down and forward, planting his fists on my desk, but his gaze swept in the three of us.

"Trespassing! Vandalism! Reckless behavior! Willful endangerment of a man's livelihood! Shall I go on?"

We were bumps on a log. My desk creaked as he levered himself back to vertical, and he pointed at the door.

"I could load the three of you into the back seat of my car, and haul you down to the police station right now. -This very instant!" He thundered. Then he lowered his voice with an even more deadly threat. "But I think a few phone calls to your fathers might be more productive. -Don't you?"

We were still bumps on a log, but we shrank further. I could see three fresh graves in Linwood Cemetery. They would be under a

common stone with three crossed swords. Heroic, but not desirable. I had a vision of Mr. Jucas standing next to them with a smile.

Ed Dawson spun around and tromped back to his desk.

“But I think not,” He pronounced. “Since I am the injured party in this case, I have the right to set the terms of justice!” He stabbed a finger, and then swept his arm around the classroom. “Wergild! You shall be my thralls! The wastebasket needs to be emptied! The blackboard needs attention! The desks need straightening!”

His head jerked forward, his eyes bulging behind his glasses. “Well don’t just sit there! -Schnell!”

There followed weeks of hard time.

Each day, the blackboard had to be sponged, dried and sponged again. It wasn’t enough to merely make it clean. Every corner, every groove, even the tray for the chalk and erasers had to gleam. The wastebaskets were not simply emptied: They had to be inspected for chewing gum, and the stains had to be scrubbed off. As the last chore of the day, the desks had to be arrayed in arrow-straight lines, and we would stand silently as Mr. Dawson walked the width of the classroom, stooping slightly to measure them with hawk eyes.

This could have gone on forever. Or at least until the end of the school year. But we were saved by our own actions. Or, to be honest, by the actions of a number of us. It was a bunch of us kids, Ed Dawson’s car, and yes indeed, my dear old dad. Fortunately, he never realized it.

Whether it was because he was in financial straits, got sweet-talked by an unscrupulous used car dealer, or simply found it abandoned by the side of the road, I never knew. But our Mr. Dawson had acquired another vehicle. Not a new one. In fact, we all christened it immediately as the Tubercular-car

It was a green ’53 Chevy, a wheezing, chugging ghost of a rig. It only came to life when it approached the steep slope of the drive that led up to the Nettle School parking lot. As we played outside, waiting for the admission bell, we could hear it coming from down the hill and a block away, while it was still out of sight.

Once around the corner down on Boardman Street, Ed would slam it down to low gear and tromp on the gas as he swung onto the entrance

ramp. This would wind the asthmatic engine up to a blating crescendo, making the car lurch and surge its way to the top, where it subsided into a sigh of relief as Ed glided across the lot and into his parking place. Each time sounded like it would be the last.

The first time he did this, two or three of the bravos playing near the top of the ramp raised their fists in an ironic cheer as he went by, and the rest of us nearby laughed. The next day, there were five well-wishers, and the day after that, an even dozen, including me and the other two musketeers.

The following Monday, there were fifty of us. Half the whole class of boys now seemed to be present, stretching down in a double row along both sides of the long slope. An honor guard of anticipation. It was a clear day with fresh snow on the ground, and the cold seemed to carry the sounds of the Tubercular-car even further than usual.

Each of us could mark clearly its progress. It had topped the first hill of Boardman Street, coming up from Groveland Street with a hearty series of blats, and then wheezed as it trundled on down the level stretch towards us.

Abruptly, it snorted its way into view, swinging across the foot of Golden Hill Avenue to hit the ramp leading up to us. Then it hit the base, and then lurched into its familiar chorus. As it surged up between our lines, we all waved our fists, laughing and cheering as we welcomed the Emperor back.

But Ed was not in a good mood that day. He slammed on the brakes, got out, and we all scattered like autumn leaves before his wrath. Dave, Carl and I were careful to split up as we ran. We didn't want him to spot the three of us together again.

For a few moments, he harangued, and shook his fist at us, promising all sorts of retribution, but that only made us laugh all the more. Teacher-baiting was one of the headiest sports imaginable. With a final shout, he got back into his car, slammed the door, and gave the gas a good goose to get going.

But that was too much for the Tubercular-car.

A funny sound caused me to look over my shoulder as I ran. It was an odd cross between a thump and a hiss, and it was then followed by a

slight crackling noise. I could see the car moving the final yards up the hill, and I felt a sudden chill prickle down my back and shoulders.

It had nothing to do with the cold air. Underneath the car, a small nest of pale, yellow flames were sprouting and weaving their way into life. Ed's car was on fire.

Many things happened at once, all too quickly to write down, and all happening faster than the time it would take to read it. Several other boys had seen the same thing I did, and so yells of 'fire!' were raised. Now smoke was pouring out by the barrel, and even Ed realized that something was very wrong. He stopped again, this time bailing out with speed instead of anger. He ran around, popped the hood, and then fell back as a fresh bouquet of flame rose up from the engine. An alarm bell began to sound.

At that crucial moment, Dave Barth had a moment of sheer inspiration that shames me to this day, for I had not thought of it first, and I was the son of a fireman.

"Snow!" He shouted. "Come on!"

I guess I can take partial credit, for I was right behind him, scooping up snow just like he was, and we charged the Tubercular-car. A glance to one side showed Carl doing the same, and then came the sound of a small stampede as another dozen joined the fray.

Like Vikings surrounding a wounded dragon, we had the Tubercular-car enclosed in a running circle, hurling in a tornado of both fresh white and dirty snow gathered from the sides of the lot and the play area. Ed Dawson and a few other teachers shouted at us to keep away, but the battle joy was upon us, and nothing could slow the barrage.

It was really a small fire when all was said and done, but we felt that not even the 1942 Cocoanut Grove fire in Boston could have survived our assault. In moments, it was thoroughly out, and we cheered our victory. Then we heard the sirens.

Dad was coming.

No child of a fireman really wants to be around when a fire is happening. There are too many questions.

As much as I truly admired my father's prowess at fighting fires great and small, I didn't want his keen eye moving from the smoking

ruins of Ed Powers' car and then falling on me. Even when innocent, it is best to not come to trial in the first place. It was time to get to the back of the crowd at least, and do one's best to look like a mere spectator.

Engine One had no trouble at all climbing up the hill, and was soon looming alongside of the Tubercular-car, closely followed by Ladder One and the Combination. Since this was happening at a school, the Inspector was soon on the scene as well. They all peered into the engine well, looked over the car carefully, talked to Ed Powers, pushed the vehicle off to one side, and were soon on their way. Even though well covered by his outfit, helmet, and equipment, I could see Dad easily by his walk and mannerisms, but there was no need to go talk to him.

We were all late for our first class, but nothing was said of the matter. And as far as the rest of the day went, it was pretty much normal. Ed powers bummed a ride home from Miss Nitis, the Geography teacher, and arranged for a tow truck. He got a newer, more reliable car a week or so later.

As for the Three Musketeers...

"I suppose some measure of thanks is in order," he began, rumbling the words around his pipe as he paced to and fro. It was unlit, for even in those days, the powers that be frowned upon smoking in a classroom. This was more for the sake of example rather than health and safety.

We were seated as before. School had just been dismissed for the day, and the three of us were staying behind as usual. So far, by dint of heroic effort and a few casual, misleading hints ("I'm gonna stop at Carl's house on the way home,"), none of our folks had noticed that we seemed to arrive back from school late. This time we had hopes. Freedom? Rewards? Who could say?

"Still," he continued ponderously, "you deliberately disobeyed instructions to stay away from a place of danger. That calls for punishment. -So!" He clapped his hands together, "we'll call it even!" He pointed at the door with a benign smile and a flourish. "Gentlemen, you are free to go! Your sentence is over!"

Direct From His Home In Riverside

We cheered and shook hands with each other as we bounded up from our seats. No gold or beautiful maidens, but a good deal all the same. Just before we reached the door, however, we were halted by one more shout.

“Hold!”

We stopped and turned, facing a now stern and beckoning figure. “One last thing, gentlemen. Attend me please.” He bent and opened the top drawer of his desk as we returned, raising up a small photograph for our inspection.

“As you know,” he continued, “I live alone. My wife has been gone for several years. I’ve been a little bit lonely, lately, and in light of recent events,” here he paused to look at each of us directly. “I’ve decided to acquire an addition to my household.”

It was a picture of a dog, but this creature could never be mistaken for someone’s fluffy-poo. It stood on four limbs like piano legs, topped with a massive chest and a huge head. It was almost split in half by a gaping maw. Two alert ears faced the camera, and the eyes gleamed out us with red menace.

Just for scale, a yard stick leaned up precariously against one shoulder. I didn’t recognize the breed, but it had to be something they used in Africa to hunt rhino.

“His name is Attila,” Mr. Dawson informed us. “Cute little fellow, don’t you think? Feed him ten pounds a day, and he’s still hungry.” The picture dropped back in the drawer and slammed shut.

“He’d welcome some fresh meat. –Especially squirrel meat! Capiche? NOW GET OUT OF HERE!”

We all got home on time, and started our homework right away.

Chapter 11

The Haunted Desk

It was a crisp, tangy Sunday in October, and our family station wagon rattled along the dirt road, leaving a plume of dust behind us. We rounded a bend, and there before me was a vast wasteland of fire, ashes, and ruin. This was Haverhill's city dump. It was smoky, it was smelly, totally unhygienic, and one of my favorite places to visit and explore. And by the way, one of Dad's as well.

The city dump was located across the river from Haverhill, almost squarely between Bradford and Groveland. It had started as a huge sand pit, where the rough, alluvial sands from the glacier ages had been scooped and mined by the ton for many years. Then someone got the idea of using it as a trash dump and landfill, since the sands would block any underground fires resulting from trash burning, and it was out of sight and immediate proximity to settled neighborhoods.

I read somewhere that archaeologists love finding the trash sites of ancient cities. I agree. Mixed in with the innumerable heaps of tin cans, rubble, and burning piles of whatnot, there was a huge assortment of odds and ends fascinating to any boy. Splintered chairs, couches, old truck parts, empty bottles, glass jars, and old containers of every size and shape imaginable. In an offbeat way, it provided a jumble of facts and concepts to be added to my education, for I often spotted an object that was new or strange to me, and Dad would describe to me its origins and purpose, or at least give a reasoned estimate.

There was another reason as well. This was where I could give my bee-bee gun full rein and improve my marksmanship. It was a Daisy lever-action duplicate of the famous Winchester rifle, and was my beloved companion on many expeditions like this one. Psychologists and social do-gooders have long wailed about it, but it's a boy's natural inclination to break things and shoot them up, and a dump was the ideal place to do this in safety. Furthermore, I was an early and avid reader of Dad's war books.

Thus, the dump easily became the ruins of a major German city during the war, and I was riding in the turret of a long-barreled

Sherman, hunting for camouflaged bunkers and hidden tanks. Grown-ups could only see bottles and tin cans, but they were all targets of opportunity to me, and after Dad, my brother and I unloaded the trash, I spent many happy minutes sneaking up on Nazi hold-outs while they poked around elsewhere.

We had to be careful not to step on something sharp, or get too close to the flames, but it was a wonderful place to play. One of my earliest memories was when I was about five or so, and the three of us, Harry, Dad and I, had found a huge old wooden barrel full of ashes and tin cans, and lying on its side. It was close to the edge of a steep drop-off that led to one of lower pits, which was lined with cans and rubble as well. All three of us grunted and heaved with our backs to it, finally pushing and rolling it to the edge, and giving it that final nudge. It created a mighty avalanche, filled with a clanging rumble and roar, totally disintegrating the barrel and spawning a tidal wave of trash and debris. It was the most wonderful sight, sound, and spectacle of my life.

Dad had his own reasons for visiting here. The first was practical: We had a regular trash pick-up service, but my father had reduced the amount long ago by utilizing a fire barrel out in the back yard, where newspapers, boxes, and wood scraps were put to the match. For safety reasons, the dump trucks refused to pick up ashes, and so every two weeks or so, my brother and I would shovel the ashes into one or two trashcans, which we would then haul to the dump.

The second reason was also practical, but only to a certain extent, and it was one of the few points of contention between him and my mother. You see, Dad was a trash-picker.

I never learned if it was the lean days of the Depression, or if he had a natural bent for salvage, but if anything looked repairable or useful, Dad picked it up. Baby carriage wheels, clean pipes, lengths of wire or rope, metal braces, and pieces of angle-iron were never passed by without careful scrutiny. Wood, such as two-by-fours and intact planking were especially prized.

Dad always carried a small tool box in the car, and one of my jobs with him was to remove the nails and place them in a small coffee can he carried along, thus making the wood safer to handle and load into the back of the wagon. Back at home, I had my proud corner in the

garage (The work bench where my brother worked on his model planes and projects was strictly off-limits), where I had my own vise, a small hammer, and a couple of bricks. Taking them out of the coffee can, I would straighten out and restore the bent nails, which Dad sized and added to his nail jars or drawers in the garage.

One of the more famous incidents in our family history was when he discovered a huge propane tank at the dump, so new that it still had the factory stickers on it, and it was clean and pristine. It was also nine feet long and weighed better than a hundred pounds, but Dad simply couldn't leave it there. Between him, Harry and I, we managed to horse it aboard the station wagon and bring it home. It jutted a full four feet out the back like a huge cigar, and I remember sitting on it and holding on to the braces of the car's tailgate, stabilizing it enough to permit us to travel home.

Mother had confronted him on the back porch, broom in hand like the grounded rifle of a resolute sentry, and firmly declared to my sire that that thing would not come into the house. -Ever. It was one of the few times that he ever backed down before my mother. So we put the thing into the garage until Dad could decide what to do with it, and there it had rested for a full five months. Finally, some local kids had knocked over our birdbath one night, breaking the pedestal. It was too low for Mom to see the birds using it from our living room anyway, and it was an easy leap for our cats, who hid in the lilac bushes.

So Dad dug a four-foot hole in the ground, lined it with old bricks, and emplaced the propane tank, which he anchored with poured cement around its base and the buried bricks. A little more cement to secure the basin of the original birdbath to its top, and we had the strongest birdbath in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. -Maybe even the country. It stood there for several years. California Condors could perch on it without difficulty.

By this time, Harry was now in High School and had other concerns and lots of homework, and so on this particular day, it was just Dad and myself as we rattled along. We came out on the level plain the bulldozer kept scraped away, and proceeded to the far end, where we would turn around, back up, and dump out our two barrels. I checked my trusty rifle one last time to make sure it was loaded, and

then opened the glove compartment to ensure I had an extra tube of bee-bees. Yep. I had plenty of ammo. It was going to be a good day.

Suddenly, Dad stood right on the brakes, bringing the station wagon to a fish-tailing halt and nearly bashing my head on the dashboard.

“Well, for Gawd’s sake, son, look at that!” He pointed out the window, and I leaned forward to follow his arm. It was an incredible sight.

About a hundred feet away, sitting upright on a small pile of rubble was an ancient, flat-topped, wooden desk. Made out of dark wood and with shiny brass handles on its drawers, it stood there, polished and gleaming in the afternoon sunlight. Never in my life had I ever seen anything so totally out of place. It was like finding a delicate, pristine lily in the middle of a cattle pen, or coming across an elegant little church, complete with white paint and delicate, lustrous stained glass windows, on one of the docks at the waterfront.

As for my dad, he was stunned. As a man who considered a pile of assorted two-by-fours to be a treasure from a pirate’s island, this thing must have hurt his eyes.

Father was never a fighter pilot, but he made me think of one when he snapped the wagon around. We shot on over to the apparition, thumping and banging the trash barrels we were carrying in back, and came to another swerving halt. We slowly got out and stepped over to examine it.

I had a sudden vision of what Moses must have looked like when he discovered the burning bush. Watching my sire slowly circle the desk, I could see the look of fascinated awe, reverence, and wonder on his face. I would not have been surprised to hear a deep voice come from nowhere and command, “Take off your shoes from your feet, for the ground on which you stand is holy!”

I think Dad would have done it, too.

“Ye gods and little fishes, son, will you just look at that?” he breathed.

I had no appreciation of antiques or fine furniture, but even I could see that this desk was something else. Made of a dark, rich wood, it stood on sturdy, yet finely carved legs. The sheen of its finish could

have only come from many layers of hand-polished wax, and the brass handles glittered brightly enough to look like gold from a pharaoh's tomb.

Three times, my father circled it before he worked up the nerve to reach out and touch it. If he had enough hair on his head, it would have stood on end. Enchanted as he was by its beauty, he was cautious as well. As a veteran of the vicious street fighting in the walled city of Manila during the war, he knew all about booby traps.

On my own because he was totally absorbed, I manfully tilted out and dumped the trash barrels from the back of our vehicle. Dad was now hunkered down in a near squat, duck-walking his way around the desk. I was not sure, but I think he was even sniffing at it.

"Now who the hell would throw this thing away, and why would he do it?" He mumbled.

"Maybe he was drunk?" I suggested.

"Hell, no! If he was that drunk, he wouldn't have been able to drive the thing here!" He retorted.

Again, he circled the desk, peering at it from all angles. He opened each one of the drawers, looking inside, outside, topside, and beneath every one of them. Then he slid each drawer in and out several times, testing it for smoothness of action and to verify it had a snug fit.

Abruptly, he went over to the station wagon and rummaged in the toolbox, returning with his tape measure. First he measured the top, the length, and the sides of the desk, as well as its height, all the while muttering to himself. Then he measured the back of the station wagon, and he began to curse.

The desk was executive sized, and there was no physical way of stuffing it into the back. He clearly didn't want to try to tie it to the roof, either, since the luggage rack would scratch the finish, or perhaps even damage it in some other way. Besides, it was obviously too heavy for the two of us to maneuver it up there.

"Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!" He said aloud. Again, he circled the desk. "Dammit!" He said again.

I knew what he was thinking. Less than a year earlier, he had spotted a drifting boat coming down the river while he and Harry were crossing the bridge. Pulling off to a side road, they had managed to

successfully wade out into the river far enough to snag the boat and tie it to a tree branch.

They had rushed off to borrow a boat trailer, but returned less than an hour later to find the boat gone, doubtless spotted and obtained by someone with his own trailer ready to hand or towed away with his own boat. Dad bitterly regretted not leaving Harry with the prize. Even if he didn't get a free boat, he would have undoubtedly realized a fair sum from the original owner as a salvage fee or reward.

Dad looked at me, and I looked back at him in a moment of pure telepathy. Without a word, I nodded and vaulted myself up on top of the desk, seating myself Buddha-like with my legs crossed. My air rifle was at sloped arms. I was proud of myself. This was not a mere, "father-son" moment: It was a time of significance between two equals, and I relished it.

No voice was spoken aloud, but the words, "Sir! I now assume my post!" rang between us. He nodded, thumped his fist into my shoulder, and I knew that I could claim almost anything under the sky from him later on.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, son." He promised.

With my trusty rifle ready for action, I was now the guardian of Fort Knox. It wasn't long before an active defense was called for.

That tin can. -A disguised armored car full of thieves! Four rounds through the center paid them off. That bottle. No! a camouflaged observation post! Two rounds were all that was needed to evict them. Another can, -Not at all! Trying the same trick again! Five rounds for that one.

I was having the grandest of times. I was laying a swath of destruction in a circle all around me. Using the tactics of short-range speed and long-range accuracy, nothing my sights fell upon could move or threaten anything again. Historians would write about me with disbelief. Cities would open their gates, and enemy troops would march out of their bunkers with their hands high. As soon as they saw my personal command pennant on the top of my tank, they'd surrender in droves. Why, there would even be...

Then at the moment, there came the sound of an approaching engine. I was brought back to reality, and here was where I knew that I had to tighten my resolve to keep Dad's trust. It was a battered, off-green and rusty Ford pickup that was jouncing and crashing its way towards me. Both of its doors were missing. There was no tailgate, and the front bumper sagged to one side like a broken arm. All four tires were bald, and the exhaust pipe and muffler were secured to the underside by twisted coat hangers.

I recognized the vehicle at once. It was the personal chariot of King Ralph, the manager, caretaker, warden, and absolute ruler of the dump. His full name was actually Ralph Joseph King, rumored to be in the Navy during the war, and a self-taught individual who went only as far as the eighth grade, first year of high school, or the third, depending on who you listened to. No one ever saw the shack he used as his headquarters, where he lived, or where he kept his truck. Dad speculated that it was off of one of the innumerable side roads that went into the adjoining woods, or maybe off of the one that ran down towards the river. Harry once theorized an underground cave with a trapdoor.

At any rate, his surveillance system was absolutely first-class, for he never failed to show up when "clients" were about. Nominally a civil servant, he was paid by the city of Bradford, which provided him with a modest but steady wage. Dad grumped that he also had first pick of whatever was dropped off, and so realized a handsome, under-the-table income by selling copper pipes, wiring, and clean steel to the smelters.

This was why I had to brace myself. This desk was clearly very valuable, and King Ralph would claim it for his own. On the other hand, Dad was very strong on salvage rights, and he considered anything found at the dump to be fair game on a first come, first served basis. In other words, this desk was ours. But I was still painfully young, and I didn't relish the thought of confronting a grown-up.

I had met King Ralph before, and I knew his nickname was an obvious joke, since he was the least likely king you could imagine. Enormously fat, unshaven, balding, and with a shaggy fringe of hair around his ears, he would never be mistaken for nobility. Nor would his

greasy ball cap, faded over-alls, and his torn, red-checkered flannel shirt be ever taken for royal attire.

He had a pair of tired, very worldly gray eyes sunk into the folds of his face, and he wheezed. He wheezed with every breath he took, and every word he spoke. The door of his glove compartment was gone, and I could clearly see the whisky bottle ensconced within.

In a normal world, any observer would tell you that he was not long for this world at all, but he was still running the place when I joined the Navy a dozen years later.

I tried politeness first.

“Good afternoon, Mr. King,” I spoke in my mildest voice. “If you wish to speak to my father, he’ll be back soon.”

I tried to mentally project an image of my dad at him, seven feet tall, covered with scars, and wearing a necklace of human teeth.

King Ralph squinted at me, wheezed, and then nodded. “Shouldn’t be playing with that bee-bee gun without your dad around, son.”

“I’ll be careful, sir. I don’t aim at anything alive, and try hard to hit only what I’m aiming at.”

He nodded again, and then wheezed. “What’s your name, son?”

“Douglass Nelson, Mr. King.”

Again the wheeze and nod, then he peered at me more closely. “Douglass. Douglass. You’re one of Kate’s boys, aren’t you?”

I nodded back. Contrary to most predictions of gene theory, which says that the darker genes dominate, all three of us born to my father and mother took after her Scottish nature, and so we were granted fair skin, freckles, and brownish hair.

Instead of picking up my father’s olive-skinned features, brown eyes, and dark hair, his major contribution to us was our personalities. Since Mom’s folks had run a candy store downtown for many years, she and my aunt were fairly well known in the community, and our close resemblance to her side of the family was often remarked on. On the other hand, Gladys, our eldest sister, was adopted, but she had the glossy black hair, brown eyes, and darker features of my father, and so we often delighted in confusing the gushing visitors who would try to guess which one of us had been “chosen”. Legal terminology simply did not apply. She was our big sister.

“I’ll tell you something, son.” He continued, and gave another wheeze. “I’ll tell you something about your mother and your grandmother, so you’ll believe me and know I’m trying to be a help.”

He reached in the glove compartment and took out the bottle, carefully unscrewing it for a thoughtful sip. He looked at me with squinted eyes, but not directly. I felt that if I had a parrot on my shoulder, then he’d be talking to him.

“Back some time ago, your grandmother helped my little sister when she was down on her luck. I was far away from home. Husband run off. Five children. And it was right in the middle of the Depression. One afternoon, she divided up one can of baked beans and three slices of bread between the five of them for their lunch. That was the last of the food in the house.”

He wheezed again, hawked, and then continued.

“Then she walked seven miles from near here, all the way downtown. Went to the candy store your grandma owned. She used to work there as a girl. Told her she needed a job real bad, and that the last of the food had run out.”

He took another sip. “Now any decent woman would have given her a job right then and there, but your grandma was more. She told my sister to go back home and come back first thing in the morning. Then she took her right across the street to the Handy Dandy Market, told the manager to give what she wanted, and to put it all on her own bill. Then she gave her bus fare to get home on.”

He cocked his head to peer at me, and I felt uncomfortable. This was the very first time a grown-up from outside my family had ever talked to me in this fashion, and I didn’t have the foggiest notion about what to say back or how to think about this. So I simply tried to look as adult as I possibly could, and continued to look back and him and be attentive.

“My mother has often told me my Grandmother was a Christian woman,” I answered carefully.

He nodded again, and then continued. “Ain’t never forgot it. I was away at the time, and I couldn’t help. Your family was kind to mine. Decent folks, son. You can be proud of them. And I know your Daddy, too.”

At this point, he wheezed even louder, then took another swig. Screwing the cap back on, he placed the bottle back in its compartment, turned, and then rubbed his hands together as he looked at me.

“That’s why I’m going to tell you something, son. I’m gonna give you a warning.” He pointed at the desk. “That desk there, son, the very one you’re sitting on?” He leaned over to peer at me with dull, watery eyes. “Well son, that desk is haunted. It’s got a curse on it.”

Despite myself, I laughed.

King Ralph shook his head forcefully.

“Don’t go laughing, son. I’m telling you the truth. Think I’d leave something so fine out here, all alone and unclaimed? I wouldn’t touch it with my ‘dozer. I’m telling you, it’s got a real live, honest-to-God curse on it! Like I said, that thing’s haunted. I wouldn’t even be sitting on it, if I was you.”

In point of fact, I was just about to move, but when he had said those words of superstition and voodoo, my Baptist teachings came to the fore, anchoring my young bottom firmly to the desk’s surface. “I thank you for your concerns, sir, but I don’t believe in ghosts.” I answered piously.

King Ralph nodded with another wheeze. “Did my duty, boy. It’s your choice to be a damn fool about it. If you were drowning in the river, my job is to throw the rope out to you. Whether or not you decide to grab on to it is up to you.”

I nodded back, and then to conceal a slight twinge of apprehension, I asked him the obvious question. “How do you know it’s haunted?”

“Study your history, boy? Ever hear of Timothy Dexter?”

This in fact was dead easy for me. Both of my folks were avid history buffs, and so was I. Mom had told me early and often about this particular figure, since we had an ancestral connection, but that’s another story. At any rate, I replied promptly, taking him aback a little.

“Lord Timothy Dexter,” I recited. “Born in Malden in 1747. Lived in Newburyport. Wealthy businessman. Considered to be a madman by his contemporaries, and a legend of his time to his friends.”

Inwardly, I was proud of my succinct answer and the effect it had had on a grown-up. He blinked at me rapidly. Then wheezed out what sounded like a chuckle.

“That’s right, son. Pretty good for a youngster like you.” He pointed again. “That’s his desk you’re sitting on.” I flinched. “But I thought it was still in his house. They made a museum out of it, didn’t they?”

“That they did, sonny. But the desk in his study is just one of his spares. That there is the real working desk he used to use when he ran his business.”

“How did it get haunted? Did he die on it or something?”

There came a spat of short, wheezing barks. It took me a moment to realize he was laughing.

“No son, no he didn’t. But I’ll bet he wished he had.” Folding his hands across his girth, he smiled and tilted his head back, tracking the white, drifting clouds above. “You see, lad, I’m one of those who also happen to think he was crazy. I read up on him, too. He was so full of himself that he even staged his own funeral, just to make sure it would go right when the time came. Horse-drawn, fancy hearse, ushers, coffin, church services, -the whole works.” He rolled his eyes back at me and grinned. “Then he beat his wife for not crying loud enough.”

I laughed and shook my head. I hadn’t heard that particular anecdote about Newburyport’s most famous eccentric, but it rang true. King Ralph laughed with me, pointing again at my perch.

“Bent her right across that very desk you’re sitting on, used a switch on her like a schoolboy, and that’s when she cursed him, so he hit her again. Told her she should feel honored being bent over that desk. It was going to be the center of the vast empire he was building, and she would be its founding queen. That’s when she cursed the desk, too. Said that any man who sat behind that desk would never prosper.”

Trying to sound intelligent, I ventured a conversational question. “I didn’t know a desk could be haunted. -I mean cursed. I’ve heard of haunted houses and precious gems being cursed (I had the Classics comic book, The Moonstone, back home), but not a piece of furniture.”

“Most times, I’d agree with you, young feller.” Another wheeze. “But this desk has been a bad thing everywhere it has been to. Rich feller who owned a boat-building business in Lynn bought it at an auction after Dexter died. Went out of business less than three years later. Had a string of fires, bad deals, and people coming down sick and

quitting on him. Sea captain bought it next, and his ship ran aground right outside of Salem. Lost everything. Gave it to his son-in-law. Same thing.”

On and on he went, reciting disaster after disaster, and giving me a cross-section of coastal New England history as he traced the wanderings of this desk. He was one of the first people I met who made me think that I should wander the earth with a tape-recorder strapped to my back (They were bigger, then). I had no idea where and how he got this vast amount of history. Even more so, I wondered how he had wound up at the city dump. I couldn't resist interrupting him at one point.

“But why didn't someone just burn it, or throw it away?”

“You can't burn a curse, son. Smoke would spread it all over the land. Besides, you just don't burn or throw away something's that very old, or very famous. That's what this desk is.”

“Is this why you don't want it?” Curse or no curse, I suddenly knew that my biggest fear had gone far away. I wouldn't have to contend for this desk on my dad's behalf.

He nodded again, even more vigorously, this time. “Think I'd leave something as fine as that just sitting out here? Been here all afternoon. Campbell boys told me all about it. Went to school with one of the brothers. Campbell trucking and Shipping Company, right down there in Ipswich. Old Man Campbell didn't believe the curse when he bought it, but he damn sure does, now. He's had four straight years of the worst luck you can imagine. Once had thirty trucks, his own office building, and four warehouses.”

King Ralph scratched mournfully behind his ear. “Now he's got seven trucks, only four of them working, and his office's in a corner of his last warehouse. Told his sons to get as far away as they could get on a half a tank of gas, and get rid of it. This is it. They're really hoping things will change for 'em, now.”

We talked on for several more minutes. It was a strange, wonderful discussion. Up until this time, I had never had a conversation with an adult about ghosts, spells, and curses. Dad never believed in them. Mother, faithful Baptist that she was, had only one or two opinions on

the matter, but since they were based on the King James Version, they were quite strong.

For me, ghost stories were a staple on every scout hike or camping trip that went overnight, and I had scores of comic books and more than a few books that touched upon such matters. I also had a prized volume of one of Edward Rowe Snow's books about ghosts from shipwrecks and lighthouses.

In turn, this man seemed delighted at my knowledge, or to put it more simply, he was just an elderly gent with no youngsters to talk to, and I had showed up to spend time on a boring Sunday afternoon.

Just as we were discussing The Lady in Black, a popular ghost* (*It was from one of Edward R. Snowe's books, The Romance of Boston Bay), who haunted one of the islands in Boston's harbor, we heard a rumble of approaching vehicles. Ralph looked beyond me and shaded his eyes with a dirty, callused hand.

"Your Dad's back, boy. And it looks like he's got some friends with him. I hope to God that he's not crazy enough to do what I think he's going to do..."

I looked over behind me. I couldn't help but grin and laugh aloud. In the lead was our family station wagon, and right behind was a battered, disreputable shape I recognized instantly, as I did the two figures riding with. It was none other than The Abomination, the ugliest vehicle in the whole state, if not all of New England.

This was Crazy Ed's homemade jeep, using the various body parts of a Crosley, a Porsche, a Chevy, and Lord knows what else. I won't even go into the color scheme. Ed was at the wheel, and right next to him was a gaunt, thin figure that could only be Herman The German. Two of Dad's closest pals from his duty shift at the Essex Street Fire Station.

The two vehicles bounded across the uneven, dusty surface, and then lurched to a stop, dust clouds swirling around both of them and then over us. I sneezed.

Dad got out first, looked his approval at me, and then nodded at King Ralph. Crazy Ed bounced out of his door like a rubber ball wearing a shirt, while Herman slowly and deliberately unfolded his long frame from the passenger side into a vertical position.

Ed bounded over to the desk, running his eyes all over it, while talking in his usual machine gun sentences.

“Master Douglass! How ya doing? Blow me down if it ain’t the king himself! How ya doing, Your Majesty? Gonna try to sell this thing to some sucker in Ward Hill? Nothing doing!”

Herman came over in three long strides, nodding at me and then at King Ralph. His face always looked as gloomy as an undertaker’s, but his eyes lit up as he looked at the desk, and the corners of his mouth slowly tugged themselves upwards. He put his hand on its surface as if in benediction.

“Genuine,” he pronounced. He looked at my father. “It looks genuine, Nails. At least 125 years old by the design of the legs and the drawers. A treasure.”

Dad nodded his agreement. “Too big for my house, and I couldn’t get it into my wagon, but it seemed a damn shame to waste it. The Cap’s gonna love this thing.”

Dad had strict rules about interrupting grown-ups, especially when it was himself and other men talking. But a sense of duty made me take the chance.

“Dad! Maybe you better leave this thing alone! Mr. King says it’s haunted with a curse and we shouldn’t even touch it!”

Three frowns swung at me for a long moment, pondering my words. Then three sets of eyebrows lifted to regard one another. As I feared, they all burst out laughing. It wasn’t because they were ignoring my warning that irritated me. It was mostly because they weren’t taking me seriously. I would be a kid forever.

“The boy’s right!” Interrupted Ralph. “I’ve been telling him about this desk. You don’t think I’d just leave something like this all out here by its lonesome, do you?” With a few brief, clipped sentences, he told them the history of this mysterious piece of furniture I was still sitting on.

Crazy Ed looked it over and gave a derisive snort. “Ah, G’wan! I’ll bet you got a buyer driving on his way out here, right now! You’re just too lazy to move this desk, that’s all. Customer does all the work, you get the cash, right?”

Herman chimed in with, “Story like that is a good way to scare off poachers.”

“For Gawd’s sake, Ralph! This is the Twentieth Century. We don’t worry too much about Voodoo, Witchcraft, or whatever the hell else happens every time the moon comes up.” Dad’s pedantic tone was clear.

King Ralph’s face had been growing redder with every word. “Look, I’m trying to do you damn fools a favor!” He leaned forward to point a shaking hand at the desk. “You didn’t see the faces of the men who brought this! I did. I believe every word they told me. That desk is an albatross, I’m telling you! Every business it was ever part of is ruined! Every home it sat in has suffered!”

He brushed his hands at them. In spite of his clothes and the battered pick-up truck he was sitting in, he looked just like an angry principal dismissing a group of unruly boys.

“Go ahead, then. Take it! I did my duty by warning you. That’s all I have to do. Tell you the truth, I’m glad to be rid of the thing!” His finger and his gaze swept over all of us. “One thing more. Don’t bring it back!” He gave a final wheeze.

Grumbling and shaking his head, he swung his legs back into his pick-up, started the motor, and sped off. The four of us watched him as he jounced his way along, up and around the bend of the access road and out of sight.

“You know,” said Herman, “I almost think he meant it.”

“Nah!” Said Crazy Ed. “It’s an act! I still say he’s got a customer all lined up. Probably on his way here, right now.”

“Remember what he said about all those businesses going broke,” admonished Herman.

Crazy Ed took off his ball cap and whacked Herman with it. “Keer-rist! You here to help, or you here to moan about bad dreams? Besides, we ain’t no business! We’re the fire department! We ain’t here to make a profit but to protect the good citizens of Haverhill! That’s good work! Ain’t no curse that can affect a pure heart, right Nails?”

“Could be. But we’re talking about the fire department.”

All three laughed, and Dad motioned me off of the top. Crazy Ed outstretched his hands to measure the width of the desk, and then

applied it to the back of the Abomination. Instead of the conventional tail gate that one found on most jeeps and pick-up trucks, this vehicle had an oversized door that swung out on hinges just like any other door, sort of what you'd see on an ambulance or hearse in those times.

Pronouncing the desk would fit, he swung open the rear door, ducked inside and whipped out a heavy blanket and some ropes to secure the beast. Herman and Ed each took a side, while Dad and I (lifting as much as I could without getting in the way) took the end. It was heavy, but not overly so, and we managed to heave it up and slide it in with no trouble.

It stuck out about three feet. Using another old blanket as padding, Ed swung the rear door gently back against the desk, and began tying the rope around its legs and side, securing it to the handle, the hinges, and around the rear bumper. Since this was a pause in the general conversation, I deemed it safe to ask just what they were going to do with it, since Dad had said earlier that it was too big for our house.

"Why, it's going to be the new station desk," replied Ed, cinching the ropes. "We're gonna give the old one to the Cap, and put it into his room, so's he'll have another private office to work from, so to speak. THIS little beauty," he patted the top, "is gonna be the pride and joy of Essex Street. It's gonna be the centerpiece of the front office, and everyone in town will know that we got the best-looking desk in the department!"

"I'm not sitting behind it," muttered Herman, eyeing the ropes and knots.

Ed raised his fist in mock anger. Grinning, he pointed at me. "Young Nellie's been sitting on it for nigh on two hours! He looks okay to me!"

"He was sitting on it, not behind it. Besides, he's a kid."

I mentally flipped Herman a salute that would have had Dad bending me right over that same desk right then and there, just like Mrs. Dexter, and welding the biggest leather belt he could find. Of course, knowing Herman, he would have been first.

Eventually, we left the dump with our prize, journeyed across the Groveland Bridge, up through Riverside, and eventually through the

heart of the city to the Essex Street Fire Station. There the boys on duty made quick work of the unloading and moving it.

Expensive oils were produced, and pristine rags grasped by willing hands were set to work. This was done on every shift for three days, until at last a genuine lambskin was acquired somehow for the final polish. By week's end, that desk gleamed.

I mean that. It really gleamed. Burnished with a thick, glassy wax, the dark wood had a sheen all its own, and the shine on top looked deep enough to wade in. Precisely as Ed had predicted, that desk became the envy of the whole department. This went on for a month or so, with visitors oohing and ahing over this mysterious, priceless artifact.

Then the troubles began.

It was nothing as dramatic as plague or death, and no unholy shapes were seen prowling the halls after midnight. But things started getting bad.

Milk spoiled in the refrigerator. Not once, not twice, but every time. The thermostat was adjusted and monitored with great care, but the milk continued to spoil. Experts were called in. They examined the refrigerator, tweaked it, and made fussing adjustments to its innards, and pronounced it sound. But the milk continued to spoil.

Out back in the parking lot, things were happening as well.

Up until then, even though the station was in the heart of the city and its large colony of pigeons, it was a more or less balanced existence, with only the occasional "accident" to mar things. Now it seemed as if the pigeons had organized themselves into an air corps, and had selected the Essex Street parking lot as their own bombing range. Every car was hit at least once a day, and the scrubbing and re-washing of the victim's roof or hood just seemed to call for another try.

Sunday meals were now getting hit, too. It was an unspoken tradition in the department to make the Sunday dinner rather special, and so the boys would contribute a little extra pocket change to the station mess, and bring in some extra "goodies" as well. A chef was selected by popular vote, and a grand meal would be produced, barring an unforeseen alarm or emergency.

This went out the window. Without fail or respite, the clanging alarm of a box would come in just as they sitting down at table, and

they would have to rush off to fight a fire, then come back to a cold or burnt repast. There were especially galling times when they would carefully gather up their plates and portions, set the oven on low heat, and try to re-heat the meal. Damned if the same exact thing wouldn't happen all over again, just as they sat down.

Then the kludge factor started picking up.

Dad once defined a "kludge" as a minor, stupid accident caused by a small act of carelessness or a simple bit of bad luck. Not harmful or dangerous, but truly annoying. A kludge is when the paint can slips out of your fingers or gets knocked out by the corner of a bench and falls onto the floor. A kludge is when you drop the new light bulb you were just changing, or when that fresh cup of coffee catches the edge of your plate in just that certain way, causing it to tilt and spill its contents all over your supper.

This was what hit the station. Dad slipped on the top step of the stairway leading down to the boiler room, causing dirty, soapy water to cascade all over the gleaming black hull of the freshly painted boiler. Crazy Ed was checking the pulley rope of an extension ladder when the rope broke, causing the inner section to slide unexpectedly back down, mashing one of his fingers and then toppling onto the freshly painted floor of the shop. Spanner wrenches were being dropped on toes with frightening regularity.

Now the trucks were showing signs of arthritis, it seemed. Fan belts began to fray and snap with more and more frequency. Running lights failed every time they went out the door, and broken gaskets within the hoses were now a common occurrence.

Dad once said that the biggest bear in the woods can be driven to distraction by flea bites.

Life in general became sour. This was what was happening to the boys at Essex Street. Dad started to get angry as soon as he had to get ready to go to work, and then he came home looking for trouble. No matter how much Harry and I cleaned our room or swept out the garage, there was always some item overlooked that merited a court-martial. It was the same with my mom and my sisters. No matter how clean the kitchen was, some crumb or dirty spoon would be spotted, and the gates of hell would open wide.

Direct From His Home In Riverside

Sullenness reigned at Essex Street.

The Cap became a martinet during inspections, and men who had saved each other's lives a month ago were barely on speaking terms. Arguments erupted over checker games. Pre-payday loans were granted in miserly amounts or with surly reluctance. Cigarette requests were met with more "get your own", or "you owe me a dozen packs by now."

The final straw came when the TV blipped out during a crucial football game. The score was tied, and it was the fourth quarter. Boston had the ball. Then the TV sighed, and the screen went black, shrinking down to a tiny white dot.

Years later while in college, I learned that the term for describing what happened next was catharsis.

Over the smashed, ruined remains of the TV set, they realized with sheepish expressions all around that they were grown-ups, after all. - Weren't they? They all agreed that something was wrong, deeply wrong, but what?

A radio was hastily brought in to hear the final results. Afterwards, without any assuming or apologies, Herman stepped to the front of the TV room, placed his hands on his flanks, and looked at them. He was a private just like the rest of them, but here was a situation he knew about, and the time for action was now.

In one breath, Herman the German gave them all a stern lecture, and he didn't spare himself, either. "The first thing we must do," he intoned, "is to get a new TV set. I'll go get mine after we get relieved tonight, but only for tonight. I will buy a new one tomorrow. I'll bring in the slip, and every man here will contribute equally. Are we agreed?"

There were solemn nods all around. Then his gaze flared up, and his eyes seemed to burn above his hollow cheeks. He looked like a Baptist preacher in the middle of a tent full of liquor storeowners and Playboy publishers.

"The second thing we must do is get rid of that desk. It is cursed."

This statement was greeted with disbelief and denial.

"Now wait a minute!"

"Baloney!"

“Bunk!”

“What do you want us to do next, Herman? Get a white chicken and cut its throat?”

“Let’s get some holy water!”

“Let’s hire a witch doctor!”

Herman folded his arms, and everyone knew that he had turned into stone. When the shouting had died down, he spoke again. His voice was low and sonorous, and it filled every corner of the room.

“I tried to warn you. I don’t look for ghosts under my bed, and I don’t give a damn which way a black cat’s going when one crosses my path. But that desk is something different. I don’t care how you look at it, or how you want to explain it. All I know is that things started going to hell in a toboggan as soon as we brought that damn thing in here. And I’m telling you all right now, that thing has got to go!”

Everyone looked at each other with reluctance and hesitation. Herman’s words had a certain ring to them, but that desk.... -Well, that desk was a thing of pure beauty. It was their pride and joy. -And it was such a bargain to begin with! And all the work they did to get it in here and clean it up. They couldn’t just give it the heave-ho. Then too, there was the Cap to consider. They’d have to talk him out of his desk and put it back in the front office. More work...

Into that glum silence, Crazy Ed broke in with a suggestion. “I know! We don’t have to get rid of the desk. We just have to get rid of the curse!”

Herman twisted his mouth and looked away. But the rest of the boys looked at him with dawning hope. Except for Dad. “Ed, you’re talking like you got a paper rectum! What are you going to do? Dance around it with beads and rattles?”

Ed drew himself up with solemn assurance. “Now, now Nails! I served in Burma during the war. The Far East. Mysterious jungles and hidden lore. I have kissed the daughters of wizards and magicians!”

Everyone broke into hoots and catcalls over this, and Ed joined them. Still, he shook his head.

“Can’t hurt anything, guys. It just might work. What we gotta do is drive off the curse. Make it an un-haunted desk.”

“How do we do that?”

“Salt water.”

There was a moment of dead silence. “Salt water?” Someone asked.

“That’s right. Sea water, in fact. British chap I knew in Burma told me that was the only way to wash off a curse from something. You gotta wash it in sea water.”

“But that’ll ruin the finish!”

“What am I doing, talking to a bunch of kindergartners?”

“Sea water!” Sputtered Dad. “So one of us goes down to Plum Island or Salisbury Beach, and brings back a few buckets of salt water. Is that what we gotta do?”

Crazy Ed smiled evilly. “It should be someone who was involved from the beginning, too, Nails.”

So it was that Dad and I were enjoying a ride to the beach, long after the summer was over. I did not find out exactly what had happened for several years. All I knew at that time was that Dad had invited me for a ride, but he was tight-lipped and grumpy the whole way. I had figured that he was having trouble with some new officer at the station, or maybe some tiff with one of my uncles. I simply followed one of Dad’s war-learned maxims: Keep your head down when there’s snipers about.

In the back seat rested a row of glass cider jugs, four in all. Carefully washed out and ready to use. Clambering out to the rocks of a jetty, we got ourselves pretty wet and very cold (This part of the Atlantic knows nothing about the Gulf Stream, especially in December). However, we managed to fill all four of the jugs, screw the caps on, and haul them back to the car. All he told me was that it was for a very special project at the fire station, and I accepted it at that.

In the kind light of later years, I can still say that he was not deceiving me. He simply didn’t want to try to explain the mysteries of paranormal rules and activities to a young boy.

I still remember the time when our family was at the Topsfield Country Fair, and Dad had gone into a fortune-teller’s tent on a joke and a dare from my Uncle Harry. He came out twenty minutes later, red-faced and angry looking, and said not a word about what went on in there. He never went into a fortune-teller’s tent again, and he never

spoke about it again. Not even to my mother. Even today, we still wonder.

It was actually a good day for me. I was able to get him to spring for an extra hot dog and onion rings without any fuss, and he told me a fascinating story about the night he and his crew had parked his amphibious tank right in the middle of a river in New Guinea. This was during the war. He gave a vivid description of how a whole troop of large apes had waded past and around them during the night.

The following evening, armed with buckets of salt water and fresh sponges, the boys had a hilarious exorcism party. They chanted army marching songs, and spent a lot of time banging on empty coffee cans with spoons, lighting white birthday candles, and watching Crazy Ed dance around with his pant legs all rolled up and a white feather stuck in his hair. The desk was thoroughly scrubbed in salt water and quickly dried, with libations of coffee and fresh water sprinkled on it as well.

The Cap had growled that this was all useless nonsense, and retreated to his room. Herman had also gone straight to his own room as well, with a book and a magazine under his arm. He firmly declared that he was having no part of this. In fact, he had told Ed that the curse was probably absorbed in the desk like a sponge full of water, and the only way to get rid of it was to get rid of the whole desk, plain and simple.

The next day, they had a field drill, and the steering linkage on the back of Ladder One failed, causing the big rig to swing far too wide as it turned the corner, totally wiping out two parked cars on Washington Square.

“Give it time,” Ed said. “Sometimes these things take a while.”

Meanwhile, milk was still spoiling in the refrigerator, and yet it was still cold and humming along without a hitch.

Then came Christmas, and then the New Year, and we were fully a week into January before surcease finally came to Essex Street. Actually, if truth be told, when it did come, it didn't look like it was going to be a blessing at all. This was now the anniversary of Haverhill's founding, and the mayor, otherwise known as “Hizzoner”, wanted the fire department to do something for him. It may not be

exact, but I have been able to reconstruct the conversation that took place in the Cap's office...

"Like hell we will!"

"You're out of your mind!"

"Forget it!"

"You must be drinking gasoline!"

It was four against one, but such odds never bothered The Cap. Dad, Crazy Ed, Herman the German, and Big Ed Norris were standing around his desk, angry and defiant. The Cap glared back at them. Except for my father, he was the shortest man in the room, but he was holding his own.

"One afternoon, gentlemen. One single afternoon. A few hours. That's all I ask!"

"Baby-sitting some old coot? Standing in Hizzoner's office while he makes a speech and tells us a bed-time story, and then waiting for him to slip the knife in? You know how he feels about the department. Why give him the chance?" Ed Norris was not in favor of the idea.

"Faith and the Saints! I've never seen such a thick-headed crew as you louts! Didn't you listen to a single word I said? This is GOOD for the department! It will bring us GOOD publicity! It might even bring some peace back between us and the Mayor!"

"Like hell," repeated Father.

"I'll lay it all out for all 'o ye once more! Seth Crenshaw is a special citizen of this city. A very special citizen. Direct descendent of one of the founding families. A veteran of the Spanish-American War and World War I. Did public service during World War II, as an air raid warden and a coast-watcher."

Herman suppressed an ill-concealed snort. Haverhill was nearly 20 miles inland. It would have had to have been a pretty canny U-boat skipper who could maneuver his vessel all the way up the Merrimack to threaten the city.

The Cap stood and swung his head to focus his glare directly at Herman. Planting both fists on his desk, he added one more achievement to Seth's roster. "And furthermore, from 1900 until 1906, he lived in Rocks Village, and was a member of the Volunteer Fire Department down there. That makes him one of us!"

Warming again to the same subject, he continued unchecked. “Therefore gentlemen, even though I don’t agree with the Mayor on a few things, this is one time when we are united in one accord. We have among us one of this city’s oldest veterans from one of its oldest families, who saw a good part of its history with his own eyes. It is only right and proper that he be given the Centennial Citizen’s medal.”

Dad closed his eyes and winced. Mayor “Uncle Bill” Mallet, like most politicians, was fond of ceremonies. Especially those that honored citizens in a big, public way, with himself doing the honors. This was one of them.

In lesser municipalities, mayors would hand out keys to the city. Not for Haverhill, and not for Hizzoner. Someone came up with the idea for the Centennial Citizen’s Medal, a bronze disk embossed with the official seal of the city on one side, and a logo and date on the other. Awarded once a year on the anniversary date of the city’s founding, it was given to some citizen who had been there since birth and had contributed significantly in some way to the city’s posterity and influence.

With the City’s 320th birthday coming up, a search committee had located Seth. Life-long resident, veteran of two wars and active in public service, and a member of one of the City’s larger and more prosperous families. Now residing at the Hudson Veteran’s Home on Lincoln Avenue. Furthermore, he was a registered Democrat. Perfect choice.

When a committee member mentioned that Seth’s oldest son still had his father’s uniform and gear, Hizzoner’s enthusiasm knew no bounds.

The details of the ceremony were quickly laid out. There would be a photo session in the Mayor’s office, with Seth Crenshaw in his old army uniform. A mixed squad of the local National Guard unit and the fire department would provide the honor guard to escort him, and the proclamation awarding him the medal would be signed on the mayor’s big, ornate desk, with photographers from all the local newspapers in attendance. It was going to be a big day.

The Fire Department Chief had been summoned, and so things had worked down to Essex Street and the Cap. Although his men weren’t

merry, they were still his men, and so the chosen volunteers soon learned of their true status in the matter. It would be next week, on the following Friday. Since the four chosen didn't want to be there, they were simply ordered to do so. After all, they were veterans, and they understood what rank was all about. Hizzoner wanted to get this auspicious year (and his campaign) off to an early start, and they would so assist. Case closed.

Coming home that night, my father was uneasy. Why wasn't Seth living at home? Why wasn't he living with one of his grown children? One son owned three auto repair garages, and two others had joined forces to start a taxi company in town, so they could definitely afford to house him.

As a part-time ambulance driver, my sire was well acquainted with all the hospitals and medical staff in the city. Thus, right after supper, Dad picked up the phone. It took about four or five calls, but he soon found out what he wanted to know.

Seth was in fine shape for an 82 year old man.

-Physically, that is. Mentally, well, let's just say that the years had taken their toll. Shortly after his wife had passed on, his neighbors could hear him as he slipped back to the Spanish-American War. He would be loudly berating Teddy Roosevelt at all hours of the day or night. Usually, it was for losing his spectacles and mounting his horse from the wrong side.

At other times, it was World War I, and he would call out challenges and insults to the Germans in the next trench. More disturbing yet, the two wars had somehow combined within him, and he was often seen patrolling his back yard at night, looking out for "Huns" with his rifle at the ready and his bayonet fixed.

When this began to happen more frequently, his family got together and arranged new quarters for him at the Veteran's hospital, down on Lincoln Avenue. There, he would be out of harm's way, they hoped.

Faithfully and lovingly, the family continued to visit the aging patriarch on a regular basis. However, such meetings were becoming increasingly tense, since he was now convinced that he had been captured by the Germans and was now in one of their prison colonies.

Still, from what Dad could learn, he would be fit enough for travel. In fact, Seth's eldest son would be glad to pick him up and deliver him to the mayor's office when the time came. Why, it would even be a good break for the old man. It would be a holiday...

So came that vaunted Friday when Dad dressed up in his dress blues. Smart and crisp, with his black shoes honed to a crystalline polish. At least he was getting a day's pay for this nonsense, he had growled to my mother as he went out the door.

As children eager for any fame that would come our way, we looked forward to the newspaper pictures that would show up the following day. Yessirree, that's my dad.

So it was that Dad, Crazy Ed, Big Ed Norris, and Herman the German lined up on one side of the front steps to city hall, and four members of the Haverhill unit of the National guard lined up on the other. Hizzoner would receive them in his office.

Pretty soon, the official limousine of the city pulled up, and two men got out, resplendent in their charcoal gray suits. Seth's oldest two sons. In turn, they opened the back door, and helped out an elderly man who could only be Seth Crenshaw himself. He was an erect, graying figure, with brushed back, snowy hair, and bushy eyebrows set upon a sharp, narrow face. He was dressed in a smart, khaki uniform, accompanied with a Sam Browne belt, and polished boots. The whole left side of his chest was covered with ribbons.

He took a swift look around, then saw the honor guard, and drew himself up to attention and saluted. Dad and the rest saluted back, and flashbulbs popped. You could see the years fall away from his shoulders, and he marched forward and up the steps without any assistance. His honor guard fell in behind.

Going up the short steps, Dad happened to look back over his shoulder and nearly lost his footing in amazement. One of the sons had reached into the limo and had pulled something out. It was a long-barreled, ancient rifle, almost looking like Civil-War issue. Polished and gleaming, it had a long, deadly-looking bayonet attached to its muzzle.

My sire was something of a history buff, himself. Later on, he showed me a thick book on the history of firearms that had a picture of

Seth's rifle. It turned out to be an 1898 "Trapdoor" rifle that fired black powder and came in two calibers. A 45 caliber model, and then a 70 caliber, which was what Seth was toting. Since an inch would be measured at 100 calibers, you get an idea of how big the thing was (Dad used a .30 caliber Garand rifle during the war).

In the mayor's office, while waiting for Hizzoner to appear, Dad wound up standing next to Seth. The old man's eyes gleamed as they darted around, and he seemed to be unusually alert and comprehending. Maybe he was having one of his "better" days. Dad looked fitfully at the rifle the old soldier was holding. He sure hoped so. The muzzle opening looked to be as big as a railroad tunnel.

At the moment, it certainly looked like there was cause for hope. At least there didn't seem to be any danger of Seth dropping the rifle. His hand was firm, steady, and strong where he grasped it. The butt rested just against the right toe of his boot, and the rifle angled up at just exactly the right pitch as shown in old recruiting posters. Its barrel was gleaming with fresh oil and polish, and the walnut stock had been lovingly burnished to a deep, rich brown.

"Well, old timer," Dad began, "I'll bet it's been a long day since you had to shine your shoes and put on a uniform."

Squinting back at him with clear, piercing blue eyes, old Seth nodded vigorously, and then cackled. "That's right, sonny boy! Heh-heh-heh-heh!" He pointed proudly at his boots. "Did both myself! Jimmy's a good boy. Kept the uniform nice and clean, he did. I can still fit in it! -But he never did learn the proper way to polish boots. Navy boy, he was. Heh-heh-heh!"

He slapped the rifle with his free hand, affectionately. "Didn't know how to take care of 'Ole Bess, here, proper-like, either. Had to take care of her, myself! Took two hour, but Bess here, she's worth it! Been through a lot together, she and I, but she always took care of me! Heh-heh-heh!"

Dad nodded respectfully in turn. He appreciated any man who looked after the tools of his trade. "You did a pretty good job on her, that's for sure."

"You bet I did, sonny! Loaded her myself."

It was as if a cold stream from a 2-inch hose blasted down my father's back. Taken by complete surprise and now in total horror, my father could only turn his head and croak his next words. "You LOADED her?"

Seth smiled back in simple, honest pride. "Yep! Learned that first week in Santiago. Always be ready. Bess and me, we're ready for anything, just like the day she was first given to me! Heh-heh-heh!"

Dad told me later that it was just like that last second before a crash, when your car and your body are all in one piece and you know it, but that tree trunk is filling the windshield. Just as he was starting to reach for Seth's rifle and call out a warning, the back door snapped open and the city Bailiff came in with a loud voice:

"ATTEN-SHUN! Presenting His Honor, the Right, Honorable, William K. Mallet, Mayor of the City of Haverhill, Commonwealth of Massachusetts!"

The previous horror my father was feeling now mushroomed higher, like aviation gasoline thrown on a trash fire. Hizzoner was wearing a uniform!

"Uncle Bill" Mallet had never joined any of the armed services during the war, but he was a loyal member of the Exulted Order of the Pomeranian Guards, one of those odd little groups that sprang up throughout New England, in those days. Since everyone else was in uniform, he had decided not to be the only one in civvies. Thus, he had opted for the official, ceremonial uniform that the lodge members donned for special occasions. The attire sported a handsome gray jacket, complete with gray pants, black boots, and a red sash. But worst of all, Hizzoner was wearing a spiked helmet as well. Evidently, it was part of the ensemble.

Of course, this was much too much for Seth.

His eyes widened in surprise and alarm. His frame stretched to its full height, and then stiffened itself into cast-iron rigidity. His mouth dropped open. The next moment, it snapped shut with a plastic clack of false teeth, and his eyes narrowed to two glowing slits.

"Boche!" he shouted. "A Hun officer! Think you're going to take me back to prison? You Jerry swine! -Not THIS time, my fine fellow! I've got Bess with me, now! Wait till you hear what SHE has to say!"

Everyone else in the room was nailed to the floor in stunned amazement. Before anyone could even raise a hand, Seth had slung his rifle around and down, and now Bess was pointing dead-level at Hizzoner's breadbasket. Yelling a challenge that must have reached up to Valhalla, he charged.

Because of his years in office, combined with a taste for high living, Hizzoner was not a man who could hide behind telephone poles. Yet, everyone marveled at his grace, speed, and skill. He spun around and whipped his body aside. Right down to the floor he dove, and then rolled off to one side. The bayonet had started to angle down towards him as Seth lunged, but with a loud "thock!", the deadly steel of the bayonet punched through the face of the upper left drawer instead. It pierced down its length, and then embedded itself in the thick leg of the desk's back.

"Hah!" Grunted Seth, tugging at his rifle. "Lucky devil aren't you? Well not for long!" Bracing himself with his feet, the old warrior deliberately pulled the trigger to free the bayonet.

Dad never learned how Seth got hold of the gunpowder, or maybe he had some hidden in an old tobacco can for all these years, but it still worked. There was a flash, and then a thunderous roar as the rifle discharged. The office was filled with thick smoke, and the recoil threw Seth backwards. He landed on his bony posterior with a thump and then toppled flat on his back.

A 45 caliber pistol fires just about the heaviest bullet you can think of. A 50 caliber machine gun is what they use to shoot down airplanes. Ole 'Bess', however, was a 70 caliber rifle. Something about as close as you could get to an artillery piece without using wheels and a trailer hitch.

Blasting clear of the muzzle, the massive round plowed into the heavy, oaken leg of the Mayor's desk, splintering it like balsa wood and violently knocking it free of its base. Like a wounded bull, the big desk lurched, swayed, and then toppled down with a crash, producing a scream from Hizzoner. It had landed on his foot as he had tried to crawl away.

Then came more trouble. A small wisp of smoke began to pour out from the smashed remains of the drawer, and now, tiny yellow tongues

of flame began to lick into sight. The sparks and burning bits of powder from the rifle firing at close range had ignited the papers that were resting in the drawer.

All this had happened in a few seconds. No one knew if it was the shot, the crash, the fire, or the scream that finally released them from their paralysis, but they all snapped into action. It was an odd phenomenon, but each man in the room rushed to perform his own priority of what had to be done.

Dad went for the fire extinguisher mounted on the wall, while Big Ed and Crazy Ed lifted up the desk. Herman pulled Hizzoner out from underneath the ruined desk. He had fainted from the pain or the danger, or maybe both.

Seth's two sons rushed to their father's side, while one of Hizzoner's aides scurried over to assist him, and the other aide dashed out to keep the reporters away from the inner office. No matter what they said or printed, it just simply wouldn't do to have any pictures taken at this time.

With a few short, noisy blasts from the fire extinguisher, the most immediate problem was solved. Herman had appropriated Bess, and was cradling her in his arms like a frightened child. Seth's boys were helping him shakily to regain his feet, and Crazy Ed was calling Water Street for the ambulance.

Within an hour, the situation had been improved, and had even ended somewhat as planned. The award ceremony was held in the Vice Mayor's office, with old Seth standing there, proud and tall. His face and hands had been hastily washed and scrubbed, and his Army uniform was brushed up a bit and declared to be presentable. Safely locked away, it was agreed by all that his rifle was not needed for the picture. Or anything else.

Stoically enduring the pain until this was over and the ambulance could take him away, Hizzoner remained seated behind the Vice Mayor's desk like Franklin Roosevelt, and awarded the medal from there. His helmet was off and carefully stored elsewhere. The boys and the National Guard took their allotted place behind him, and the cameras popped and flashed without any fanfare. A rocky start, but it

was a smooth finish, which is enough for most professions. -Even politics.

Best of all, the Mayor himself visited the Essex Street Fire Station the following day, while Dad and his fellow members of the honor guard were on duty. For once, there was none of the animosity and stiffness that usually accompanied such visits, for it was a mission of gratitude. Hizzoner wanted to acknowledge the quick action and efforts displayed on his behalf, and had come on over in a conciliatory mood.

There were no medals of heroism to be handed out, but he made it a point to seek out and step up to each man, look him in the eye, shake his hand, and personally thank him for his efforts. Of course, each man responded that it was nothing, and that he was only too glad to be there and to be of service. All part of the day's work.

Naturally, this being the real world, they never did learn to trust each other and all become friends.

Indeed, less than a few months later, a new conflict raised itself up when the mayor wanted both the police and the fire department to have the same uniforms, only with different badges. He felt it would cost the taxpayers less if all the uniforms came from a single source. The police and firemen felt differently, and so the old feuds were in full swing again, but that's another story. For today at least, there was a tolerable truce in effect.

Anxious to make as much hay out of this congenial situation as possible, the Cap was personally conducting Hizzoner around the station, giving him a detailed inspection of each fire truck and whatever it was carrying. Then while going by the desk office, the mayor bought himself up short, and peered in through the windows that looked out on the engine bay.

"Say-y-y-y! Look at that!" He said.

He was looking at the desk.

In fact, he was looking real hard. First there was an expression of wonder, and then one of longing. It was as if the loneliest man in the world had suddenly stepped through a doorway, and there confronted a beautiful young woman who turned and smiled at him.

The deskman on duty looked out through the window, nodded politely, and then stood up and opened the door leading into the office. First, he nodded at the Cap, then turned to the Mayor.

“Good morning, your Honor,” he said brightly. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Swaying in a minor trance, Hizzoner walked slowly past the deskman. He didn’t even look at him. Softly and lightly, he reached out and brushed the desk with just three fingers of his out-stretched hand, and then he sighed.

I’ve never made up my mind which description of his face to use, so I’ll try both: Dad said later that the mayor looked like a weary pilgrim who was finally able to touch the holiest relic in Rome. Almost the same time, Crazy Ed told me caustically that it was more like a lecherous old man at the follies, who had worked himself close enough to the stage to touch the leg of a chorus girl.

This desk was not only haunted, it could cast a spell, too.

“Why this is, I mean, this thing is... Why, it’s beautiful!” He breathed. His full hand was on the surface now, but he was stroking it as lightly as a blind man tracing the carvings on an eggshell. Eyes wide, he turned to the Cap. “But what’s it doing here? How did you get it?”

In spite of himself, the Cap stiffened. Hizzoner’s tone of voice was that of a man who sees a crucifix tossed on a poker table as stakes.

“Well sir,” he began, “the truth is we found it. I mean, a few of the boys did while they were off duty. But they found it fair and square, by accident, I mean, and let me tell you...”

At this moment, with the Book of All Knowledge and Hope dawning behind his eyes, Crazy Ed Carrier interrupted things by thrusting himself between them.

“What the Captain means, Your Honor, is that we found this thing sort of accidental-like, while were looking for something else, and so we got it. But to tell you the truth, sir, in spite of all the hard work we did to get it in here, and then clean it up, it just doesn’t seem to fit, somehow. No matter what we do. It’s ugly where it is. Out of place. Do you know what I mean?”

Hizzoner stretched his neck up and rotated his head to look at Crazy Ed with both eyes. His mouth twitched. Clearly, something that he saw in the far distance was now up close, and clearly within range.

“Why yes, young man. Yes, I think I do. I know exactly what you mean. What you need is a WORKING desk. Something useful and sturdy! Not something that belongs in a museum!”

“Damn! Er, excuse me Your Honor, but yes. Yes, that’s it, that’s it exactly! Why, some of the men are actually afraid of that desk! Can you believe it? They don’t want to sit behind it, even! It’s almost like it’s got a hex or something on it. -Can you imagine that? Sometimes, hardly any work gets done there at all!”

Even before Ed could finish talking, Hizzoner was emphatically moving his head up and down. “Why, bless my soul, young man. I believe you! In fact, I think we can help each other! I’ll tell you what! I’m willing to pay...”

Waving his hands like brushing away flies, Crazy Ed shook his head back and forth. “No-no-no, Your Honor! We all work for the city, don’t we? What would the newspapers all say if they found out we were selling things to each other? We can’t have that.” Then Ed lowered his voice and leaned close.

Hizzoner leaned closer still.

“And me and the boys, Mr. Mayor, we did a lot of work on that desk.”

Hizzoner nodded his agreement.

“Tell you what, Your Honor. How about a trade? That’s a valuable desk in there, very valuable.” Crazy Ed lifted up a finger. “In fact, unless I’m mistaken, your office needs a new one. Something er, suitable, to the décor, right?”

Hizzoner winced, but nodded his agreement again.

“So here’s what we can do, Your Honor. We got a few things we need and we’d really like to have, but there’s just so much paperwork, forms and things we got to fill out to get them from the department, know what I mean?”

Hizzoner nodded wisely. There was even a small wink. Good as gold, from a politician.

“Why that’s grand, Your Honor, simply grand! Just four or five, - no! Let’s make it three! Just three items we need help with. Think you can help us?”

“Name ‘em!”

“Well first, we need another desk. Obviously, we can’t leave that space in the front office empty now, can we?”

“Of course not!”

“Well, that’s great! But upstairs, well, we got two problems. The refrigerator in the kitchen’s the biggest one. Been there since the war. It’s cranky, makes a lot of noise, and just doesn’t seem to work as well. -Know what I mean?”

“I’ve had one like that, myself.”

With an elaborate, casual ease, Ed continued. “Well then, Your Honor, there’s the TV we got in the lounge. One of the boys brought in his own, sometime back, but you know how it is with charity. Sometimes, you just don’t get the best there is. It’s just not working as well as we wanted it to. -Know what I mean?”

Ed wasn’t exaggerating. Dad had counted 53 separate pieces going into the trash.

“Absolutely!” said The Mayor. His tone was one of full understanding.

Two days later, one of Haverhill’s Public Works Department trucks backed up to the side door of the Fire Station, manned by three beefy employees. In less than an hour, a second-hand, but quite sturdy and serviceable desk was sitting quietly in the front office. A new refrigerator was humming in the kitchen, big enough to hold a stallion if you had a taste for horse meat, and a few of the boys were happily tuning the reception of their brand-new TV set in the lounge.

Without a spoken word but in full agreement, Crazy Ed was declared a hero. It was a happy ending for everyone who was involved in the affair.

The Cap was happy, for life had returned to normal at the station. Morale was up, again.

The boys were happy, for they now had a new refrigerator and a new TV, both of which worked far better than their predecessors.

Direct From His Home In Riverside

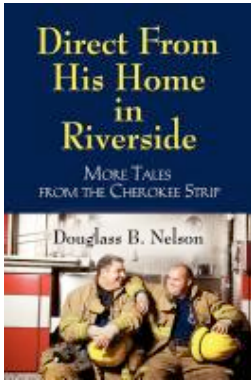
Dad was happy, for a fantastic item he found at the dump turned out to be useful, after all.

I was happy because my father was happy. So was my family.

The mayor was happy, too.

-Until November, that is.

He lost the election.



Small town America in the 60's was not all picket fences and elm trees. There were also fires and the firemen who fought them. Most of them were men who fought in the Second World War. This time, however, they fought not for their country, but for their neighbors, and against one of man's most ancient enemies. It could be grim, but not always. There was also laughter, love, and a touch of boyish madness.

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