

OCTOBER 2006
35 cents

THE
*mysterious,
traveler*
MAGAZINE

*Five New
Tales of
Terror!*

JAY NORMAN

CHARLES MORGAN

MARK ZAHN

WILLIAM A. HALL

MARK ALLAN REYNOLDS

GREAT STORIES OF MYSTERY, TERROR AND SUSPENSE

GREETINGS. This is The Mysterious Traveler speaking. Once again I would like to extend an invitation for you to join me on a journey into your darkest fears. Our destination on this trip may be unsettling to your nerves, so I suggest you muster what courage you have before commencing with the stories between these pages.

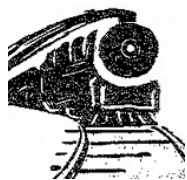
And what stories they are! Five tales of deliciously diabolical reading. I have carefully hand-picked each tale, choosing every macabre story to ensure that you have the maximum amount of intrigue, fright, and dread that THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER MAGAZINE can deliver. The authors have assured me that their submitted efforts are of the very highest quality, each one positively brimming with morbid atmosphere and mysterious doings. I know that after reading them I spent a sleepless night – one full of horrifying dreams and disturbing visions...

So get a good grip on your nerves. And be warned! The stories you are about to read are guaranteed to thrill you and chill you to the very bone. Read at your own risk, as sleep may not come easy once you have turned the last page.

Until our paths cross again – perhaps on the next train-ride home – I shall remain your ever humble servant of literary oddities and all things bizarre.

Sincerely,

The Mysterious Traveler



FALL 2006

THE *mysterious traveler*

MAGAZINE

GREAT STORIES OF MYSTERY, DETECTION, AND SUSPENSE

MYSTERY

DEVIL'S NIGHTJay Norman 4

STRANGE STORIES

SECOND CHANCECharles Morgan 13

CRIME

FAVORITE CHAIRMark Zahn 19

SUSPENSE

THE FOURTH MANWilliam A. Hall 26

THE MACABRE

CARVEDMark Allan Reynolds 35

SHORT SHOCKER

JACK & THE DEVILThe Mysterious Traveler 41

SPECIAL FEATURES

A WORD ON THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER43

All copyrights are held by their respective authors.

SETH T. SMOLINSKE, Publisher

MARK ZAHN, Managing Editor

Dedicated to Robert Arthur & David P. Kogan

In the hustle and bustle of today's modern world, Hallowe'en is a celebration that has been all but forgotten. It is still honored by a select few, but its dark origins and ancient history are now a passing memory of our culture. But for some it still holds a strange power...

DEVIL'S NIGHT

By JAY NORMAN

Owen Paradise rolled down the window and breathed in the cool October air. Paradise had spent the past ten years shivering through Chicago winters and he knew that October in the Midwest and October in California were two completely different animals. When Halloween rolled around in California, the air was cool and the days were long; a fine time to be alive. Whereas in Chicago the autumn air always skirted a razor's edge between crisp and bitterly cold.

But however different the weather seemed to be, the traditions of Halloween remained the same. Kids still carved pumpkins, cut eye-holes in white bed sheets, and begged for candy just

like they did in his youth.

One curiosity Paradise observed was that the celebration of Halloween took on more importance the further South he traveled. In Los Angeles, parents worried about the safety of their children, and Halloween went from an all night event of begging, pranks, and fun, to an hour of trick-or-treating around a block or two of suburbia.

The border towns near Mexico, however, were still practicing the Halloween of his youth. And now, to the primarily Hispanic population of the borderlands, it was All Hallow's Eve – a night of raucous jubilation before the solemn marking of All Saint's Day on November first. In the border towns there were still parades and dances and parties and contests. Unchaperoned children freely wandered the streets dressed as witches, ghosts and goblins; begging for candy at every door they could find.

Paradise stretched his six foot frame and yawned. What was supposed to be a simple tail job around Los Angeles had taken him South through San Diego;

right to the very border of Mexico. When he'd found where his pigeon had nested, a pile of buildings called San Ysidro, he placed a telephone call to his office, and then pointed the car toward the nearest motel. He was disappointed at having come so far South on Halloween night only to find a bed waiting for him. But he had been in the car the majority of the day tailing a girl on the run, and he was tired.

A more decadent, glamorous agent might have been inspired by the harvest moon and sworn off sleep, partaking in the festivities that lit up the small border town. But he was far from decadent these days. Paradise could barely keep his eyes open as he pulled his car into the motel's gravel drive. The most exciting thing to happen all day was when the girl he was tailing suddenly took an off-ramp to a roadside park. Paradise had continued on a mile up the road and waited. He hoped she would continue South and not change her mind; heading back home. Ten minutes later she was back on the road and he was yawning again.

Four hours after the brief detour, Paradise entered the office of the Motel Shangri-La. It was pushing midnight and the only light in the motel's office came from a dim lamp on the front desk and a jack-o-lantern made out of a large yellow squash with a candle burning inside. Paradise knew the routine by heart. An unkempt proprietor, asleep on a cot in the back room, is roused from his slumber. He comes to the desk pulling up his suspenders; yawning and eyeing Paradise suspiciously. There's some small talk, a quick sign of the registry, then Paradise takes the room key and crashes on a lousy bed.

But this time it was different. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and Paradise immediately smelled trouble. The motel's manager, a fat man wearing a stained undershirt and looking very much like Paradise had imagined, appeared almost as soon as the bell was chimed.

Paradise looked him over as he scratched a name in the book. The fat man had beads of sweat on his forehead and was breath-

ing heavy. A matchstick in his mouth flicked nervously from one side to the other, and the thinning comb-over of hair on top of his skull was practically standing on end. And now another mystery: His key was for room thirteen – the last room on the far side of the lot. He hadn't noticed any other cars in the drive when he pulled up, and there were no lights on in any of the other twelve rooms. Surely he was the only customer...

“Don't you have anything closer to the office?” Paradise wondered. “My car is parked right outside the door.”

The fat man shook his head and ushered Paradise outside.

“That is the only one. My cleaning lady, my daughter, she is in town at the Hallow's Eve party. And the other cleaning lady is at home sick. All the other rooms are dirty, see? Thirteen is turned down. You like that one, okay?”

Paradise grabbed the keys from the ignition and his bag from the front seat. He studied the fat man. “Are you okay, mister? Or are you sick, too?”

The fat man licked his lips, and then walked Paradise to his room. “I'm maybe sick too. There's a bug going around. Don't worry. You like thirteen okay. You call if you need anything. Coffee in the office tomorrow morning, okay?”

“That's fine.”

As they walked, Paradise caught a flutter of movement out of the corner of his eye. The door directly in front of his car, room one, opened a few inches and then closed. The light burning above the office door, the moonlight, and the soft glow of the motel's neon sign, had provided just enough illumination for Paradise to see the pale flash of a young woman's face in the darkness.

They arrived at his room. The fat man opened the door and stepped inside. The small room was sparsely furnished: bed, chair, dresser, and nightstand. A small toilet and sink in the rear. Two towels hung neatly beside a mirror. Paradise studied a painting of a bullfighter that hung proudly above the bed as the motel proprietor clicked on a

lamp. He swept his arm grandly.

“You sleep good, okay? Soft beds.”

“Good night,” Paradise smiled agreeably. The fat man paused as if he might say something more, and then left the room. Paradise peered through the curtains and watched him go. When the fat man was safely inside the office, he slipped his gun into his jacket pocket and stepped out onto the short wooden porch that ran around the front of the building. Gazing up at the stars, Paradise lit a cigarette and rubbed his eyes. A strong smell of sage was carried by the breeze. In the distance he could hear the whoops and hollers of Halloween parties still going strong. He rubbed his eyes once more and ground the butt of his smoke with his heel.

Moving unobtrusively, Paradise stayed deep within the shadows of the porch's five foot overhang and approached room one. Outside the door he paused to listen. He slowly turned the knob and stepped inside, pausing once more to listen for any movement in the dark room.

Satisfied, he stepped to the nightstand and clicked on the lamp.

The room was a duplicate of his quarters; the only difference being the painting above the bed. His immediate thought was that something had been burned recently. Following his nose, Paradise moved to the bathroom and flipped on the light. The smell of burned cloth lingered in the air – and something else...

As he scanned the room, his eyes fell on the towel rack beside the toilet – only one towel. He moved closer and examined the small bathroom. There were beads of water inside the sink. Something had been rinsed down the drain recently. Paradise ran a finger around the white porcelain basin and held it up to the light. Flecks of a black substance stuck to his finger – ashes – probably from the burned cloth.

He then turned his attention to the floor. As he kneeled to peer under the bed, his hand felt something damp. He ran his fingers over the carpet. At the foot of the bed there was a circular area about two feet in diameter that had been scrubbed with

soap. He looked under the bed and spied a small object. It was a wooden match that had been chewed on one end. Paradise pocketed the match and surveyed the room once more.

Satisfied, he shut off the lights and stepped outside. Instead of going back to his room, he walked inside the office and rang the bell. He heard the squeaking springs of the cot as the fat man got out of bed, then smiled graciously as the proprietor entered the office.

“You don’t like the bed?”

“The bed is fine,” Paradise smiled. “Who was he?”

“Huh?” The fat man pulled up his suspenders and looked at Paradise blankly. “Who was who?”

“The man who was shot in room one. Who was he?”

The fat man’s jaw worked, but nothing came out. He blinked several times, and then laughed suddenly. “A joke, huh? What’s this all about – a Halloween joke so late at night? You can’t sleep or something?”

“No joke,” said Paradise. “Someone was shot recently in

room one. You’ve got ten seconds before I go for the cops, so I’d advise you to come clean.”

A look of panic spread across the fat man’s face. He ran a hand over his sweating forehead and leaned on the counter top, his arms spread wide as if begging for mercy.

“I don’t know... what’s this about, huh?”

“It’s about the man that was murdered here tonight,” Paradise growled. “Let me refresh your memory. A man checks into room one. You or the girl that’s here, maybe your daughter, is in there waiting for him. You’ve got a gun with a towel wrapped around the muzzle to deaden the sound. He turns on the light and comes into the room, and then you step out from behind the door and plug him. He falls to the floor by the bed, leaving a bloodstain on the carpet. Meanwhile, the towel has caught fire from the gunshot. You run it under the sink to put it out. Then, while you’re getting rid of the body, your daughter scrubs the stained carpet with soap to get rid of the blood. Any of this ring a bell?”

The fat looked at Paradise helplessly. He raised his arms again, pleading. "No... No... I don't know, okay? What do you want? You want money? We have no money! You're not a Santino man – are you from the police?"

"I'm not the police. And I don't want money. I want the truth." Paradise took a step toward the door. "I'll probably go to the cops either way, but now's your chance to spill it."

The fat man's shoulders sagged and his head dropped in defeat. "How can you believe the truth, huh? You want the truth? I give it to you – but how can you believe?"

"Try me," Paradise said flatly.

The fat man went to the office door, looked out timorously, and then closed it softly. He resumed his post behind the front desk.

"Hands on the counter top where I can see them," Paradise ordered. His right hand dipped into his coat pocket. "Anything funny and we'll find out who's the better shot."

The fat man complied, resting his elbows on the worn wooden counter. He took a deep breath

and sighed.

"Maria! Come out!"

Paradise lit a cigarette, and then watched as a beautiful girl, no more than seventeen, limped through the back door of the office. A large bandage covered a welt on her forehead, just above her right eye. A bloodstain was centered in the middle of the gauze. Her bottom lip was split and swollen.

"My daughter," the fat man said proudly. Suddenly his face grew dark. "The animal that did this got what he deserved, okay?"

"Start from the beginning."

The girl stood beside her father and held his arm, glaring at Paradise with disdain. The fat man breathed deeply and sighed once more. He said nothing for a moment, as if trying to decide where to begin.

"My daughter, she does not speak English so well – so I speak for her, okay?"

"That's fine."

"My Maria, she is special, okay? Her mother, God rest her soul, was of the Gypsy blood; the Rom from Serbia. Beautiful and

kind, she taught Maria in the old ways.”

Paradise watched with raised eyebrows as the fat man quickly crossed himself, then kissed a small gold crucifix that hung around the flabby folds of his neck.

“She instructed Maria in the ancient arts,” he continued. “It is not the Jesus way, but Maria learns that, too. I insist she learn that, too. She’s a good girl. She loves her papa and she goes to church. But she is very good at the old ways, okay? Some call them the Black Arts, but that is only the ignorant – those who do not understand the past – who do not understand our culture.

“She is very beautiful, my Maria. Always the boys are chasing her. One boy he chases her too much. He is a hoodlum: a bad man working for Santino – the crime boss of San Ysidro. This boy, Carlos – he is a man now – he desires for Maria for a long time. But she turns him away. Always, for years, she turns him away. But one night he will not be turned away. Carlos waits for my daughter as she walks back

from town. He hides like a snake – catching her and pulling her into the shadows. He... he has his way with her, okay?”

Paradise nodded in understanding.

“I wanted to kill the filthy bastard, but Maria, she had a better way. Just like her mother she is smart, my Maria. She has kept something from Carlos.”

The fat man plucked the top off of the squash jack-o-lantern as if to demonstrate.

“She pulls hair from his head that night and uses it. The old ways work best for this kind of thing, this sin. The old ways bring good fortune to the wise, but they also bring misery to the wicked. When used properly, they are strong magic that cannot be broken. Using the hair, she curses the animal that has taken her womanhood. She burns it and sends forth a spell to Carlos. In a week’s time, his manhood is painful. It turns blue, then purple, then black. The doctor’s cannot explain. It is shriveled – useless. He is no longer a man, okay?”

Paradise studied the fat man

and his daughter with a blank, expressionless face. It was obvious they believed every word of the tale. He crushed the butt of his smoke under his heel and bade the fat man go on.

The motel owner replaced the lid to the squash and put an arm around his daughter.

“But Carlos, he is not so dumb, okay? He knows who do this to him. I fear for my daughter, so in town I buy a gun. I know he will come looking for my daughter, and I will defend her. Tonight he comes. Maria is in room one, cleaning. Carlos sneaks like a snake around the back of the motel so I do not see him. He is drunk from the Hallow’s Eve parties. He beats Maria and threatens to kill her if she does not take back the curse. She tells him she can reverse the spell if he gives her a piece of his clothing. Carlos gives her his handkerchief and Maria says some words and sets it on fire in the sink. Nothing happens. His manhood is the same – a useless black worm. Carlos becomes enraged and he beats her again. That is when I come in with the

gun and shoot the devil in the heart. Carlos falls to the floor, leaving blood on the carpet. Maria wets a towel for her wounds, and then uses it to mop up the blood when I have removed the snake’s body.”

The fat man looked at Paradise expectantly, as if his story could be anything but the truth. He held his daughter close and waited for Paradise to respond. After a moment of uneasy silence, the fat man cleared his throat.

“So you see it is hard to believe, okay? You ask for the truth and I give it to you. But now you must know this: tomorrow, when the Hallow’s Eve celebrations are ended, Santino will see that Carlos is gone. He will – how you say – put two and two together? Tomorrow, Santino and his men come here looking for Carlos. I have buried his body far away, in a place where they never find it. I will tell them I don’t know what happened to Carlos – he did not come here. And maybe they believe me, and maybe they don’t.”

The fat man pounded an angry

fist on the counter top and cursed in Spanish. His daughter cringed and buried her face in her father's arm.

"What's to stop them from shooting me and taking my daughter and my motel? I pray to Jesus and the Virgin Mary to send us help. And now you come and will not believe and say you go to the police. Well, go to the police, okay? Santino *is* the police. He is the judge. He is the whole San Ysidro! You stay here you get shot at. You go to police you get shot at, okay? Leave tonight and you will leave with your life."

Another uneasy silence filled the small office, broken only by the crackling sound of fireworks being set off somewhere in town.

Paradise felt a headache coming on and rubbed his temples. The fat man watched him carefully, his eyes pleading. Paradise lit another cigarette and walked to the door. He stepped out onto the wooden porch and breathed deeply of the sage-scented air. Even though it was well past midnight, the sounds of the Halloween revelers in town had

not subsided.

Tonight was the Devil's night, and tomorrow the sun would rise on All Saint's Day and Santino and his men would come to the Motel Shangri-La looking for blood. But it didn't have to be *his* blood that was spilled. Hell, he had just come looking for a few hours of sleep on a lousy bed, not a Halloween shoot-out.

He could walk away.

He could get in his car right now and never look back.

Paradise mashed the cigarette butt into his heel and then flicked it into the gravel.

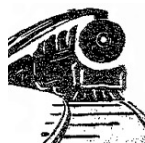
"I'll help you."

"Bless you," the fat man beamed. His sweaty face lit up in a crooked smile, and the girl kissed his hand repeatedly.

"Can you shoot a gun?" the fat man asked.

Paradise smiled cruelly.

"Yes."



Sometimes in life we are afforded the rare opportunity at a second chance. To start over from square one. But it is a rare occurrence indeed when one is afforded a second chance in death. As he drives, life and death are the last things on the mind of John Holly...

SECOND CHANCE

By CHARLES MORGAN

What is life? That is the philosophical question that has been asked since the beginning of time. To most of us, life is our daily existence, an existence where we try to accomplish certain goals. Sometimes the goals are lofty; sometimes the goal is to simply survive.

Let us take a look into the life of one John Holly. His friends like to call him Bud, because of his resemblance to the late rock-n-roll singer. Bud is still a fairly young man. He has short blonde hair, black rimmed glasses and is slight of build. He is as intelligent as his gauche appearance would suggest. He is married to an attractive and petite brunette, named Marilyn.

Bud and Marilyn are in their car coming home from an office party. Bud is driving his new black

Mercedes, a status symbol of how successful he has been in life.

It was a night where the blackness almost took on the physical appearance of crushed black velvet. The overcast sky blocked out any light from the moon and stars above. The road was slick from the residue of an earlier spring shower – the illumination from the headlights seemed to disappear in the blackness of the wet pavement.

Inside the car, the radio was on. The volume wasn't loud enough to be discernable as anything but background noise. The new car smell of fresh leather still permeated the air. Bud was in a suit and tie, although now the tie was pulled away from his unbuttoned collar. Marilyn was in clad in a tight fitting party dressed that revealed just a hint of cleavage.

"I really enjoyed that," Bud commented, as his hands casually maneuvered the steering wheel. "You know, at parties like that, the big wigs almost seem human."

"That was never the problem," Marilyn responded. "The problem was that you thought they never treated you like you were human." She put her dainty hand on the dashboard and gripped it.

"Whatever. I'm feeling good."

“You should, as much as you drank tonight.”

“You’re not going to start on that again are you?” Bud asked, scarcely hiding the disgust in his voice.

Marilyn knew that tone. In the state he was in, she knew it was best to just leave him alone. Maybe she would approach him about his drinking some other time. Resigned, she just stared at the road ahead. Her body tightened as she inadvertently tried to guide the car. Marilyn shifted in her seat as Bud belatedly corrected his course causing the car to squeal as it fishtailed. Again, she wanted to say something, but decided that bringing up the subject would only make him mad and matters worse. She decided to change the subject.

“It’s funny how at these parties people are always talking about the shape the world is in.”

“Yeah,” Bud chuckled, “I don’t know why people complain about the shape the world’s in. What’s wrong with round?”

The big oak tree stood near the highway. It had stood there for scores of years, long before there was any road, a road that cut into a sharp curve not fifty feet away. The oak had once been in the mid-

dle of the forest, now it stood at its edge. It was a sentry of nature at the edge of modernization.

The old oak felt the lights softly hit it. The intensity and warmth of the glow grew as the car approached. Then, at its brightest moment, the light disappeared as the car sped by. It was a pattern that the old oak tree was familiar with. But this time, there was something different. After the passing of the light, the serene night was suddenly split by the squeal of tires caused by the locking of brakes. The skidding sound was punctuated by a crash like an exclamation point. The big oak tree immediately sensed the pain, the tearing splintering pain of one of his brothers. The tree also sensed the numbed crushing pain of the occupants in the car.

Bud felt his pain. He was blinded by it.

“Marilyn, are you all right?” he half-mumbled and half-yelled.

He heard nothing but a scream, a scream that originated somewhere inside of his head. Slowly the scream started to dissipate, and with it, so too did his pain.

Bud felt himself starting to rise up, to float. He looked down and could see his wife and himself

inside of his Mercedes. Because of his condition, he hadn't been able to navigate the sharp curve.

Bud reached down and tried to touch his wife, but his grasp fell short as he continued to float upward. He saw a white car stop on the road and a man run out. He yelled to the man to help Marilyn. The man though, couldn't hear Bud's plea.

Slowly, and then with progressive swiftness, Bud felt himself glide through the air. He realized now that he was dead. Somehow he didn't really care. For the first time in his life, or death, Bud felt truly free from the cumbersome ties of existence.

Bud then felt himself start to rise again. He could see his town, then his world shrink underneath him. He was flying through space. Bud was amazed at how brightly the stars shined. Faster and faster he traveled. He looked all around trying to absorb in all of the beauty. It was overwhelming.

Things then became blurred around him and he had the sensation that he was now in a tunnel. Bud looked ahead and could see he was headed directly for a tremendously brilliant white light. It became so penetrating that he had

to close his eyes. He was sensing sensations that of which he had never felt before. They made him feel wonderful. Even under the influence of artificial stimuli, he had never felt anywhere near as good.

"John Holly," a voice boomed.

Bud opened his eyes and looked up. He was standing before a man who was seated behind a high podium. Bud squinted, but his eyes couldn't focus clearly upon the person who had addressed him. The glare of the white light emanating behind this man was just too brilliant to see through, making the appearance of the man almost translucent. The utter brilliance of the rays made this place a bright yet colorless place. Even without being able to see well though, Bud could sense that there were other people around him. He knew that these other people there were his friends and relatives.

Bud stood in awe. He had the remarkable feeling of unadulterated love washing over him.

"John Holly," the voice started again. "You are here to have your fate decided. The verdict will be heaven, or hell. Do you understand?"

Maybe it was the light, or

maybe it was his surroundings, but despite the pending judgement Bud still maintained the tremendous feeling of peace and happiness. He cheerfully nodded that he understood.

“We will start with the most grievous charge against you,” there was a pause, “the murder of your wife. John Holly, defend yourself against this charge!”

“Murder? I didn’t murder my wife!” Bud cried, as all of the good feelings he had felt vanished, replaced by the chill of anticipation for the things to come.

“John Holly, your wife perished at your hands. Premeditated or not, if it were not for you, she would still be alive.”

Bud tried to talk. “I ah... I don’t know what to say. I loved, I mean I love my wife. I would never want to hurt her.”

Bud tried to steady himself as his body was racked with emotion. His voice now quivered as he continued to talk. “I didn’t mean to hurt her. All I can say is I’m sorry. I’m terribly sorry.”

“Since you have not taken the gift of salvation, you shall now be judged upon your own merits. While it is understood that your action was not intentional and that

you are truly sorry, you are still responsible for the negligence of the act. You shall therefore be held accountable. You John Holly are sentenced to eternity in hell.”

Dead silence answered the decree.

Then the man continued. “Hell is the total absence of God. It is the total absence of love, family and friends, of anything pure, noble and good. Even on earth you had these things to a degree, and God was always there for you whether you sought him or not. You did not. I am sorry.”

“Just a moment please,” another voice interjected.

It was then, while Bud felt sick of spirit that he realized there were more beings present at his table of judgement.

The beings began to converse. Bud had no idea what they were saying. In a moment they stopped talking. The main voice boomed again.

“Your relatively young age, your sincerity in sorrow, and the frailty of your own essence dictates that justice can be served by allowing you the choice of returning and reliving your entire life over. This will not guarantee you any salvation. In fact, you could

make it worse by poisoning the chances of the people around you.”

There was a pause so that what had been said could sink in. Then the voice continued. “If you go back, you will not know that you are getting a second chance. Things might seem familiar to you at times, but you will not remember why. The only thing that can save you is a strong sense of right and wrong. Your free will shall still be there to lead you on whatever path you choose.” Again there was a pause. “John Holly, do you choose to go back to earth and relive your life?”

Bud didn't have to think. The loss of his wife, and of course his sentence inspired the words to spring from his lips. “Yes!”

“Very well John, seek light.”

Bud was blinded by light.

He was again in the comfort of his mother's womb.

Bud started to relive his life. As he grew up, he would have the occasional feeling that he had been in a certain instant or situation before. At first he just ignored these moments. However, as time went by, these occurrences happened a little more frequently, or at least he thought about them a little

more differently than just being *déjà vu*.

He postulated that he was reliving his life. Reliving it up to a critical situation that some how he had blown. He pretended that he was getting a second chance at something. He didn't know what, but he decided to do things right, or at least the best that he could. It was like a game, an insurance against making mistakes.

He thought it was pretty corny, but as long as no one knew his motivation, no one could accuse him of being crazy.

Bud sincerely tried to keep his vices and weaknesses in check. He tried to help other people he would come across. In his mind, he was trying to be, and therefore he was a good person.

Life went on with very little difference in the major occurrences of his life. Yet the quality of that life, unbeknownst to him, was better. Then, that fateful night again. Bud found himself in his car with his wife Marilyn, coming home from the party.

“I really enjoyed that,” Bud said. “You know Marilyn, you really charmed the boss tonight.” He kept one hand on the steering wheel; the other hand was firmly

holding his wife's hand.

"That's what super wives like me are for," Marilyn laughed. She thought of how lucky she was to have a husband like Bud. He made it easy for her to give. She gave his hand a squeeze.

"You are a super wife, and I think I'm hopelessly in love with you."

They drove together in the silent bliss of their own thoughts and Marilyn soon fell asleep. A soft sigh caught Bud's attention. He looked over at her and smiled. Then he looked back at the road.

The feeling of *déjà vu* was back.

The old oak tree felt the oncoming car lights softly hit it. As the brightness increased, the tree seemed to sense an intensity that it didn't comprehend. The car sped by causing a slight breeze to blow on the tree's bark. The old oak shuddered and waited.

Bud had his eyes fixed intently on the road. Both hands were now tightly clenched on the steering wheel. He slowed down and took the sharp rain slicked curve carefully. As he started to speed up on the straightaway, he looked into his rear view mirror. He couldn't

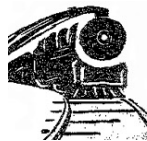
see anything but darkness, nonetheless a shiver shot through him.

"I hate that curve," Bud muttered to himself.

The old oak heard the engine rev as the car sped up. Suddenly, the tearing sound of crashing metal split the night. The tree was relieved that his brothers were all right. But the old oak did feel sorry for the instant loss of three human lives. As he listened to his friends he learned that a human in a white car coming toward the curve had crossed over and hit head on the black car with the two humans in it.

John Holly's life had ended when it was supposed to. However, the life he led changed him and others, in a different way than before.

The question remains: what is life? Maybe the answer is simple. Life is what you put into it.



Those surroundings that are most comfortable to us can sometimes be the most frightening. Long shadows in a darkened room, no matter how familiar, can be ominous and chilling. Martha Petrie will be faced with a disturbing choice in just such a setting...

FAVORITE CHAIR

By MARK ZAHN

Martha Petrie slid the elevator's steel grate shut and pushed the broken '2' button a dozen times until the box started moving up. She sighed, blew a curl of red hair off her nose, and leaned back against the wall. It had been another long night at the diner. The work was hard, the customers were fresh, and the tips were lousy. She kicked off one shoe and massaged her foot, trying to remember why, exactly, she was waiting tables at Joe's instead of singing and dancing on Broadway. She laughed loudly just to hear her own voice, and then wrenched her worn shoe back on.

Her apartment, if you could call it that, was 222 – at the end of the hall. Each night when she returned home from work another light bulb in the long hallway was burned out, and the foul smell of

cooked cabbage was somehow stronger. Carlos, the super, was supposed to fix the lights two weeks ago. Martha had reminded him twice already. "What if some nut is up there, Carlos, hopped up on something?" she had argued. "How am I supposed to see somebody in a dark doorway, huh?" Carlos ruffled his funny papers and nodded sympathetically. "I know. I know. You are right, Marda. I fix it, okay? Tomorrow there is light, okay?"

Tomorrow came and went, and now it was Friday night and the hallway was dark. Martha reached into her purse and clutched the cold hardness of the blackjack inside. She had bought it from the pawn shop around the corner for two dollars for nights just like this. A night when the moon seemed brighter, the shadows stretched longer, and an air of uneasy tension encompassed her every fiber. She was used to nights like this – particularly on payday. If a crook was lurking in the shadows waiting to snatch her earnings, she would crack him over the skull with the weapon and drag his body down to the first floor and knock on Carlos' door. Maybe that would convince him to fix the lights!

Of course there wasn't anyone

waiting for her in the doorway. There was never anyone waiting. Martha unlocked the door and stepped inside; quickly snapping the chain and deadbolt into place. Her hand groped for the lamp by the doorway. She clicked the switch twice but the apartment remained cloaked in darkness. Martha cursed under her breath and waited several seconds, allowing her eyes to adjust to the blackness.

It has been said that when a person is deprived of a sense, such as vision, their other senses become more acute. This thought occurred to Martha Petrie as she stood in the dark by the front door. She shivered and thought herself foolish. "Stupid girl!" she said out loud, mainly just to hear her own voice. But still - there was something. Her ears picked up the normal sounds of traffic and sirens outside her window, and the sound of her neighbor's television next door. Nothing unusual there. Her nostrils twitched and processed the scents she associated with her apartment. She smelled perfume, candles, hairspray, and... cologne? That couldn't be. She hadn't had a man in her apartment in the two months that she had lived there. There was something else as well;

a thin, coppery smell that reminded her of pennies.

Martha inched forward toward the windows in the kitchenette, moving her feet by memory. She bumped into the small breakfast table, making a sound that seemed unreasonably loud in the confines of her own home. With haste, she snapped open the two blinds and allowed moonlight and the glow of the city to illuminate the small space. The first thing she saw by the faint light was that the blackjack had somehow found its way back into her hand. She forced laughter and tossed the object onto the table. The resounding clatter that followed made her wince.

Everything in her cramped world seemed to be in order. The ironing board was by the wall. The easy chair was facing the small black and white television. The coffee table and the bookcase were in place next to the lamp and the love seat. Martha allowed herself to relax and her thoughts immediately turned to removing her shoes and drawing herself a nice warm bubble bath. The thought of a soak raised her spirits and she laughed out loud once more. Tomorrow was Saturday - no work! She could sleep in, go to the square for coffee, the market

for fresh produce, and then maybe catch the two o'clock matinee at the Shangri-La. Perhaps at one of these places she would meet a man more interesting than Carlos, the apathetic super who stared too long at her legs.

These were the thoughts that occupied Martha Petrie's mind as she shuffled toward the easy chair that rested in front of the television - her favorite chair. It had been her father's; one of the few remaining artifacts from the small town life in Iowa she had left behind two years ago. It wasn't the most comfortable piece of furniture, but its coarse fabric and slightly musty smell reminded her of home. Her last thought, before her world was turned upside down, was of the chair and the sweet relief she would feel when she finally removed the shoes and stockings from her aching feet.

Her body was set in motion toward the chair - falling backward in a heavy slump known by those who toil in exhausting, wearisome labor. She knew there was a body occupying the seat almost instantly. What else could it be? Her backside came in contact with gaunt legs and bony knees, her right hand touched the clammy flesh of the intruder's

hand. The smell of pennies was thick. This information was processed in Martha's brain at the speed of light. Stopping her fall, almost in the same movement, she was moving her body forward; up and away from the person in the chair. Even as she was moving upward, her brain insisted she move faster; that any moment the man's arms would reach out, encircling her in a smothering, deadly embrace.

Martha's forward trajectory took her through the bedroom door where her hand found the light switch. Her mind had a split second to ponder whether shedding light on the intruder was in her best interest - perhaps what awaited her in her favorite chair was something she would rather not see. But it was too late. The switch went up and light flooded from the bedroom doorway, casting a crooked yellow rectangle across the apartment and the body in the chair. And it was a body. The smell of pennies - the smell of blood - radiated out from a blooming rose on the front of the man's shirt. Martha clamped a hand over her mouth, stifling the scream that threatened to issue forth.

Things began happening very quickly then. From outside came

the wail of sirens. Martha rushed to the window and noticed the latch had been jimmied. So that was how he got in! Up the fire escape, then a short climb along the ledge. Her breath came in deep, violent gasps. She forced herself to calm down for fear she would faint. When her breathing was under control, she peered out to the street below. There were police everywhere! Flashlights blinked on and off like fireflies as uniformed men, guns drawn, combed through streets and alleyways.

A low moan from the body made her gasp in horror. She rushed over to the man, grabbing the blackjack along the way.

The man was not dead, but he was clearly dying. His eyelids fluttered and, although his lips did not move, there came another gurgling moan. Martha stood before him, like stone, transfixed by the gruesome site. She clutched the blackjack with both hands, ready to strike out should he suddenly leap out of the chair. His face grimaced in pain and a single word passed his dry lips.

“Cigarette...”

Her voice wavered and came out in a hushed whisper. It sounded strange and unreal to her ears.

“I don’t smoke.”

Martha saw the man’s right hand move slightly, and then noticed the rectangular shape in his shirt pocket. Could it be a trick? She could see herself leaning over to retrieve the cigarettes and the man’s eyes suddenly opening. She imagined him springing from the chair - clamping his cold hands around her throat! Martha studied the man’s face. It was ashen; beads of perspiration formed on his forehead and above his lips. Suddenly she was overwhelmed with a completely irrational sense of compassion. She must help this man! Perhaps this was the man she was dreaming about! Perhaps she was destined to nurse him back to health! And when he had recovered from his wounds they would enjoy a dangerous, thrilling lifestyle; a passionate romance as they traversed the globe!

She surged forward spontaneously and whisked the packet of cigarettes from his pocket. Her fingers moved frantically. She plucked one from the package, lit it with trembling hands, and then placed it between the man’s lips. His eyes rolled behind their lids and one side of his mouth came up in a half smile. Martha watched

the tip of the smoke glow red for a second, and then dashed to the kitchen for a bottle of sherry; the only liquor she kept in the house. She poured some in a coffee cup, removed the smoke, and then held the cup to the man's lips. He drank the entire thing and his eyes opened a fraction.

"Can you hear me?" she urged. "Who are you? What happened to you? What's your name?"

The man's left hand twitched and a bloodstained finger pointed to the floor beside the chair.

"Money..."

Martha set the coffee cup down and looked to where the man was pointing. In her panic she hadn't noticed the small leather satchel that rested beside the chair. She pulled the black bag into the light, undid the latch, and gasped.

It was full of money!

She put her hands into the bag and withdrew two neatly stacked bricks of cash. Tens, twenties, fifties – it was more money than Martha had ever seen in her life! And the bag was packed solid with at least ten more of the same kind of stacks! Her eyes bulging, she stared in awe at the treasure, then at the man dying in her favorite chair.

"Wh...What..."

"Blood money," the man croaked.

Martha dropped the bricks of cash into the bag and poured more sherry into the coffee cup. She held it to his lips, noting that more poured down his chin and onto his shirt than the first time. He smiled gratefully, and then winced in pain.

"Double cross... cops after me. Dead either way. Dirty money... sorry..."

Martha could hear the police knocking on doors just down the hallway. She ran to her own door and pressed her ear to it. They were at 201: Miss Byerly's apartment. Her mind raced. Clearly there was only one thing to do. She must give up the man to the police. She must turn over the money and hope that her honesty would be rewarded. But what if the man had spent some of the money, or hidden some elsewhere? Would the police know? The mob? Martha bit her lip, thinking furiously. Would they think she took it? Would the mob come looking for her? But no – that was madness! The police would protect her. Her name wouldn't even come up; certainly not in the newspapers. Yes, of course. She was being foolish!

There was only one thing to do.

She rushed back to the man in the chair and knelt before him. He was very still. The cigarette had fallen from his lips and dropped upon his lapel.

Fighting back tears, Martha Petrie grasped the dead man's cold right hand and smiled.

"I know what to do."

Martha Petrie laughed out loud to herself, mainly just to hear her own voice. How ironic! She never would have guessed that the next room she lived in would be even smaller than her apartment! She stood by the tiny, barred window and sighed, thinking how nice it would be if the thing actually opened so she could feel the warm breeze on her skin. There wasn't even a view! Just bricks upon bricks not five feet away. She supposed she would get used to it; just like she had gotten used to the small, lumpy bed and the tiny toilet that barely flushed. Just like she had gotten used to her new way of life. Martha had never done an illegal thing in all her life. At least not one she could remember. And yet here she was, her life forever altered by the decision she had made that night, kneeling before her favorite chair.

When the telephone rang she snapped out of her daydream and picked up the receiver. At least the phone worked!

"Miss Emerson?"

"Speaking."

"Good afternoon Miss Emerson. It's Mr. Hobart from the Ambassador Hotel. How are you enjoying Rio?"

"It's hotter than I expected, but breathtakingly beautiful."

"Indeed it is. Well, Miss Emerson, I'm pleased to inform you that your money has been safely deposited in Nassau, and the sum that you requested has been set aside in the Ambassador's safe. Your room has been prepared and you may move in at your leisure."

"Room 222?"

"That is correct, Miss Emerson, room 222. Again, I apologize for the wait while the Ambassador Hotel underwent construction. I hope you weren't inconvenienced. The bungalows are small, but serviceable. One would not like an extended stay, as you can imagine. You'll find your current room much more to your liking. I hope you weren't troubled by the delay."

"Not at all, Mr. Hobart; I'll be there within the hour."

“Very good, Miss Emerson. Have a nice day.”

“And a nice day to you, Mr. Hobart.”

Martha Petrie hung up the phone and sighed. She had spent much of the last week on the beach hidden behind an umbrella, sunglasses, and a magazine; replaying the strange turn of events in her mind. She remembered how she had taken the wallet from the dead man’s jacket and learned his name - Walter Emerson. She remembered how she had hidden the recently deceased Walter Emerson beneath her bed when the police came calling, and, the next night, how she had dropped his body, wrapped in an old blanket, from the window into the dumpster below.

It had taken the police two days to find the body. A harrowing two months followed in which the money remained hidden in the springs beneath her favorite chair. Those two months were a paranoid dream world for Martha. Every passerby on the street was a detective; every shadow in the dark hallway outside her apartment was a hit man for the mob. Of course she knew the police would be back when the body was found beneath her window; and

suspicion would be aroused if she moved out too soon. So Martha Petrie bided her time, waiting for the knock on her door which meant the money had been traced back to her - a knock which never came.

The telephone jangled again.

“Hello?”

“It’s Mr. Hobart, Miss Emerson. I’m terribly sorry to bother you again . . .”

“That’s quite all right, Mr. Hobart.”

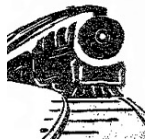
“I meant to tell you, Miss Emerson, that your chair arrived by freight today. I took the liberty of having it delivered to your room. I trust that was the proper thing to do?”

“Quite, Mr. Hobart. Thank you for your thoughtfulness.”

“Not at all, Miss Emerson; I will see you in one hour.”

“Perhaps longer, Mr. Hobart. I might take a stroll along the beach.”

Martha Petrie hung up the phone and laughed out loud.



Twin brothers James and Joseph Evans are very successful businessmen. VERY successful. In fact, some might say they have taken the term 'hostile takeover' to a whole new level. In this macabre tale, we get to see what a cut-throat place the business world can really be...

THE FOURTH MAN

By WILLIAM A. HALL

JANUARY 8- Monday

Ted Vines stood at the newsstand glancing at the line of magazines along the back wall. He wasn't really interested in them, merely occupying time while he waited for 5:40 P.M., the time when he would board the commuter train that would take him home. It had been a long and difficult day at work and he relished the thought of relaxing in his hot tub with a tall glass of scotch while letting his mind and body rest. He glanced at his watch once again, put back the newspaper he had been idly glancing at, and hurriedly walked in the direction of the station. He stood at the curb with a crowd of other jostling commuters waiting on a traffic light before once again impatiently glancing at his watch.

It was at that instant a hard shove rammed in the middle of his back. He looked up from his watch before plunging head first into the street. The last thing he ever saw was the grill of the fast moving delivery truck as it slammed into his body and began dragging him violently down the city street before he lifelessly came to rest 30 yards away. The driver hurried from the cab of the truck his face deathly pale and marred with horror and disbelief. The people on the street corner were a mixture of screaming women and stunned men. No one noticed the figure behind them that hurried away into the evening crowd.

MARCH 12- Sunday

Robert May stepped out of the shower, patted himself dry with a clean towel, and then casually dressed in a pullover shirt, khaki pants, and a pair of clean white sneakers. He glanced at himself in the mirror and as an afterthought added a Red Sox baseball cap before bouncing down the stairs and into the kitchen. The house was unusually quiet as his wife and two daughters had left on

Friday to visit her parents for the weekend. It was not the norm for him to be alone in the house and he relished the quiet solitude. He glanced at the cold coffeepot before deciding that he would drive out by the lake for a big breakfast and would wait and have coffee there. Besides, he was itching to get behind the wheel of his new sports car. He went through the doorway adjoining the garage and stood for a moment admiring the machine. It was small, sleek, and fast while the bright red color glistened under a new coat of recently applied wax. He opened the door with a flourish and waited impatiently while the whir of the garage door opener slowly made the way for his exit. The engine roared to life and in minutes he was speeding down the rural two-lane road.

With an idle eye he admired the countryside, the budding trees that foretold of springtime, as well as the deep azure blue of the sky. He knew that in the next mile he would be approaching Fountain Lake and there he would find a long boat dock as well as a diner that served surprisingly good food.

He pushed the car to go even faster and as he rounded the last curve he saw the first glimmer of the lake's sparkling water. He was now traveling almost 70 MPH and he reluctantly tapped the brakes to slow himself. It was a moment before he realized there was no response. With a slight twinge of uneasiness he pushed the brakes again and then all the way to the floor before frantically pumping the slack pedal. There was a steep incline leading in the direction of the dock and the car gathered even more speed as it raced toward the moored boats. He downshifted the gears in an effort to slow the speeding vehicle and in a last ditch effort swung the car to the left, sending it into an out of control spin. The car slammed into the side of a long pier and flipped end-over-end through the air before crashing into the nearby gas pump. Robert May never heard the explosion.

MAY 5- Friday

Oliver Goodman neatly stacked the papers that had recently littered his desk and pushed them into a fat file folder, which he then deposit-

ed into the bottom drawer of his desk. He stretched and yawned and pushed aside the stale remains of his coffee cup before standing and walking over to retrieve his coat that hung limply on the office coat rack. He glanced up at the wall clock across from his desk and sighed when he saw that it was already after 10 P.M. It had indeed been a long day.

He shuffled out of his office locking the door behind him then walked toward the elevator, which sat dark and silent at the far end of the empty hallway. He thumbed the button and stood for a moment listening to the silence. After another long moment he once again pushed the button while this time noting the dark of the usually lit button. There was not a sound or movement of any kind and with tired resignation he turned in the direction of the doorway leading to the stairs. Inside, the stairwell was dimly lit as he realized two of the three bulbs in the ceiling were not burning. He shook his head in disgust and slowly began the eleven story downward descent.

On the landing of the seventh floor he stopped, partly to catch his

breath, and partly to listen to a tiny noise. It was as though the sound followed him in unison with his steps and after a moment he thought it must be the echo of his footfalls that followed him. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and it was then he had a strange sensation as though he felt the presence of another person. He turned slowly back in the direction of the way he had just descended and imagined he saw the outline of a shadowy figure in the dark gloom. The only sound he made was a short desperate cry as two hands pushed violently against his chest. He plunged headlong down the dirty linoleum of the narrow stairs and bounced almost three stories before his body came completely to rest. His eyes were wide open and sightless as they stared upward in the direction from which he had fallen. The odd angle of his neck stated that it was quite broken and that he was quite dead.

JUNE 30- Friday

James and Joseph Evans were now sitting across from one another in the company boardroom, the

two of them sipping tonic water from tall icy glasses. They would each have preferred a liberal splash of gin as a mixer but they were, after all, still tending to the company business. The other remaining members of the board had already left for the day leaving them alone with their thoughts and the pointed direction of their discussion.

The two men were brothers, twins in fact, and they were the youngest of three siblings. Their older brother, Lawrence, was president and CEO of North Pharmaceuticals and the two brothers considered themselves little more than Larry's henchmen. While Lawrence Evans led the company in its now prominent business direction the twins were relegated, as it were, to being in the trenches. Their job was to essentially carry out any and all directives, enforce rules and guidelines, and above all else maintain and accentuate the bottom line. It might indeed be true that blood was thicker than water, but in the Evans family, profits were decidedly thicker than blood.

After the board meeting Larry

had kept them late to "revisit some previous business" which had dealt primarily with the ever needful measures required for padding the aforementioned bottom line.

In his usual fashion, Larry had not wasted any time. "So are we all squared away on the provisions we had adopted for the first two quarters? I mean, I know the required results have shown up in the numbers but I want to make sure there aren't any loose ends."

James glanced at his brother Joseph before answering. "Everything worked out as planned, Larry. We made sure to eliminate three people who were still several days away from being fully vested in the company retirement plan. In each case the deaths were ruled accidental and it didn't cost the company a dime. Following our recommendations, the three had availed themselves of the accident policies introduced during the last benefits meeting. As a result the families were benefited in some measure and as I stated there was essentially no cost to North Pharmaceuticals."

Larry slowly nodded and idly smoothed the crease in the pants of

his pinstriped suit. "Good." He slowly looked up and met their eyes in that penetrating look they both knew so well.

"I don't mind telling you guys that was a brilliant idea in regard to eliminating overhead in the fastest way possible. We could have simply terminated Vines, May, and Goodman but the severance package and the 60-day extension of benefits would have amounted to quite a bit. Of course, there is always the possibility they could have sued us as they were so close to being vested, and, frankly, it never does anything for morale to simply fire someone from their job." He shook his head. "No, it was a simple plan but highly effective."

"You mean killing them instead of firing them." The twin named Joseph was always been a get-to-the-point sort of guy.

Larry frowned. "Oh, Joseph, please. I think...*eliminate* is a much kinder word."

The two of us exchanged glances and waited as Larry cleared his throat and it was then I knew what was coming next before he even spoke.

He began. "I think before the year ends we need to make one additional...adjustment, a fourth man, only this time someone higher up. I think, this time, someone from the board of directors would be our best option."

Joseph sat up straight in his chair. "Larry, have you lost your mind? What you're talking about is---."

He impatiently held up his hand. "Hear me out." He once again cleared his throat. "Eliminating someone from the directors would benefit the company as well as each of us personally if you think about it."

He stopped to stare at us and made sure he had our attention. "As acting CEO my personal vote counts as two and each of your votes gives our family voting "bloc", if you will, the potential for control of the company's decisions on most of the matters that will influence our careers and our lives for years to come." He took a deep breath. "Barnes and Abernathy vote the same as we do anyway but, as you know, on major issues we need a 75% majority and 3 of the remaining 5

members have become unbearable. If we could eliminate just one of those five look at the possibilities.” He held up his fingers and began to tick off his points. “We could replace that person with someone of our mindset; we would be in a position to manipulate stock options, and we could, of course, compensate ourselves with more generous salaries and retirement options that would ensure our prosperity for the rest of our lives. I don’t know about you but the idea of permanently retiring in our early 40’s sounds very appealing indeed.”

James spoke up. “But Larry, murder—or rather *elimination* isn’t something we need to make a habit of. Isn’t there some other means available?”

He shook his head. “How? We can’t fire them in the traditional sense by virtue of their position and even if we could it would reflect in a negative way on the company. Their elimination by accident would not only serve our purpose but would play out as good PR for the firm. We as survivors would be maintaining the viability of the company by our

continued perseverance in spite of our loss.”

It was Joseph’s turn to speak. “But the first three who were eliminated, won’t it start to look suspicious?”

Larry again shook his head. “Those were middle level management. They were not as publicly well known or as high profile. As it turned out, by combining their divisions after their deaths, the company was able to streamline and push profits to new levels. Think of it as a way to streamline the board only this time we reap the benefits as well as protecting the company.” He stopped and stared at both of them. “And as you two have the expertise required, I’m depending on you to follow through with my directive.”

It was nearly midnight and James Evans lay awake in his bed. He was consumed with thinking about Larry’s proposal and as much as he hated to admit it his idea made sense. Larry was ruthless and dispassionate beyond measure and over the years he had managed to intimidate and cajole some of the other board members

around to his point of view and had milked the power for himself in the process. James had also pushed aside any guilt about committing murder once again (let's call it what it was). Try as he might he had examined the situation in regards to who should be eliminated and try as he might he had come to the conclusion that his other brother, Joseph, seemed the best choice. His reasoning was that over time Larry would convince the other members anyway and he personally felt the others liked him much better than Joseph. Also, with the Evans family controlling the purse strings he could obtain his goal of financial independence even sooner. Wealth divided by two was even better than wealth divided by three. With a sign of resignation and a sense of having arrived at the best decision he slowly turned over in bed and drifted off to sleep.

Joseph Evans had made his decision and knew what had to be done. His calculations were precise and straightforward which is the way he did everything. His brother James was the least liked

of the twins by all the other board members, he was sure of it, and by his elimination the problem outlined by Larry would be resolved in the quickest way possible. After Joseph was gone he and Larry could guide the company with renewed intensity and in the process share the resulting profits. Getting rid of James would not only expedite matters but would substantially increase his share of the money. The whole scenario stuck him as symmetrical, which is the way he liked things, and the more he considered it the more he knew it was the right thing to do. With a sudden nod of his head the decision in his mind was finalized. He went upstairs to his bedroom, changed into his pajamas and climbed contently in his bed anxious for a good night's sleep.

AUGUST 6- Sunday

As funerals go it had been a fine event, a very wonderful event indeed. The congregation had sat quietly the only sounds above those of the minister being the occasionally punctuated sobs of one of the females in attendance. The eulogy had been simple and

yet effective as the man of God spoke eloquently in a deep and resonant voice. "Our friend and colleague was a man of integrity and principle as well as high moral fiber. He was a business leader that set an example for others, who led in a quiet, yet determined, forceful, and straightforward manner. He was a man of vision and hope and dignity who was able to instill in others to strive to be more than they were. Mr. Evans was filled with a passion for life and gave of himself beyond measure in a never ending attempt to reach out to and provide for the happiness of others."

The minister stopped for a moment to survey the crowd before him then lifted his hand forward in an invitation to rise. "Please join with me and bow your heads in prayer. Father in heaven, please accept this man, J.L. Evans, into your fold and speed his ascent into heaven. We commit to thee his soul and give thanks for the time he was allowed to enter our lives here on earth. We pray these words in the name of the Father, Amen."

Late that night James Evans sat

on the balcony of his penthouse apartment. He was nursing his third gin and tonic of the evening and relishing the unusually mild summer night. He tipped his glass while slowly letting his eyes wander above the rim watching his brother who sat opposite him in a plush lounge chair.

"You do think we did the right thing don't you? I mean after all he was our very own family, our own flesh and blood."

"Of course we did the right thing. We've been over this time and again. Family doesn't really have anything to do with it. This was a business decision pure and simple." He leaned forward. "In a few months when the money begins rolling in, and it will, you'll forget all about any reservations you might still have. Now, drink up and let's enjoy the evening. Tomorrow will be a busy day."

James sighed and took another sip his eyes looking pensive and reflective. "I suppose you're right. When you think about it there couldn't really have been any pain. Tampering with the fuel gauge on the airplane was really very simple. I mean as soon as they were

over the mountains there would have been some sputtering and then, BOOM! The plane hits the side of the mountain and shatters into a million pieces.”

Joseph smiled and tipped his own glass toward his twin. “That’s the idea, one big smash-explosion and it’s all over. Good ‘ol Larry never felt a thing.” He laughed out loud. “Larry was always gloating about how using the corporate jet was such a perk of the job. It turns out he was right.

James snickered as the alcohol began to kick in. “Yeah, it was a perk all right, a perk for us. I mean, Joey, why didn’t we think of this a long time ago? With Larry out of the way we can point North Pharmaceuticals in any direction we want. We were doing all the real work anyway. From this point on, we not only do the work, but we get the big bucks for it.”

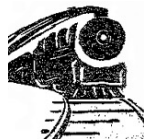
Joseph eyed his now empty glass. “No doubt about it Jimmy.” He paused and looked reflectively over at his twin. “One thing about it though, one thing we do have to give Larry the credit for. He did allow us to use the...elimination method that we came up with and

it certainly did come in handy. It’s a bit ironic don’t you think? The idea he himself sanctioned is the very idea we employed to eliminate him.”

James nodded. “And don’t forget, if anyone on the board can’t seem to fall in line with our future plans, they themselves might be subject to...”

“Elimination.” Joseph finished the thought for his brother.

With a slightly unsteady hand James reached for the large pitcher of gin and tonic that sat in the middle of the table and refilled their glasses. They grinned at each other then made a silent toast listening to the clink of their glasses. With a contented sigh each sat back in their chairs wordlessly surveying the night, alone with their thoughts, each silently considering the exciting possibility of guiding North Pharmaceuticals into the future. Alone. After all, process of elimination could, by necessity, become an... ongoing process.



For most adults, the mystery and charm of Hallowe'en night may have worn off since they roamed the streets begging for treats. But for today's children, Hallowe'en is still a night of mischief and mystery. It is also a night when the veil between the living and the dead is at its thinnest. A night when evil just may have the upper hand...

CARVED

By MARK ALLAN REYNOLDS

Sometimes in October strange things happen. At the age of thirteen Josh Adams knows this as truth. It's not so much he has seen these things with his own eyes but, because gossip spreads quickly through a small town and October is smaller than most, he often hears tales of odd occurrences, whispered by adults who think they are being clever. It frightens him to believe the gossip, to think it could be true—more than he'd ever admit to his two best friends, Greg and Marty.

Josh stands on the dirt road, looking up at the property of Old Man Caruthers, and senses weirdness in the air around him; as if he could squint his eyes and watch it float on the soft breeze this late October day. He tries to determine

what is bothering him but cannot. It isn't the house itself—Josh has stood in this exact place countless times, never feeling as he does now.

The house looms atop a hill, its paint falling away like large scabs off a rotting corpse. The roof is in shambles, shingles lying helter-skelter, dark holes visible even from the road. Curtains flap aimlessly over broken glass in the windows. One might think the house abandoned, but the folks of October know better. Amos Caruthers travels into town every Wednesday to buy his groceries and cause as much grief as possible before returning home, not to be seen again until the following week.

For all Josh knows, Old Man Caruthers could be watching him at this precise moment. A chill slides and twists over his body and Josh zips up his Louisville Bats jacket to block out the wind. Time to go, he thinks. So what if something is creeping him out? Every town is supposed to have a spooky place or a haunted house and he stands before October's. Like most kids his age, he and his friends are drawn here, ever mindful of the stories passed down for generations concerning blackmail, mur-

der, and ghosts.

Turning away, it isn't until he has walked several paces before it dawns on him - what has been nagging at his nerves:

Josh retraces his steps, staring at the orange objects stacked on both sides of the house. Pumpkins. Lots of pumpkins. Out here, in God's Country as his father is fond of saying, seeing fruit and vegetables piled up outside one's home isn't a rare sight at all. So it isn't the pumpkins themselves that unnerve Josh. It's the fact that each and every one of them has a goofy, happy face carved into their sides.

"So what?"

Josh is tempted to slap Greg upside his head. For almost an hour he's been trying to explain how uncharacteristic it is for Caruthers to have carved pumpkins outside his home. He tries again, slowly, hoping his friend will understand.

"Look," Josh says, putting both hands on Greg's bony shoulders. "It's just not right. Old man Caruthers would just as soon run over us with his tractor than to decorate his place up for Halloween. No one trick-or-treats there. At best I could see him carving one or two pumpkins, but there are hun-

dreds of them!"

Greg rolls his eyes. Whatever is making Josh uneasy obviously isn't having any effect on his friend.

"Know what, Joshie? I don't care if Old Man Caruthers has a thousand pumpkins all dressed up to look like a circus. It's his house. Who knows, maybe he's trying to make up for being a jerk all these years. Maybe he'll give out extra candy!"

"You don't even trick or treat anymore," Josh sighs.

"I just might this year. Go by Old Man Caruthers' house and see if he gets tricks or we get treats."

Greg laughs and rolls his eyes one more time, making sure Josh knows how nerdy he is acting. He shoves past Josh, leaving him to wonder what Greg had meant. Surely he and Marty didn't have one of their not-so-ingenuous pranks staged for Halloween night? Old Man Caruthers isn't the type of person to be messed with. Josh remembers a chance encounter with him last summer at the Stop 'N' Go. Despite his age and frail appearance, Old Man Caruthers moved with an agility reserved for someone one-third his age. And Josh will never forget how alert and piercing the man's

eyes were.

Two days before Halloween, Josh rides his bike down the dirt road leading back to the Caruthers place. He quit wondering years ago why he is so obsessed with the dilapidated house—he just is. He likens it to riding a roller coaster. Without the fear factor there would be no fun to it; and Josh almost always experienced a touch of fear out here where the land is barren, save one lone eyesore.

When he rounds the curve that signals the property line belonging to Amos Caruthers, Josh skids to a halt, his mouth dropping from disbelief. Hundreds atop hundreds of pumpkins fill the Caruthers yard. Some stacks are over three feet tall. Up near the house itself, pumpkins are piled so high they conceal all evidence of the wooden structure, save a partial window and the roof.

Has Old Man Caruthers gone mad? Why would he bother spending so much money on all these pumpkins? Why the overkill?

These thoughts shriek through Josh's mind as he stares wide-eyed at the overstuffed yard. From here it is impossible to tell if all the pumpkins are carved; he will have to get closer to examine them properly. Only he doesn't want to.

A tingling in his belly begs him to stay put, not to move any closer to the weather worn fence that surrounds the too tall grass that sways on the Fall wind.

Still, he has to know. For if all those pumpkins are carved, then something out of the ordinary is going on. No one, not even Superman, could have decorated so many pumpkins in less than the two weeks since Josh was last here. Unless, of course, they had arrived pre-carved. But why?

Josh pedals forward, dread kneading his insides. Much to his dismay, he sees hundreds of faces watching him. But unlike the previous ones, these aren't goofy and happy. These are horrible faces—screaming mouths and fanged teeth under eyes that appear all too alive and alert.

Gliding along the fence, he feels the eyes following him, sizing him up. Goosebumps erupt over his body. At last, he's had enough. He wheels around then abruptly stops. There, unnoticed until now, in the center of the tall grass stands a scarecrow. Josh screams as he realizes that he is wrong. It is not a scarecrow. Old man Caruthers stands among the pumpkins, snickering. As his head nods toward Josh, the snickering

becomes a full laugh that fills the day like a million echoes trapped in a small canyon.

“Don’t go there,” Josh pleads. Both Greg and Marty ignore him. His two friends refuse to tell him their plan, but Josh is certain that the Caruthers house is involved and that’s enough to worry him.

Greg and Marty don’t share his beliefs in ghosts, monsters, and things unexplainable. If a strange light were to appear in the night sky, Josh would see a U.F.O. where Greg might see a meteor and Marty would say it was a helicopter. All their lives they had made fun of Josh’s obsession with the strange and unusual. Which made it next to impossible for Josh to talk them out of following through with their Halloween prank.

“Let’s just go to Nancy Morgan’s Halloween party and be done with it,” Josh offers, hoping Greg’s slight crush on Nancy might be just the thing to change his buddy’s mind.

“Forget that!” Marty says. “Nancy’s parents are going to be there. You know how her folks are.” For a brief instant, Josh detects indecision on Greg’s face. Then it is gone. Greg, while phys-

ically the strongest of the three, has always let Marty make his decisions for him and Josh soon understands that tonight will be no different. “Besides, we want to see them again.”

“See what?” Josh asks, already knowing the answer.

“The pumpkins! They rock!” Greg’s blue eyes light up.

“So you coming?” Marty asks.

Josh thinks back to that day when he saw Amos Caruthers standing knee deep in pumpkins, laughing hysterically.

“No.”

Marty frowns and shakes his head.

“What a girl.”

A half hour later, Josh is pedaling down the dirt road despite himself. He passes several trick-or-treaters along the way and, if only momentarily, this makes him happy. Halloween has always been his favorite holiday and in October the children showed up in droves.

Considering the week leading up to Halloween night had been cold and rainy, a person couldn’t have asked for a clearer, warmer night to go trick-or-treating. Josh feels a twinge of jealousy. The fact that he is now thirteen, he and his friends consider themselves too

old for the holiday tradition. Obviously, however, Marty and Greg aren't above pulling a few pranks. Josh wonders for the hundredth time just what his friends are up to.

That thought is still in his head as he runs over something squishy in the road and jackknifes the bike's handlebars, throwing him hard to the ground. His bike slides to a stop in the tall grass beside the road. Josh lays there, heart racing, hoping nothing is broken. He reaches down and feels his hand come away wet from where he has cut his knee. Moving carefully, Josh sits up. Besides a few nicks and cuts, everything seems to be okay. Josh spits dirt from his lips and is about to stand when he spies what caused him to crash.

A pumpkin, smashed into pieces. Oh no. He hopes Greg and Marty haven't gone off and started stealing the pumpkins from Old Man Caruthers' yard. He can see them now, running up and grabbing pumpkin after pumpkin, tossing them at each other and generally making a mess of things. How many would find themselves back in town, splattered against doors and cars?

Josh stands and, walking gingerly on his cut knee, retrieves his

bike, which isn't any worse for wear. Climbing on the bike, Josh hurries. Hopefully he can help keep Greg and Marty from getting into any real trouble.

It isn't but mere seconds before Josh has to dodge another pumpkin. Then another. And another. Only these aren't smashed. They are huge and round. The road is full of them. If this is Greg and Marty's plan, to fill up the road with pumpkins and cause havoc for anyone hoping to use the road, then there must be others with them - there's no way just the two of them could have moved this many pumpkins to the road in a half hour's time.

Josh winds his bicycle through the orange obstacles. As he passes one particularly large pumpkin, he hears something in the road rustle and feels immediate agony at his ankle. Something has bitten him. Josh looks down and panic sweeps over him so fast he loses control of the bike and tumbles again for the second time.

The pumpkin, its mouth furiously pumping up and down, jagged fangs digging into itself, moves toward him. It makes a juicy, suckling sound that reverberates though the darkness.

Josh screams and starts crawl-

ing backwards, kicking up dirt as he hurriedly moves away. He stops instantly as he hears more suckling sounds directly behind him. Jumping up, he jerks the bike through the air, and climbs on it, pedaling before he is even seated properly.

He wants to turn and get home, to warn his parents and inform the sheriff about the pumpkins, horribly alive and hungry, but he knows his friends are still out here somewhere. With every ounce of will power he can muster, he goes rolling down the dirt road, dodging pumpkins as best he can.

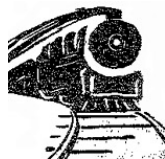
Around the curve, nothing in his short thirteen years has prepared him for the scene playing out across the Caruthers lot. Thousands of pumpkins, chomping and sucking and twisting and sliding, move toward the road. Josh fears the sound from this might very well drive him mad. Then, above all the other noise, he hears laughter. An old man's laughter.

Josh glances up at the Caruthers house and now knows why it is considered the town's spooky place or haunted house. It is evil. So is its owner. And it has picked tonight, Halloween night, to show its evil face once and for all.

Josh begins to cry. There's no need to worry about getting home to warn his parents or the sheriff. He isn't going home. Never again. Pumpkins surround him, one atop the other, all obviously hungry and anxious to be fed.

As for Greg and Marty, Josh no longer has to worry about his friends either. Their bodies hang on poles on each side of the yard like scarecrows, meaty chunks of skin dangling from their limbs from where the pumpkins have been chewing on them. Their eyes are wide and bulging. Both boys have corncobs stuffed in their mouths to stifle their screams.

In one broken window, Josh sees the outline of a frail looking man. As the first of the pumpkins start to chew, Josh hears laughter again. Only it isn't coming from Old Man Caruthers' house. It is Josh's own piercing, insane laughter that echoes into the late October night.



In this section of The Mysterious Traveler Magazine, it is normally my distinct pleasure to present our faithful readers a quick tale of mystery and suspense. However, as Hallowe'en is upon us once more, I've cooked up something special in honor of the season...

JACK & THE DEVIL

By THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER

as told by Mark Zahn

If ever there was a drunken sot in the township of Boglee, There can be no doubt who was that lout, that sot 'twas Jack McGee!

If ever there was mischief afoot, why then surely there was he.

Jack liked to joke with all the town folk; 'tis how he spent his time, you see.

But in Boglee his welcome was worn, a disgrace as plain as can be. The mass did shout they wanted him out, that no good lush McGee! His brain was mush, yet not quite dead; his eyes were able to see. With a half-full jug and his trusty mug, Jack traveled – unsteadily.

Within a mile he entered the wood, gnarled arms from every tree. Purple clouds like funeral shrouds blot the moon to an inky sea! Jack squinted his eyes upon the path for better that he might see. When to his shock he spied on a rock, The Devil plain as can be!

“Good evening, kind sir,” Beelzubub crooned to the tosspot Jack McGee.

“I have a deal that is quite a steal – if you're game, naturally.”

Jack rubbed his chin and took a nip, and with that he did agree.

“Fortune I'll bestow in trade for your soul,” was The Devil's black decree.

“On one condition,” said Jack with a wink, “that *you* must do first for me.”

Had Old Scratch finally met his match in that imbiber from Boglee?

“Climb the orange boughs of yonder tall oak, returning top leaf to me.

Then I will seal your most heinous deal,” quoth the sobering Jack McGee.

Quick as a wink The Devil did climb, to the top with greedy glee. With a little swagger Jack drew his dagger and carved a cross into the tree!

“Happy Halloween” Jack shouted aloud, tipping mug triumphantly.

“’Tis your home so tall until that tree does fall, thirty years it seems to me!”

Crapulous living and a shameful life took its toll on Jack McGee.

He entered the soil from this mortal coil, buried – unceremoniously. Upon his ascension into the Heavens, he was denied Saint Peter’s key.

“Your lifetime of sin has done you in, it’s to Hell with you, McGee!”

Down and further down poor Jack did fall, to the doorstep of Hades.

“Paradise is no place for such a disgrace, Hell is home for eternity!”

“No, no, no!” Satan cried out in alarm, “You’ll find no rest with me!

You tricked me good out in that wood,” he shouted defiantly.

“You’ll wander the world a restless spirit, and get no pity from me!

You’ve endless days for your foolish ways of jokes and trickery!”

Jack trudged up the steps of The Inferno, black as a hangman’s tree.

“My vision’s poor – I need light to the door, or suffer my company!”

The fallen angel did not hesitate, plucking an ember free.

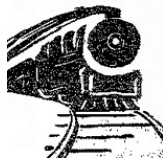
He tossed the coal to the miserable soul and shut out Jack McGee!

The glowing spark was too hot to handle, yet ‘twas his only light to see.

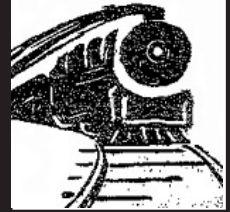
And so he bored into the skin of a gourd, a lantern for history!

Now on Halloween as you carve a lantern, for better beggar’s to see, Recall who’s name has laid stake to that claim, Jack O’ Lantern of Boglee!

And if you ever glimpse a restless spirit in shadows wandering free, Be not afraid of that contemptible shade, ‘tis only Jack McGee!



**FOLLOW THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER
ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB
EXCLUSIVELY AT:
www.threeinvestigatorsbooks.com**



For a taut and thrilling evening of entertainment, journey into the realm of mystery and the unknown with THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER MAGAZINE! Simply type the address above into the browser of your choice and prepare your nerves for spellbinding suspense!

A Word On The Mysterious Traveler

A joint venture of Robert Arthur and David P. Kogan, "The Mysterious Traveler Magazine" was based on their radio program of the same name. This digested magazine was published bi-monthly by Grace Publishing Co., Inc. of New York City at 35 cents a copy – annual subscriptions could be had for \$2.00. David Kogan was credited as the Publisher and Robert Arthur was credited as the Managing Editor. The cover of each issue featured stunning artwork by Norman B. Saunders.

Each issue consisted of twelve stories classified into various genres and sub-genres including crime, suspense, detection, mystery, strange stories, science fiction, terror, macabre, short shockers, etc. Some issues contained special features like contests and movie/book suggestions. Each issue featured at least one story by the Mysterious Traveler himself (Robert Arthur) plus stories by some of the most well-known writers of the day including Ray Bradbury, Dorothy L. Sayers, John Dickson Carr, Craig Rice, Sax Rohmer, Agatha Christie, Cornell Woolrich, August Derleth, Brett Halliday and others. As many as seven stories in each issue were penned by Robert Arthur, most under various pseudonyms. The Mysterious Traveler (Robert Arthur) also introduced each story with a paragraph or two.

Each issue began with a little introduction (or sales pitch!) by the Mysterious Traveler (except Issue #5). These introductions usually told a few tidbits about the authors or the stories in the issue, encouraged readers to spread the word about the magazine, let the reader know that back issues were available, and finally, tantalized the reader with information about the upcoming issue. Consisting of five issues, this short-lived magazine ended at about the same time that the radio program finished its nine year run in September of 1952.

...Wherever the lonesome train whistle can be heard, The Mysterious Traveler cannot be far behind. Be on the lookout for more exciting issues with some of today's finest new voices of the macabre, exclusively at www.threeinvestigatorsbooks.com!