



The Odd Profession of Jeremy Scratch

THE ODD PROFESSION OF JEREMY SCRATCH

by

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PROLOGUE Old Silk Road, Tolbo, Mongolia

It was 1976, but it could have been 1776 or 1876. What made it 1976 was the truck's motor running. Gunther bought cadavers every other month for three years.

Gunther was used to screams coming through the moonless midnights. There were echoes of people shouting and animals squawking off old stone walls, which were sometimes so high they hid the mountains along this old road. He placed gas lanterns on the four corners where the cobble-stoned Silk Road crossed over the unnamed dirt road. Only the locals and some mapmakers knew the road's name.

Gunther waited for his deliveries from the sellers of an insane asylum from China and a prison from Mongolia as his young helper, Bogdan, nodded off in the truck's cab. The Chinese and Mongolian groups detested each other, so the outcome of the auction concerned him. He continued fussing with his hair and fixing the tip of his fedora. As the night grew colder, Gunther paced to stay warm. No other human was nearby but he spoke anyway, "The delivery trucks should be here any minute now." He could not help but wring his hands or check his watch every few minutes.

The Chinese vans and Mongol trucks eventually arrived. With the vehicles came the foul, funky, ill-scented odor of human corpses. The intersection became impassable. The few travelers who did not intend to watch the auction left to go back from where they came and pinched their noses as they departed.

The sellers of cadavers, were Chinese guards from the asylum and the Mongolian guards from the prison who got paid in US dollars, a desirable commodity. The cargo was well worth the five to six-hour trips to the crossroad at Old Silk Road.

Still, Gunther carried a rifle and knives to defend himself. The potential for violence during the exchange was high. Standing on guard beside Gunther was his oversize German Shepard Gregor, who barked at anyone daring to approach them. The dog's presence disconcerted the Chinese and Mongols, especially when Gunther loosened the muzzle. Gregor growled and his teeth flickered.

Gunther also had Bogdan in the cab but would only call him from his sleep if necessary. Bogdan slept with a double barreled shotgun. After the completion of the sale he would be the primary driver back to Poland,

The laborers backed away.

Neither group could go back without money, a fact giving Gunther good leverage. Much of the movement and action existed for nothing more than an ancient ritual. Bargaining was an exercise each soul present had in its DNA. These deals, sacred remnants of the past, have occurred for eons. Gesturing with sign-language was a necessity because nobody spoke a

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common language. The only odd part about this particular trading session was the products being traded.

Gunther's tall height added to his dominant presence. Much taller than the others, he could lean down and into any face who was harming the procedure.

"You are bull's piss," screamed a Mongolian in his native language knowing only his own people understood what he yelled. A few men urinated toward a Chinese woman.

The Chinese men extended their necks producing reddish faces and they clenched their fists while the Mongolians were hunched forward and snarling. Gunther's shoulders tensed when the Chinese men invaded a woman's personal space. He didn't want to see a fight break out...or something inappropriate happen.

"Your mother is a silkworm," shouted a Chinese woman in Mandarin. She stuck her middle finger in the air and put it into orifices, her nose and below her cloth belts. She spat at three pissed off Mongols.

Gunther yelled, "You're all root fungus. Now get to work." He took out his whip and lashed the truck's hoods as if they were large beasts. Gregor growled at everybody.

Buying undocumented cadavers had limitations. Two merchants, one Chinese and the other Mongol, stood with Gunther around a bench. Gunther made the bench one meter by two meters, broad enough for even the tallest corpse up for sale after Gunther's close inspection. He looked for broken bones, signs of foul play, or diseases. Paperwork was exchanged after each cadaver was sold.

The third cadaver up for auction arose with a rancid smell on the table. Two Mongols ran down the road and puked. Savvy travelers did not dare pass through this crossroad. Instead, they found a rock and sat until the auction was over and the trucks departed. They wrapped their face below their eyes with wool cloaks to ease the impact of the foul air.

The Mongol and Chinese traders knew one hundred dollars was Gunther's top payout. But his largest payout that night was eighty dollars. A full fist meant \$100, four fingers meant \$80, and three fingers meant \$60. Gunther never showed a full fist. He had practiced flashing three fingers on his way there. When a cadaver landed into Gunther's van, the exchange of money would follow. As daylight broke, the last corpse was bartered, Gunther had acquired thirty-six cadavers.

Each vehicle was boarded by the Mongols and Chinese. Gunther examined the remaining cadavers left at the roadside that Gunther would not purchase. He considered calling Bogdan for help but decided to let him sleep and loaded three more bodies into his van. He covered them all with extra-large canvas pieces to help conceal the stench.

The Chinese van left, but some rumbling began among the Mongols...it grew louder.

A fight broke out between two of the Mongolian laborers. They wrestled each other onto a rag pile used to wrap cadavers.

The smaller Mongol pulled out a razor-sharp knife with a hardwood-honed handle from his belt. He lashed the blade at the larger man. Blood gushed. There was no movement by the victim.

Three or four men spoke among themselves. They each glanced at Gunther and Gregor. Gunther put his finger on the trigger casing of the rifle, lowering his head. Gregor growled loudly.

A few moments later, a Mongol laborer approached Gunther. He held up two fists, signaling he wanted two hundred dollars for the extra body that became available. Gunther held three fingers.

Bogdan walked out from the front of Gunther's truck. He saw that the sale was still on. He then stood next to Gunther and petted Gregor.

The man clenched one fist and remained still. Gregor pulled away from Bogdan and growled at the man's tightened fist with as much or more aggression as he had shown all night.

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When the man conceded to Gunther's offer, the dog knew to stop. There had been no prompts by Gunther.

Gunther paid ninety dollars, and he waved the traders off, motioning them to go. After the Mongols left, he pushed the murdered man to the roadside. He knew not to take a murdered man.

Gunther looked at Gregor and Bogdan and said, "Nothing is worth a campfire. Let's get home." He removed the muzzle and Bogdan started the drive back to Poland.

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FROM GHOST TOWN to FIFTH AVENUE

CHAPTER 1 - Bosler, Wyoming: Ghost Towns Don't Happen Overnight

Bosler became known as a ghost town in the late 1800s, becoming that way when as a town its purpose for being no longer existed.

The cattle companies made low offers on the local cattle. Ranchers abandoned their houses after one or two “notices.” The notices meant that if they did not leave, the companies called upon the infamous Tom Horn. He was a former detective for the railroad but then became a hired gun. After killing many ranchers, he was finally hung in Cheyenne in 1902 for the murder of a fourteen-year-old boy.

More families left when the local Union Pacific railroad went out of use caused by the US Mail pulling its mail account and instead shipped by air. It made life more difficult. Soon after the railroad stopped all state-wide passenger service. Only long distance train travel remained. Most of the trains travelling through Bosler were freight trains.

People departed slowly over the decades. To make things worse a courier for the railroad saw a tall pale apparition wave at her and she told everybody she met. Then other locals near the old railroad building heard odd noises contributing to the myth.

Folks tried to sell but there were no buyers so they abandoned houses. Consequently, their homes became accessible. Doc stopped serving liquor at his store and sold furniture he took from the vacant houses he ransacked. He kept Jack Scratch as an employee, but now as a carpenter instead of a bartender.

It was the summer of 1987. The population of Bosler was around 400.

The Scratch family lived on Broughton Lane in Bosler, Wyoming, that runs along the Laramie River.

Prolonged daylight and warm winds promised Bosler a special summer. Dry air allowed for walking and swimming. Riding bikes, sailing on Little Lake, and fishing at Laramie River meant midsummer fun for the kids. Sitting on a bench by Ed's barber shop, with the rocking chair outside meant the warm season had arrived. The remaining lived-in houses promised rocking chair on the front porch, and a hammock in the back.

It also meant summertime. Ed cut hair, but people tested his sobriety before sitting in the barber's chair. The test consisted of asking Ed if he had seen any Indians. If he became riled, they'd get a haircut another day.

Scratch, 17, enjoyed being outside year-round because the outdoors meant shooting rabbits with a B.B. gun and working more at the local taxidermist shop: Lukes Skull Shop. Lucien LaForge took on big mounts, bears, mountain lions, and deer in the warm weather of the season. August was the hunting season. For Jeremy Scratch, the summer of 1987 meant practicing Kung Fu with a three-section-staff.

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Jeremy's nickname was his last name, Scratch. He was an only child. His father, Jack Scratch, was 45, and had tended bar for a living but was also serving as a carpenter for Doc because the bar never got busy. His mother, Dorothy, was six years younger than her husband. Dorothy was the primary seamstress for the two annual holiday plays. She had a limp when walking. Both Scratch and his father knew not to mention the matter.

Today was the day. Scratch would swim Long Lake. Stopping where the beach blankets were, he told a few folks of his effort.

"I will swim the length of the lake," Scratch said, his head tilted. His posture expanded, his hands were placed on his hips. He then raised them above his head suggesting the effort was like getting a touch-down.

"Watch out for snakes," which Scratch already knew. His concern was the midget faded rattle snakes, which aren't bigger than two feet. This meant they were hard to notice until you are close to them.

Another boy reported, "there's been a mountain lion preying on farm animals. Good luck Scratch."

"See you in an hour or so," Scratch replied as he walked toward the other end of the lake.

Scratch was confident he could swim the distance without resting, but he was interlocking his hands because he wasn't admitting to himself how nervous he was concerning the swim. The anxiety was in place because he had crossed the width of the lake at its widest, almost a mile long. But in essence he'd be swimming a distance of almost two and a half miles. He reasoned he could always swim out of the lake if he was feeling too tired.

Not a sound came from the other end of the lake as Scratch entered the water. His face beamed; He was ready.

A few sun's rays pierced through the overcast sky coloring the plains in a pale and sandy orange. A slight increase in the wind came from the South and East, which released light underbrush balls into the heavy air. A raindrop fell on Scratch's cheek that he did not feel. He focused on his mission.

He felt his body moving as it should, one stroke after the other.

At the halfway point, Scratch paused. The people on the beach were leaving because of significant rainfall. Raindrops pelted him. Rain did not cross his mind to care. He smiled knowing he could not get any wetter than he already was. Nope. He continued onward, and concentrated.

But the Long Lake grew choppy as the winds became brisk. He was swimming with the rampant current pushing him toward the right side of the lake. It was odd. He stopped, lips trembling. The beach was empty, not a person in sight.

Splash! Whoosh! *What the hell.* A large limb of a tree flew over Scratch's head and landed fifty feet in front of him. His eyes widened. A branch then whisked by him, nearly nicking him. His pulsed raced. *What's happening?* The litter of twigs, branches, and logs obstructed his path. He needed to swim in a different direction to get around the debris.

When he got past the limbs, he could assess what was happening.

Three more limbs of different sizes fell near him. One just missed.

Once Scratch got ahead of the limbs, he stopped and turned to where he had entered the water. The mountains were not there. A dark gray sky prevailed. What he saw coming unnerved him. He froze, with the left leg shaking. Not a bone in his body stopped quivering.

A huge and ominous tornado dominated the edge of Long Lake. Dust, rainwater, branches, and other debris spewed out of the funnel. The roar of the tornado was like a freight train zipping by.

Scratch swam. Only this time there was an urgency for him to increase the distance of each stroke of his arms and legs. *If I can get to the shore and to my bike, I can beat this thing.* O

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n each stroke, he focused on the beach looking for his bike. *There it is!* He figured he was at least six to eight strokes away from where he could stand in the shallow water and then make a dash for his bike.

The tornado followed as if it had a mind and will of its own to catch the young man. From afar it looked as if it were a race between David and Goliath, with the giant being fifty times larger.

The odds of survival didn't matter. Scratch made it to the beach, sprinting out of the shallow water. When he reached the dry land, he sarcastically shouted, "I swam Long Lake!"

After spotting his bike and running toward it, the tornado lifted him about ten feet off the ground, spun him into a circle, and then bashed him back down.

The wind from the tornado exploded into Scratch as if a bus hit him. His only thought was to live. In an instant, the tornado's wall knocked him down, flung him upward, and then tossed him through the air. He thought of grabbing his knees to reduce the airlift and fall to the ground again, yet because his was spinning in all different directions, he couldn't complete his effort. A huge tree limb crashed into his low leg, snapping his bone like it was a twig. Something else hit his lower leg that was as if it were growing from the ground. It was either a tree limb or a telephone pole.

Scratch felt his head snap. He rolled and again became windswept finally settling in a grassy patch. He knew his lower leg was fractured. His body drained itself of feelings. Scratch, despite the pain, felt saved. It was a good feeling.

The storm spun away toward the mountains in the west.

Scratch's pain was excruciating. His neck pain made it impossible for him to even consider turning his head. Opening his eyes, he saw no light. He knew he had not gone blind. He was somewhat conscious by objects pelting him as he whirled, as if he was being slapped across his face coming out of a sleep. A car's headlights helped orient where he landed on a dirt road running into Route 30. He wasn't far from his bicycle, but that notion was academic at the moment.

While wet and frigid, Scratch grasped a patch of grass and moved his hands to learn what was around him. He felt cloth, a jacket. The next moment he had the fabric in his hand; it was an old, high school jacket with missing snap-buttons.

Another car's headlights traveling on the dirt road swept over Scratch's head. His eye caught yet another vehicle in the distance. Scratch threw the jacket upward trying to get the jacket seen. But the car passed.

"Blind bastard," he shouted.

A car's lights flooded a spot; the car slowed. It stopped fifty feet from Scratch. The car door opened, and somebody got out. A driver walked for a few steps and stopped. He unzipped his pants and urinated.

Scratch tried to say something, but hoarseness muted him. He propelled a jacket, hoping to hit the man.

"Hey... who's there?" a man asked in a raspy voice.

Scratch moaned and tried to cough.

The man reached into his glove compartment for a flashlight and shined it toward Scratch.

"Are you the Scratch kid?"

"Yes. I'm Jeremy Scratch," he whispered. He tried to crack a smile to show his appreciation. The man saw fear in Scratch's face. He looked horrified.

"What happened?"

"Tornado... the leg... broken. The neck too."

"Relax son. I'm a deputy... from Laramie... be right back."

Scratch did not understand what was being said over the police radio.

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The deputy returned with a pillow and blanket and placed them under his head and around Scratch's torso. "The ambulance is on its way. Please lay still."

"Thank you, sir."

"The Amboy farm... nothing left... otherwise no issue... except you. Your folks reported you missing... a good thing I had to take a leak."

The ambulance arrived. After an aide set an ankle splint, he braced Scratch's neck. The medics put Scratch on a stretcher and carried him to the ambulance. He thanked the deputy.

He was glad it was only an ankle.

At Memorial Hospital in Laramie X-rays of Scratch made the doctors decide upon surgery to repair the splintered ankle bone. The pain stopped.

When Scratch awoke, his mom and dad were sitting in chairs next to his bed.

"Hi son, how're you doing?" Jack Scratch crossed his arms in pride.

Scratch's mouth and eyes smiled more than he could ever remember.

"Better, Dad, thanks. It feels good to see you and Mom." Scratch felt around his left lower leg with his fingers. He touched the cast's sculptured material and a cotton bandage hanging out. He was wearing a neck brace.

"Your ankle broke in two places dear," said Mrs. Scratch. She caressed the splint as if it were her son's ankle. She gazed at her son as the edges of her smile indented her cheeks, relieved that her son was okay.

Scratch looked at his ankle wrapped with two splints.

"It's fine now, mom. How's my neck?"

"It's strained; it will be fine," said Mrs. Scratch.

Scratch saw a stack of cardboards. "What's this?"

"We stopped at a Post Office and got Wanted posters; they're doozies," John Scratch said, with a slight laugh.

"Thanks dad. We've been collecting those posters for years. I still go through them when I get a chance."

"Me too, son."

"I don't get the attraction to killers," Dorothy Scratch said.

"Somebody's got to keep an eye on bad guys." Scratch grinned. "Who's gonna do it if dad and I don't?"

The Scratch family talked for more than an hour. Much of the time Scratch retold the story. He mentioned nothing of the deputy officer taking a piss. The thought of not telling his parents made him laugh.

"What are you laughing about Scratch," his mother asked.

"Mom, when I first saw the tornado, I felt stupid being in its path. When I ended up inside the tornado, I felt even more stupid."

After kissing and shaking hands with their son, John and Dorothy Scratch left him in the good hands of the doctors and nurses.

Scratch read a few wanted posters. They exhausted him. As Scratch nodded off, he felt a twitch in his ankle. The next morning, he could have forgotten his ankle. But the doctor kept him two more days and taught him how to use crutches.

"How soon can I get a cane?" said Scratch.

"You'll be using a cane soon enough," said the nurse.

When Scratch returned home, everybody wanted to hear his story of the Long Lake tornado. He told ever-increasing details of events that were true or enhanced. He had earned his way to the status of folklore and had no problem whittling away at the truth. There was no mention, for instance, that the deputy stopped to pee and then found him. The tale he wove was about his glory and survival by trickery against the ferocious tornado.

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Somehow, Scratch learned that the story had to be the same each time he told it. The story faded, even in Scratch's mind. He had his private memories and they were good.

CHAPTER 2 - Daylight Was Fading

It was August 1987.

The lower leg cast was taken off. The neck brace was discarded. Scratch was back to his routine of being an eighteen-year-old in Bosler, which meant finish out the summer break in the next few weeks by cutting down on the fun and also working less hours at his job at Lukes Skull Shop. He worked Saturdays, Sundays, and Mondays at Lukes, cleaning and assisting Luke with specimens destined to become trophy mounts. Once school started his schedule was only Saturdays and Sundays and the work went from seven hours a day to 4 hours a day. In the summertime he attended Qigong Martial Arts Center on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, but once school was back he only attended Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Scratch rode to class early to have a long session. He wanted to make up for the weeks he missed while recovering from the "tornado break," as he called it.

When Scratch was fifteen, he earned a brown belt for Kung Fu. At sixteen, he won his brown belt for Wushu. Since he began the arts, he practiced many variations of Tai Chi, Qigong and Kung Fu. Now, he was in his 4th year practicing the two-section staff, generally known as nun chucks. The three-section staff was similar but was a more exact and powerful weapon. Both the two nun chucks and the three staff weapons were accurate, but the third staff gave more and precise moves. Scratch earned a brown belt in nun chucks in March. In May, he won his black belt in the three-section staff.

From the day he started to learn and partake in the martial arts it was made clear to him that the key to becoming a master at any martial art would be a hard regiment of practice. In whatever form he learned, he made sure it was a part of his daily workout. "As a musician practices every day for the rest of his life, so too do martial artists. It is the only way," The coach's words were said with such intensity, Scratch knew it was true.

Scratch trained with his metal three-section staff at the center, a gift from his father, until Master Chin approached him and said gravely, "No weapons allowed. Leave it at home." Master Chin wrinkled his nose and shook his head in disgust. A few moments later he returned observing the entire class.

Scratch withdrew and packed away his metal three-section staff. He understood by bringing the metal staffs it was his ego that motivated the action. He was thankful for the coach's correction. Chin was a traditional Qi Gung master and the metallic staffs were introduced without consulting with the Chinese masters. They just became another product to buy.

Scratch performed helicopter spins and neck rolls with the school's staffs, which were wooden. He then went to a long-range whip and an intermediate range flail. Acting as arm extensions, three-section staffs strikes, chokes, traps, disarms, and blocks opponents.

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Over the years, Scratch learned more and more about coach Charlie Chin. The coach was a Chinese master. He left his home in China at a young age and grew up in San Francisco whereby at fifteen taught Tai Chi and Qigong. As a quiet and even-spirited teacher, he never raised his voice. Scratch respected the coach. Chin told Scratch he had the idea that in an earlier life Scratch was a Buddhist priest. It was Chin who initiated Scratch into Buddhist thought. But Scratch was self-taught. Only periodically did he ask Chin about the pantheistic way. Scratch learned much about Buddhism via the martial arts he was also learning.

Scratch had become the leading student with the three-section staff. He spent sessions poking and striking, using it as a whip. He practiced joint-locking techniques to take on more than one opponent. Coach Chin corrected a form with an uplift motion at the end.

“You don’t want an opponent to trip into you; you want them to fall on their backside.”

Scratch bowed to Coach Chin and walked outside into early dusk, the sun weakening in the late afternoon. Aside from the metal staff incident, he felt it had been a good session.

Scratch looked out over the big plateau, broken by towering mountain ranges. The location was where the Great Plains meet the Rocky Mountains looking west. The Continental Divide cuts through Wyoming from the northwest to the south-central border. It’s called the great divide. It is gray and blue, green and brown. But when you are there long enough, the countryside takes in the colors of the rainbow.

Scratch rode his bike five miles from Laramie, passing by the Diamond Ranch where he halted. In the field, horses were galloping and scattering. He squinted his eyes, wondering why. A mountain lion had snatched his supper, holding a colt by the throat. The horse’s mother struggled to land a kick at the mountain lion and free her baby.

Breathing deeply, Scratch dropped his bike, yanked his three-section staff from his bag, and sprinted into the field. He screamed as loud as he could, clenching the staffs hard. The lion stopped and turned toward him. It dropped the colt and the mother timed her kick and sent the mountain lion spinning into the air.

The mother ran after the other fleeing horses with her baby behind her, leaving Scratch and the lion alone. The color went out of Scratch’s face. He placed the three staffs out in front of him, showing the mountain lion his claws, so to speak.

Fear was a voice in his mind urging him to get back on his bike and pedal away as fast as he could, but he didn’t. He stayed and faced his emerging feelings. He felt a slight trembling in his arms and legs.

The mountain lion stared at the isolated Jeremy Scratch. A new feeling arose within Scratch. He trembled again, becoming uneasy when he moved. *I never experienced this.*

Daylight was fading more. The ancient mountains edged up to the vast alpine meadow. Remote Wyoming was at its best. Scratch recalled seeing human movement along the ridge line when he was young. *Can I still see the ghosts of ancient settlements? The mountains, where we went to play. Only the mountain lions go there. We went to unlock the secrets of the place. These are such high places. Higher than any manmade place.*

Scratch saw the flickering of a tiny chipped arrowhead resting in the grass. He wondered if his mountain lion saw the reflection. The sense of isolation rolled over and overwhelmed Scratch. *In this secluded place, we’re fighting for our lives.*

Still unnerved, and not sure what to do, Scratch spun the staffs high and low. The action caught the mountain lion’s attention as he made himself look bigger. The lion was no longer interested in the colt. Its interest was with Scratch who was sweating. He stretched his arms sideways without spinning the staffs but wasn’t sure why he did it. Scratch wasn’t sure of much right then. He only hoped his skill was adequate. *This is not the time for self-doubt.*

Scratch started and ceased the spinning of his weapon. He crouched keeping the staffs in a position to renew the spinning. Scratch understood this new emotion, fear, with confidence. He hoped the feign kept the cat’s focus on him and not the horses.

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In his years studying Qigong, he had never experienced real fear, but it was coming out. Distressed and realizing he had trained to recognize fear. He breathed rapidly and clasped his hands over his head. His eyes widened. He gained confidence and soon found himself in a universal position, that is, he felt the chi surging through his extremities. He was ready.

Scratch allowed his disciplined training to surface. His arms crossed in front of his chest and charged toward the mountain lion, spinning his three-section staff.

In an instant, the mountain lion pounced into a sprint, teeth bared. Scratch responded by spinning the three staffs that encompassed a full eight-foot diameter circle. As the lion moved Scratch spun the staffs faster. The staffs whistled through the air at a high-pitched piercing tone. Scratch changed the trajectory and moved to meet the oncoming big cat, which had become airborne.

Scratch focused on the job at hand. The staff's first section struck the mountain lion's front legs. The second staff pulled a rear leg toward Scratch. He darted to his left waving an imaginary cape as a bullfighter.

A fallen mountain lion swiped his front claws and grazed Scratch's shoulder. Blood dripped down his arm, but Scratch maintained his stance and unleashed the spinning staff to the mountain lion's head. The strike sent four teeth flying from the mountain lion's mouth. Blood puddles formed.

Stunned, the mountain lion got to its feet. The cat looked as if it was considering another run at Scratch. It turned toward the horses. As it walked, it turned toward Scratch again. The mountain lion was bleeding. It tried to stride away faster, but it had to go slow to walk.

Scratch stood and watched the cat move away. He could have but did not go after the cat. Still, Scratch felt the job of protection needed completion.

He ran toward the mountain lion. It did not take long to cut the distance between the human and the feline. He hurt the cat. Looking back at Scratch the cat was trying to get away, but it could not. The mountain lion stopped for the confrontation.

The lion roared first and then moved toward Scratch. It appeared as if the cat saw a weak spot and went toward the left side of Scratch. Scratch spun the staffs and hit the lion's face and neck. The mountain lion fell, heaving one last hiss then breath before dying.

Scratch tilted his head back, trying to keep his pride under control. He breathed in and his chest expanded. Scratch put his hands on his hips and then he rose his arms in victory.

It took a while, but he experienced reverence for the lion. As he rode home, he cried as a mourner cries. The sorrow came and went along with the prairie breeze. His lips trembled. Scratch sensed a radical change had occurred. He could not understand it. He tried to reason it through but whatever it was that bothered him, on this day he would not learn. In the end he knew he would need to collect the carcass the next day.

The following morning, Scratch and his dad drove over to collect the kill. They put carcass in the pickup truck and brought it to Lukes Skull Shop where they put it in a freezer.

"Dad, if I had a wooden three-section staff, I'd have lost."

"I don't believe it, son." Jack Scratch appeared glad Jeremy had the metal staffs as a wide smile crossed his face.

Later in the day, Luke had a comment of the kill.

"One great mountain lion. It was a hundred and seventy pounds. Want to mount it?"

"No," Scratch responded. "I would like to present the head of the mountain lion to the rancher at the Triple L who lost three foals in the past two weeks."

"We'll do it," Luke said.

Luke LaForge was 5 feet 10 inches tall. He was a big man, and a barreled chest created the bigness. He had huge arms. He wore a crew cut. Luke was younger than Scratch's father and older than Scratch by ten years or so.

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Luke's lecture was but a few words. "You can taxidermy an animal, but you can't taxidermy a human being. Why not?" Luke asked.

"Not sure."

"Cause, animals have hair over their face and bodies. With humans, their skin decomposes, gets leathery," Luke said.

This idea was to haunt Scratch for years. What also happened on the previous day was that Scratch learned to have a new respect for death. He reckoned the mountain lion had a need. He recognized the foal had a right to live. He killed not for sport as he had since he was a boy, but because he made the choice to protect the innocent foal. He realized from now on he would not kill for sport but only for necessity. He knew he would kill again for necessity.

CHAPTER 3 - More Gravy Than Grave

It was just after Thanksgiving in November 1987.

Scratch wasn't sure which event, the tornado or the mountain lion, had a bigger impact on his way of life. He knew the rest of the year, the Fall of 1987 and the Winter of 1988, had to be great. How could it not? The townspeople of Bosler, Wyoming heard the stories of Scratch's duel with the fierce mountain lion and his survival against the Goliath tornado that nearly killed him. Most of the townsfolk had at least hunted and killed an animal, but nobody could tell a tale like Scratch's. So, yes, it was a special year.

The football season was over, and the Christmas holidays were in the air.

The Christmas play at Bosler's Consolidated School, the high school, was underway in rehearsals. This was Dorothy Scratch's favorite time of the year, designing and creating the costumes for the play. An entire bedroom in the Scratch's house contained the dresses, costumes, and outfits, which Dorothy forbade Jeremy and his father from sneaking a peek by always locking the door. While she worked with the different fabrics and fiddled with the seams, wrinkles of joy and concentration formed in the corner of her eyes. Whenever she spoke of her designs to Jeremy, her face beamed with pride and enthusiastic. One secret Dorothy Scratch had was to store four costumes for each part and rotate their use each year. Then came the real design work, recreating costumes and creating new costumes. It was her passion.

The Christmas Carol has been Bosler's high school play for as long as anyone could remember. Laramie's high school and the dance company presented Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. The dancers were from high schools within thirty miles. Exceptions were rare but talented dancers could come from as far as they wanted.

Laramie students acted in *A Christmas Carol* and Bosler students danced in *The Nutcracker*. Many students were in both productions. Scratch was not interested in dancing in a ballet. He passed on *The Nutcracker*.

Scratch already was making the fifteen mile ride on his bike twice a week for martial arts, so he certainly didn't want to make it an everyday affair, especially in the very cold weather.

Local townspeople attended both productions. Newspapers such as the "The Laramie Daily Boomerang" and Cheyenne's "Wyoming Tribune Eagle" sent critics and from numerous smaller towns in Southeast Wyoming. Theater and dance departments in other schools pulled their best performers and sent them to Bosler and Laramie. *The Nutcracker* ran from December 1st to the 12th, and then *A Christmas Carol* ran from the 13th to the 24th. Every performance of both plays sold out every year. The towns supported each other. It was a marvelous time of the year; a magical atmosphere prevailed. For the balance of December folks celebrated twelve days of Christmas, but this was done family by family and neighbors by neighbors.

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In January and February, we freeze.

* * * *

Jeremy Scratch went back to the high school to learn if he got the part he wanted. He walked down the hall, listening to the janitor Willie whistling tunes that echoed as well as the mop meeting the floor in a splat. Along the wall, a small light lit the bulletin board. The hall lights flickered. Scratch tilted his head back, looking at the board where the register of names listed what role was appointed to which student. He tried to keep from smiling. The best role in the play *A Christmas Carol* belonged to him. Rightfully so. Only he could *perfect* the role of Ebenezer Scrooge.

As Scratch stepped toward the closet exit the lights flickered rapidly. Willie's whistling zipped to silence. "Willie?" he called out as he walked to the north corridor where he assumed Willie had been. He ran his fingers through his hair. Maybe, Willie needed help fixing something, but his bucket and mop were left abandoned in the middle of the hallway.

"Willie!"

No response.

The lights blacked out—except one. The limelight on the bulletin board remained lit.

"Shit," Scratch whispered, startled. He decided to head toward Willie's office in hopes of finding the long time school janitor. While walking further down the hall with one hand on the wall, his eyes acclimated to the darkness.

Knocking began. It came from his left but further ahead. Still moving toward the knocking sound, he walked into the door of the auditorium. He held his breath.

The knocking came from the theater. *What the fuck.* It became more frequent and louder. He did not realize it, but he had become pale.

Scratch opened the heavy doors. The tapping ceased. His eyes met a pitch-black cavern. Moments later, his eyes then adjusted to two blue foot-lights on stage. He knew the theater's breadth and hollow nature. Scratch heard an echo, but he couldn't discern the sound. He became disoriented for a moment. He sensed a presence. It was a smell and a thickness of the air that he walked into.

"Hello," Scratch said.

On stage, a gentle blue cloud streaked across the floor then outlined the form of a child—no, a teenager.

"Who are you?" Scratch asked in a tight, soft voice.

A mist of blue contorted the features of the teenager.

"Who are you?"

Dead silence.

As his lips trembled, something urged Scratch to imagine words. Instinct took over.

Who are you?

"Dada," came a murmur.

Who?

"Dada."

Scratch assured himself it was a whisper. His nostrils flared.

Is Dada your name?

"Dada Lucas."

Dada Lucas?

"Lucas, Dada Lucas."

Are you a student?

"No."

In the meantime, the blurred form unfolded with ominous red hair and lightly tan skin.

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Scratch needed more. He was fidgeting. He didn't want to but soon just accepted that he may be speaking to something that was beyond the reality he knew. The words *ghost* and *town* passed through his thoughts. It unnerved him and he responded accordingly.

"I will come on stage and introduce myself." Scratch took a step forward, and the footlight went out. The form disappeared. Boom. A moment later, the back-stage doors closed.

The auditorium and the hall lights lit. The bucket was gone, but the mop leaned against the wall. *Where is Willie?*

An hour later Scratch was home. He finished a meal, did his homework, and fell asleep reading his part.

* * * *

The stage was set in Victorian London, 1800s. Many fashionable establishments were located on Regent Street. Upper and middle-class homes existed near abject poverty and filth. The rich and poor got tossed together in the city boulevards. Street sweepers attempted to keep the avenues clean of manure. The roads were restless from the hundreds of horse-drawn carriages. Chimney pots were blowing out coal smoke. Soot settled everywhere. Raw sewage flowed in gutters that emptied into the river. Street merchants hawked their products. The harshness of street noises was everywhere. Drunks, beggars, pick-pockets, prostitutes, and gypsies of every description added to the mass. The prerecorded street sounds played through the speakers complimenting the backdrops and making the scene very real and present. The audience felt a taste of old England.

The lights to the last performance dimmed on Christmas Eve. The curtain opened. A spotlight turned on Scratch who played the wealthy banker Ebenezer Scrooge. The street was active, as Scratch trudged forward.

"A Merry Christmas," repeated Scrooge's nephew.

"Bah! Humbug!"

"You don't mean this uncle."

Scratch rejoined with the voice of an older man, "What good do you have to be so merry? You're poor."

"Uncle, what good for you to be so miserable? You're rich."

"Humbug."

Scrooge walked out of the scene and the stage went dark for fifteen seconds. The lights were slow in becoming brighter.

Scrooge was lying in bed. The light showed an elderly man in the room hunched in a chair. Chains wrapped his grayish body and an iron ball was at his feet.

"Ebenezer," the ghost screeched, "it's your partner Marley, can you look at me?"

"You're seen," Scratch said, "but I don't believe it."

"You doubt?"

"I do," said Scratch, gulping. "You're an upset stomach, undigested beef, a cheese crust. You're more gravy than a grave."

The audience laughed.

"Ebenezer," Marley said. "This chain I wear, forged in life, made by me, link by link."

Scratch knew his lines but could not control his body and voice. As each scene unfolded, he became more disconnected from what was taking place. He wasn't in control of his own body. Something else was in control.

There was a double awareness. He was both in the moment and outside the moment. He was confused. Intermission arrived. Scratch drank from a water fountain. He peeled back the drape and peeked out to see who had come to the play. Luke sat in the center of the crowd and two seats to his right was Coach Chin. Both were a surprise.

Why are they here?

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As the curtain opened Scratch, continued as Scrooge, and was present at the Cratchit's family's feast. There was laughing and dancing. The student players took their place, laughed and danced.

"Ah, a happy boy hugging his mother," a ghost offered.

"Yes," said Scratch.

"It's Tiny Tim," said the spirit, "he will die soon unless events turn."

"Too bad," Scratch uttered. Neither Scratch nor Scrooge had feelings.

When the ghost disappeared, Scratch felt alone in the spotlight. He had forgotten everything. Was he to walk off stage? The curtain closed behind Scratch, while the rest of the set went dark.

Scratch stared into the pit of the audience. *What is there attracting me?* The curtain behind him opened.

Christmas yet to come showed Scratch in a Christmas of the future, a scene at a hated man's death. Attended by two businessmen, a laundress, and an undertaker. Each visitor leaned over the hated man and stole jewelry, money, his tie.

Scratch wanted empathy, but instead he became connected with death, his own. He went back to the Cratchit family, where they mourned Tiny Tim's death. A ghost unveiled a hated man's grave. The tombstone said, "Scrooge." *The other side of the tombstone said, "Scratch."*

Sobbing, he vowed to change his ways to avoid a horrid outcome. He had become Scrooge again, and this knowledge terrorized him.

He knew he had not been himself. He felt empty. He had not been Scrooge either. Instead, he became his essence and his self as an amalgam. On Christmas morning when Scrooge awakened. Scratch saw the audience.

He sat there, and a narrator's voice spoke: "Scrooge spent a day with his nephew's family. Scratch had a large turkey delivered to the Cratchit family. He gave Cratchit time off and sent him home with a raise in pay. He became an uncle to Tiny Tim, who did not die. Afterward, Scrooge treated everyone with kindness."

An applause erupted from the crowd with cheers of "Bravo" and "Well Done".

What is happening? Is it over?

As the clapping subsided, the actors walked to the dressing room, except for Scratch. The audience thinned out and departed. He stood there on stage. Spotlights dimmed. There were shadows. The sound of closing exit doors echoed from every direction.

Scratch knew he wasn't alone. He saw a soft blue streak in the orchestra. A glow appeared in the area where he had spotted Luke and his coach. Scratch focused his awareness in that direction, waiting for the familiar form to defined itself. To the quick Scratch knew who was there. The coach was still sitting in the audience.

To his left was Luke, sitting. The glow was between them. As the glow got brighter, Luke and coach Chin's light faded. The glow became more visible and detailed.

It was Dada Lucas. Earlier her form was vague. Now Dada Lucas had detail. A Royal blue velvet material enveloped Dada, a slight smile was on her face. Her red hair was long and curly, below her shoulder. Dada Lucas stared at Scratch and he returned a smile. A strange warmth grew between them. It was Dada Lucas, a woman, who had been watching, and it was Dada Lucas who had the capability to hold his spirit and now gave it back to Scratch. She had sat between Luke and his coach.

Scratch and Dada locked eyes.

"Great job Scratch," declared Willie who was clearing the rubbish.

Dada Lucas disappeared. Nobody else was there.

There are addresses in ghost towns,

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There are hopes that never come about,
We are all beasts and we are god.

CHAPTER 4 - The Stubborn and Foolish Stayed in Bosler

It was May 1988.

Snow fell from the grey sky every day until the warmth of Spring arrived, melting away the cold chill in the air. Scratch graduated at the head of his class. Unlike the summer of 1987, the summer of 1988 was likely to be uneventful. But on Memorial Day, Doc ran on Route 30 naked as a jay-bird. Nobody knew why he did it. For years there were different kinds of speculation. Jack Scratch told his son that Doc did it because a ghost sat at the bar most of the afternoon. The bar closed five years ago. The ghost planted an idea in Doc's mind that if he did not get naked and run on Route 30, he had to go to hell.

Scratch got into Baruch College of the City University of New York. Three other schools, including the New School, also accepted him. He assessed the offers and registered to study Anatomy and Pre-Med at Baruch College. He received a full scholarship, which included books, room, and board, so taking out a college loan was not necessary. Scratch's only need was to get a job for spending money. He was happy he freed his parents from the burden of paying for his tuition.

In early June the Scratch family celebrated Jeremy's acceptance to Baruch College at Doc's, which Jack opened for the event with his boss's permission. Over dinner, Doc cooked and served in his old suit, his mother first, his father next, and Scratch spoke on how much change was on its way. The family ate in silence, unwilling to become sentimental as they enjoyed each other's company.

The days passed at a good pace. On June 21st, six days after Scratch's birthday the three members of the Scratch family remained quiet as they say at the railroad station. When the Union Pacific's whistle blew, it was Scratch's last moments at home. Dorothy Scratch opened her purse and pulled out a dark blue sweater she had knitted for her son. She and Scratch hugged and kissed goodbye. Her lips trembled. When she avoided Scratch's gaze, he hugged her a second time. She burst into tears, tightening her arms around him. He then guided her to the bench and sat with her for a few more moments, assuring her he would be safe.

After Dorothy calmed down, Jack picked up Scratch's Boston bags and placed them on the train. He returned and handed his son a hundred-dollar bill. Scratch nodded his head in thanks, shook his father's hand then stepped onto the stairs to the passenger car.

"Don't forget to write to your mother," Jack reminded, his face beaming with pride.

"For sure, Dad."

Scratch grabbed his bags and disappeared into the train. He had been awake most of the night, was anxious, and could spread out over adjoining seats and fall asleep for eight hours.

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As the train pulled out of Bosler, Scratch took one last look at his hometown with mixed feelings, that of enthusiasm for the future, and melancholy for the past. He grieved his hometown, which valiantly fought off the ongoing decades loss of residents. On this day it became more of a ghost town by one. For a moment Scratch felt like a deserter. He smiled and laughed, excited to go to college in New York City.

There was a transition between Bosler and New York City. The transition's name was Chicago. In Chicago, Scratch learned there were six other train stations in the city. He was shocked. *Why? How insane? Are all cities insane?*

Scratch studied a map of Chicago. Union Station was the station where he could find the Pennsylvania Railroad train going to New York. He approached a conductor smoking a cigarette in the main hall and asked for directions to Union Station.

The conductor pointed in one direction and said, "Head west on Polk Street toward South Federal Street. Turn right onto Wells Street and go another two or three blocks. You follow me so far?"

Scratch nodded.

"Turn left at Harrison Street. Go two blocks, turn right onto Canal Street and you'll see Union Station two blocks away."

"Thanks."

"You sure you understand?"

"I'm sure. Thanks again."

Scratch had not walked ten steps when he felt a tap on his shoulder. When he turned long red hair blew into his face making him step back.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said the owner of the red hair.

"Can I help you?" Scratch asked.

"Yes, are you going to Union Station?" the woman inquired in a mild French accent.

"I am," he responded.

"May I walk with you?"

Scratch nodded, and the woman held his arm as they walked. Her red hair covered the upper left part of her face. Scratch wondered if a facial flaw was behind her hair or was there something else? Either notion intrigued him. He raised his eyebrows as his eyes widened. He knew this woman. It could have been from television, but Scratch did not watch much TV. He settled on the idea that she was an actress in a movie he saw in Laramie.

While he walked a step ahead of her, he glanced back and would find her staring at him. He thought to say something but did not because she could soon go in a different direction on another train. He was fidgety. As they turned onto Canal Street, the wind calmed allowing for a perfume scent of what fragrance the woman was wearing floated toward him. Its familiarity seeped into Scratch's consciousness as something recognizable. *Who are you?*

"I'm just another young woman trying to make it in New York," she said, trying to make conversation as well as answering Scratch's specific thought.

Scratch became aroused and attracted primarily because he never paid so much attention to a woman before. Without knowing it he was being bombarded by stimuli to his senses. His cheeks lifted. He laughed at himself. *You, silly man; you are less than a day away from home and you are in love. Cool down my good man, cool down.*

"Ah," she said, "there's Union Station."

"It is," Scratch said.

A voice came over a loudspeaker, echoing into the Chicago streets. It was likely a familiar sound by people who worked in the buildings nearby.

As the late afternoon sun set, Scratch and the woman arrived at the terminal. There were large globe-shaped lamps attached to pillar tops. The lights were lit, which cast a new light on Union Station. People talking filtered through doors as commuters and travelers walked in and

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out. Women in high-heeled shoes tapped their heels on the marble floor. The tapping offered an echo of where they have been and where they're going. The men walked hard and in cadence. Children tested their voices in the large hall. They loved hearing the sounds' ricochet. So did Scratch. It was melodic.

As Scratch walked up four steps, he opened the left door and stood back to allow the woman to walk through first. But no woman passed. She disappeared.

Scratch became upset; he felt abandoned. Trying to avoid the feeling, Scratch withdrew by spotting an empty seat on a bench. He sat for a period of time so the feeling could break apart and leave. The abandonment was a new feeling to Scratch and lingering was disconcerting. But it was over...for the time being.

A conglomerate of four railroads constructed Union Station. Pennsylvania Railroad took the lead. Union Station's main hall of the structure filled a full city block. The attraction was the Great Hall. It had a 200-foot-long round vaulted skylight. It rose ten stories above the ground. The long oak benches with birds, butterflies, and flowers decorating the chandeliers above were the original features of the grand station. Two statues stood for the day and night, a symbol recognizing passengers on the move at any hour of the day.

Scratch looked around for the woman, scanning the huge hall, but after a while of no luck, he gave up. He drifted into a deep nap. *Dreaming, Scratch was on stage but did not think the play was familiar. He spotted Luke and coach Chin in the audience. They waved, and so did the person who sat between them. He did not recognize who was between his mentors.* The station sounds began to be heard in the dream. As he was reentering consciousness he could see but could not articulate who was sitting in the audience..

Scratch knew his train would leave from Gate 9. He napped hoping to complete the dream and learn who the person was between his two mentors.

"All-aboard," came an echoed voice that exaggerated the cry which woke Scratch. He looked at his slow watch, which read 9:25 PM, and saw that a train was leaving in five minutes. Scratch trotted and then ran toward Gate 9. He worried he may not make the train.

He ran faster and made the train as it started to move.

Scratch entered the fourth car from the rear and limped his way toward the front of the train. He hobbled through five or six cars and found two seats on the left. He put his suitcase above and sat next to the window.

He waited until the train moved at a steady speed and then manipulated the seat's handle so it reclined to read in a comfortable position.

The car Scratch had chosen was old-fashioned. The Pennsylvania railroad workers had vacuumed the train's floor. But the seats did not get the same attention. The trim inside each passenger car was woven with wicker wire. The janitorial service kept it straightened out and clean. There were signs that a naughty child could pull a strand of wire out. The springs on the wheels were in good condition giving the car a soft ride with few bumps felt.

"May I sit here?" a familiar voice asked.

"Hello," Scratch greeted the red-headed woman. The woman leaned on his shoulder as she sat next to him. Tilting her head, she looked at him. He was eager to know more of her realizing earlier she offered sensual overload by the fragrance she wore, the way she kept her hair, the French accent, and her eyes, which were intense and beautiful. Scratch expanded his shoulders and inhaled, swelling his chest.

He helped her with her bag and then sat and tried to find something to say.

"Merci," she said.

"Are you going to New York?"

"Yes, and then I take another train to eastern Long Island."

After a brief exchange of small talk, she went into silence, and he drifted into a light sleep.

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The woman pulled cardboard sheets from her handbag. She paged through the large cards, spending a minute on each.

Wanted posters from other countries. Scratch tilted his head. *Am I dreaming?* He eyed her slowly from head to toe. Her snake tattoo wrapped around her neck, under her hairline, and then curled under her earlobe where a metallic earring of a snake's head bared its fangs. She wore a long-sleeve Pucci blouse of pale pink, which matched her white shorts and earthy sandals.

"I collect wanted posters," Scratch offered, hoping to grab her attention.

"Why?" she asked, not lifting her gaze from the posters.

"I'm not sure. I've had an interest in murderers for years."

The woman turned to him. "What will you do if you meet a killer?"

"I'd kill him." He smiled with embarrassment. She winked. They each knew he was serious.

Scratch and the woman continued talking through the night. They laughed, confessed their younger years, and had fun. There was touching on occasion. It was innocent... or maybe it wasn't. But it didn't matter.

He told her his interests were in biology, anatomy, and pathology. He mentioned he was a taxidermist.

"Human taxidermy," she joked with a smile. She then giggled. He didn't laugh.

"You cannot do human taxidermy."

"Why not?"

"You can't save the skin from decomposing."

"You can't."

They smiled.

Each of them learned more about the other's history. She rested her head on his shoulder. Scratch knew it was the same woman. The last time he saw her she had a suit on, but now she was casual in her dress. He noted a ring she wore had the initials DL.

Scratch and the woman slept through the night until they reached New York. She and he were awakened by a conductor announcing, "New York, New York."

Having breakfast together in a Penn Station restaurant, they talked more, and parted.

"My name is Scratch, and I am twenty," he lied.

"Hello Scratch, I'm Dada Lucas, and I'm twenty-one," she lied. "I live on Twenty-second street but am staying in Southampton for the summer."

Fright ran through Scratch's body. "Dada Lucas?" he whispered.

Dada Lucas. Am I dreaming? A sense of glee entered him.

"I'm not sure where I will live," he hollered.

Trepidation interrupted the glee. She did not answer what she did not hear.

"Be like a train; go in the rain, go in the sun, go in the storm, go in the dark tunnels! Be like a train; concentrate on your road and go with no hesitation!" - Mehmet Murat ildan

CHAPTER 5 - My Left-Handed Wife in the Chelsea Hotel

In 1988 most of July was hot. On its last day, Scratch wrote a letter to his mother:

“Dear Mom, I’m settled into a room at the Chelsea Hotel at 222 West 23rd Street. I’m paying \$95 a week, affordable. Many artists and writers are living here. I like it. Your favorite writer, Arthur Miller, wrote *After the Fall* while living here at the Chelsea. Classes start tomorrow. I love New York City. Miss you and dad very much. I’ll write in a few weeks. You can write me here; I’m in Room 517. Much love, Jeremy.”

Even though they both had separate rooms at the Chelsea Hotel, Scratch didn’t meet Tunji until they met in an English class. Right from the beginning, they sensed a common focus and competitive nature in each other. Classroom exchanges awakened all when Tunji and Scratch entered into a discussion. Often on opposite sides of an issue in class, they aligned in world politics. They agreed a progressive democratic agenda was a reasonable position for most emerging countries. Both agreed the United States has not lost its racism. Scratch and Tunji reached agreement the racism was steeped first in the way the indigenous peoples were treated and that was amplified by half the country which sought and depended upon the slavery of Africans. Their differences on the details often erupted in and out of the classroom. They were each passionate about understanding history their own way. They were often dramatic and demonstrative when debating. Together they were a wonderful show for other new students to watch. Both gained friends easily.

Tunji Faria was from South Africa, and people in his homeland called him by his full name. In the United States Americans did not consider using his full name. Americans referred to him as Tunji.

He noted and asked Scratch why he allowed folks to call him by his family name, and not Jeremy.

“One reason is the last name is often a nick-name. Many school friends called each other by their last name.”

“So, you’re Scratch.” Tunji smiled.

“And you will remain to be ‘Tunji.’” They both smiled.

They did not articulate it but they had bonded and saw themselves as brothers. Scratch was 6’-2” and had a lean physique. Tunji had a carved muscular 6’-2” body. Tunji also had a slight twitch which he learned to hide by making a quiet cough an instant after a twinge. Scratch had noticed the twitch but also realized Tunji covered it with the clearing of his throat. He’d never mention it to Tunji.

What they didn’t know about each other was they were born one day apart, Scratch on June 15th in 1970 and Tunji was born a day earlier on June 14th in 1970.

Scratch kept a crew cut but by the semester’s end he realized he could wear his hair as long as he wanted. By summer’s end, he grew a beard and trained a mustache to point out and

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upward. He continued to stylize his facial hair and introduced a new look. He did this with a black fur felt Homburg hat, which he wore tipped forward and to the right.

Tunji's lips were full, his nose, Nordic. He had brown skin, which changed color and tone depending upon the time of day. Copying Scratch, he allowed his hair to grow into an Afro. He did not allow facial hair, however. Indeed, he carried a Gillette razor in his pocket and would use the razor to get rid of any stubble when he went to the men's room. Tunji spoke with a pleasant melodic South African accent.

Scratch listened when Tunji spoke. When alone, Scratch practiced speaking with more distinction and more perfect enunciation. Curiously, and also privately, Tunji developed speech using idioms Scratch had used. His favorite was "my left-handed wife," meaning, a mistress. Scratch had never used the term, but he told Tunji he had, after Scratch commented on a woman passing the two of them on the street; "She's my left-handed wife," he said jokingly.

Tunji kept fit by running five miles a day. He also had the ability to put on a theatrical show. He danced and played African drums.

"I play the djembe and the talking drum."

"What's a talking drum?"

"It's shaped like an hourglass with drumheads on the top and bottom."

"Oh, you play it between your legs?"

"You can and many people do play it that way. But practiced drummers put the drum under their arm next to their body. It has tension straps made from leather pulling the two drumheads toward each other."

"How does it talk?"

"The drummer squeezes the straps in and out allowing the drum to mimic human speech."

"I understand."

"Do you play any instruments?"

"No, but when I practice martial arts with the staffs, there are distinct rhythms that need to be followed or else hurt yourself by being out of rhythm losing control of the staffs. Again," Scratch emphasized, "if you don't create a defined rhythm, you WILL hurt yourself."

"The sticks sound dangerous."

"They're very dangerous; they can kill in the right hands."

"Do you have the right hands?"

Scratch thought about the mountain lion and considered whether to tell the story.

"I do; I killed a mountain lion with the staffs that outweighed me."

"We have lions; you have cats. African lions weigh three times your weight." Tunji's arms stretched sideways as if he were showing the dimensions of the lions.

"But, dear friend, our alligators weigh three times that of your lions and will eat your lions if they get too close." Scratch spread his arms in the air wide apart, then he leaned down toward Tunji and closed his arms as he bent over and growled, "I eat lions, tigers and bears!"

Tunji laughed. He then scanned the restaurant.

"But let me tell you about my part of Africa," said Tunji with a serious look that Scratch took as being secretive.

Tunji moved closer and lowered his voice.

"Please," said Scratch. "I'm very interested." He got closer to Tunji as well.

"First, some history. The Pan Africanist Congress of Azania was a South African Pan-Africanist movement that is currently a political party. It was formally launched in Soweto. Other African National Congress representatives joined because they objected to other national groups joining, such as the Communist Party of South Africa."

"Holy shit," Scratch said.

"The PAC organized a campaign against pass laws. People..."

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“What are ‘pass laws’?” Scratch interrupted and asked.

“Pass laws are like a passport that people needed to carry and was designed to segregate the population,” Tunji explained.

“Oh, my God,” Scratch exclaimed, surprised.

Tunji continued, “so people gathered in the town of Sharpeville where top leaders were arrested and convicted for inciting riots. They were sentenced to three years in prison. Right after the Sharpeville massacre the government banned the ANC and PAC. The PAC responded by founding what would become South African Guard Elite. (SAGE). It took up PAC’s ideology that the South African Government should be made by African people owing allegiance to Africa.”

“What happened to SAGE?” Scratch asked.

“SAGE became affiliated with the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) a grassroots anti-Apartheid activist movement. The BCM represented a social movement for political consciousness. It was an ideology that at first I liked but have moved away from it.”

“What happened in Sharpeville?” Scratch asked.

“The Sharpeville massacre occurred at the police station in Sharpeville,” Tunji started. “After a day of demonstrations against pass laws, by 10,000 demonstrators went to the South African Police opened fire on the crowd, killing over 100 people. Many were shot in the back as they fled.”

Suddenly Tunji began to cry, “it was a nonviolent protest!”

Scratch grabbed Tunji and held him. “I’m so sorry my friend.”

There was a paused while Tunji composed himself.

Scratch then said, “I have an idea. Let’s meet for a few beers after class.”

“We’ll meet where the parrot hangs out,” Tunji shouted. “Later.”

Scratch growled again. Laughing. He said “Aweh,” a term Tunji taught him used when acknowledging something good.

“Aweh.”

Scratch walked away realizing that the moment they shared would be as close as he would ever get to Tunji. He was fine with that but reasoned it through. Because each friend had taught Tunji and Scratch more spirit and mystery than religion, they became as close as they could be... but no closer.

They understood but did not verbalize, there was an abyss between them, and both agreed not to breach it. It was a wise action.

Baruch College was on Park Avenue at 68th Street. They walked to and from school, and after classes sometimes met at Molly Malone’s, a bar on 3rd Avenue and 22nd Street. They liked its ambiance, peanut shells on a slanted floor. It made everybody who had over two drinks negotiate every step to the bathroom.

Scratch arrived first and drank a Heineken. Tunji came in and saw his friend. The bartender came over, and Scratch spoke up, “please pour cognac for my friend.” He pushed a ten-dollar bill toward the barman.

“Merci mon ami,” Tunji smiled at his friend.

“My pleasure good man.”

As Tunji lifted his glass as a toast, Scratch lifted his bottle and saluted. Both men talked, and both men listened.

They talked seriously about what they wanted to do. Tunji shared he felt tribal traditions and cultural bioregions should get defined and created all over the world.

“We are all tribal,” Tunji said. “Every tribe has its own belief system. What I want to do is study the similarities and their differences so that commonality can be found and used to maintain a harmony by and between tribes and kinfolk. I see a new world map, where the terms

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are functional in describing the common social, spiritual, and economic links among the people.”

“Geomes will be what I call cultural environmental social regions,” Tunji said. He stood straight up with a slight expansion to his chest. He looked Scratch straight in his eyes. The parrot, which had been quiet and unnoticed let out a loud screeching call.

Scratch knew tribal people in Wyoming. He knew of what the United States did to steal tribal lands and put the indigenous people on reservations separating the different Indian nations.

“Reservations were my young country’s answer to your sophisticated Geomes. In my view the United States owes apologies to the tribal people of this country and also to the sons and daughters of slaves who were brought here from Africa. Their reservations are called ghettos,” Scratch said.

“As will the rest of the world,” added Tunji, happy with Scratch’s words.

Scratch also shared with Tunji his interest in creating artificial skin. He talked about “the present abomination of the way funerals function and the way death is misunderstood.”

He explained he wanted to meet the needs of history and will create human taxidermy, which has been in demand since it attempted to preserve the first human.

“That will be good as long as you follow strict tribal beliefs in how to send people to paradise,” Tunji offered.

Scratch had not thought about it but accepted there is value understanding tribal tradition. He promised Tunji he would honor and follow Tunji’s dream regarding tribal belief systems.

Both men drank too much and the exchange between them degraded. Instead of what they had, a dialogue, it generated into jabber jawing.

At one-point new and strange information slipped from Tunji’s intoxicated lips: “they took me without a trial to John Vorster Square, the notorious detention center. They locked me in a special room and tortured me. My hands and feet were manacled, and they beat me until I was prepared to say, ‘I did it.’ They injected me with ‘truth serum’ and later showed me what they claimed was a recording of my confession.”

It stunned Scratch. “What are you talking about? Is this true Tunji?”

Tunji looked around for a moment.

“Is what true?”

As hard as Scratch tried to learn more about this sudden offering, Tunji forgot what he had said. They drank more and slurred their words jumping from a few words about divinity, and thousands of gods.

“Scratch, it’s a wicked problem. How do you reconcile evil’s existence with an omnipotent being? Their coexistence is impossible.”

“That’s bullshit,” Scratch responded, finally getting frustrated with Tunji’s arrogance and nonsense. “I’ve got to piss.”

When Scratch returned from the men’s room, Tunji had departed. Scratch left a tip and left the bar and went outside. He began to walk toward the Chelsea. A moment later Tunji lunged at Scratch from behind a parked car and cold-cocked him. Scratch went down and out.

Sudden vicious actions can steal consciousness on occasion. When a brain is abruptly shocked, it turns off and goes dark. The punch landed square on Scratch’s head. Inside his skull, his brain parts floated off the inner skull’s walls.

Scratch realized, an instant later, when his consciousness returned. The light came back on. He soon recognized it was Tunji who had hit him. The mystic aspect of martial art is when the art is concentrated power in reciprocation. Scratch made a quick move and felled Tunji with a sweeping kick to his forehead purposely avoiding the more vulnerable spot an inch over.

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Their drinking begot a primitive state. Each man risked his life without even knowing it.

* * * *

On their own they each found the Chelsea Hotel and their respective rooms.

Neither of them admitted to remembering what happened. But the outcome was to change their social habits. From then on when they met after class it would be at Sip 'n' Soda where they talked only intelligently and as a reward enjoyed every flavor of the organic ice cream and then rated the flavor and discussed its nuances. They remained friends over the years but shared no classes once they made their way toward their separate paths. They saw each other occasionally, sometimes went for coffee, but eventually became out of touch.