

Spirit Dump

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

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"There's this place I know," he said, perching himself on the corner of the desk, "Out past the Bannersburg landfill, near where the sheriff dumped all the confiscated booze from those moonshiners last year, that I visit when I need cheering up."

She looked up him, startled, and then grimaced. "It's that obvious?"

"Yup." He smiled.

She sighed.

His smile vanished. "Or if you'd rather just talk about it..."

She shook her head. "No," she said, "I tried that, with Angie-- you know her, my apartment-mate, don't you? Well, anyway, I talked to her, and it didn't do any good."

"So what is it that's bothering you, anyway, if you don't mind my asking?"

"That's the thing-- maybe that's why talking didn't work. I don't *know* what it is. I just feel like my life... I don't know, like it's not going anywhere, or maybe it's... oh, hell."

He nodded. "Well, this place I mentioned is a lot cheaper than a shrink, and it's safer than drugs; care to give it a shot?"

"Where did you say?"

"Near Bannersburg. It's about half a mile past the landfill."

"What, is it a great view, or something? That's getting up in the hills, right?"

"Kind of. The view-- well, there's a view, but it's not just that. It's hard to explain; it just seems like a place where you can dump your problems and worries and forget them."

She eyed him suspiciously. "And I suppose you were figuring you could drive me up there, to this place in the middle of nowhere, just the two of us for a look at this romantic scenery?"

He put a hand on his chest, fingers spread. "*Me*?" he said, "Would I try something like that?"

"Yes." She nodded emphatically.

He laughed. "True-- and if that's what would cheer you up, Suze, I'd be glad to oblige. But honestly, it wasn't what I had in mind. Look, I can give you directions and you can drive up by yourself, or we can bring along a chaperone, or make a party of it."

"Really?" She studied his face, and saw nothing hidden there, no trace of sarcasm or spite or even lechery.

"Why are you telling me this, Paul?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Just trying to help out a fellow human being."

"That's it?"

He smiled crookedly. "Well, maybe I do have an ulterior motive-- but I'm not going to tell you what it is until *after* you've seen the place."

She stared up at him for a moment, then said, "All right, you're on. But we'll bring Angie."

* * *

Angie looked out the car window and pronounced, "Yuck."

Paul laughed. "That's the landfill," he said.

"That's a dump," Angie said. "I don't care what they call it, it's a dump. They were dumps when I was a kid, and changing the name doesn't change the fact that they're still dumps."

"They plow 'em under now, though," Paul pointed out. "It's more sanitary. The stuff doesn't just sit there collecting vermin."

"Whatever, it's still a dump, and it's ugly."

"Never said it wasn't." He glanced at Suze, and his expression dimmed; she wasn't laughing. She was staring dully out the window on the other side, watching the passing trees.

"There's nothing wrong with dumps," he said. "Gotta put all the trash somewhere, don't you?"

Angie snorted. "Dumps make me sick," she said. "When I was a kid, my uncle Bert used to hang around the town dump-- he'd shoot rats there, they paid him a bounty, maybe a quarter each, which was hardly worth the bullet. He thought it was fun, though, and he'd pick through all the stuff and sometimes he'd bring home some of it. Old magazines, and sometimes books, and machinery parts-- he used to fix my mother's washing machine, and I don't think he ever in his life paid for parts. And people throw away the damndest things."

"Doesn't sound so bad," Paul said.

"Yeah, it was-- everything he brought in stank. *He* stank. And he was filthy, always. I can still see him standing there, holding up a bunch of mangled rats by their tails..."

"Well, there probably aren't any rats in the landfill back there, anyway," Paul said. "That's why they bury it all now, so rats won't get in there."

"Course, that means nobody can pick through it, either," Angie pointed out. "Uncle Bert would lose out both ways-- if he hadn't drunk himself to death ten years ago."

Paul shrugged. "I guess he would," he agreed. He shook his head. "And people throw away the damndest things."

A moment later they turned off the main road-- which wasn't exactly a highway to begin with-- onto a narrow strip of dirt. Angie started away from the window as they passed within inches of the tree branches on either side.

"Shit," she said, "You sure you know where you're going?"

"I'm sure," Paul told her.

About a quarter mile from the road the car suddenly emerged into sunlight; Paul brought it to a stop and killed the engine. "Everybody out," he announced, "We're here."

Angie leapt out and looked around; Suze didn't move until Paul came around the car and opened her door.

She looked up at him, then reluctantly climbed out.

The three of them stood in a strip of grassy meadow atop a small ridge. Behind them were the woods, all secondary growth and brambly underbrush; ahead of them the land dropped off abruptly, a steep slope of bare earth and tuffets, perhaps fifteen or twenty feet high. Grass and wildflowers filled the gap between trees and drop, which varied from about a dozen feet in width to as much as forty.

At the foot of the slope the scrub forest gradually resumed, starting with grass and weeds, graduating through thorns and briars to bushes, a few browning evergreens, and finally to crowded, unhealthy maple and ash.

Suze looked around, appalled.

"*This* is your great scenic spot?" she demanded.

Angie said, "Looks more like Uncle Bert's old hang-out, only without the trash. They'd throw it all down the slope and let it pile up at the bottom."

"Hey, I said it wasn't the view that mattered-- though I'd like to point out that you can see Sugarloaf if you look over that way." He pointed to the distant mountain, a blue lump on the horizon.

"So what is it, then?" Suze asked.

"Come here, and I'll show you," Paul told her, marching up to the very brink and beckoning her forward.

Slowly, reluctantly, she approached.

"Come on," he said, "I'm not going to push you over or anything."

Both women came up to stand beside him.

"Now," he said, "Look down the slope and tell me what you see."

Obediently, the two peered over the edge.

"Nuthin'," Angie told him.

Suze blinked.

"Not even a beer can, right?" Paul asked.

"I don't know," Suze said. "It's... I don't see anything, but it *feels* like there's something down there."

Paul nodded.

"Okay, Suze," he said, "I want you to take all that anger and depression and whatever it is that's got your spirit so weighed down lately, and I want you to gather it all up into a big lump and throw it down there."

She turned to stare at him. "What?"

"Like a visualization exercise," he said. "Like in meditation, or biofeedback, or something. Just concentrate on it, think of it as if it were a real, tangible thing, and throw it down there."

Suze hesitated.

"Oh, go ahead," Angie said. "Can't hurt to try."

"All right."

She concentrated. She thought of the gloom as a big gray something that had hung down over her, and suddenly she could *see* it, she could see this dark, foul thing, half cloud, half slime, that was covering her, and she reached up with both hands and heaved it up, revolted by the feel of it, heaved it up and flung it out over the brink. It fell, streaming grayish gunk that settled after it in a noisome, clinging cloud.

And suddenly she felt better than she had in weeks.

She blinked, and realized that the day was warm and sunny, that even though the trees down there were thin, their leaves were green and bright, the sunlight golden on the ground. The wildflowers on the ridgetop were cheerful, like a scattering of children's drawings. A monarch butterfly was vividly orange as it fluttered from one blossom to the next.

"Wow," she said.

Angie looked at her, startled.

Paul grinned. "Worked, huh?"

"How did you do that?" Suze demanded-- but she wasn't angry; she felt too good to be angry. She was just curious.

"I didn't do anything," Paul told her. "*You* did."

"Come on," Suze insisted, grinning.

"No, really! Or really, it's this *place* that did it. Take a look over the side, there-- carefully."

A bit doubtful, Suze approached the edge as closely as she dared and looked down.

"What am I supposed to see?" she asked.

Angie, beside her, said, "I don't see a damn thing but rocks and dirt."

"Suze," Paul said, "Try to see that bad mood you threw down there."

"I won't get it back, will I?" she asked, with just the faintest trace of apprehension.

"No, no, of course not!"

She glanced at him, then stared back down the slope, trying to recall what that gray squirming mess had looked like...

And there it was.

And there was a great deal more.

She saw, faintly but definitely, gray and black and sick brown and bilious green and hot red, and gray and more gray. The slope was covered with the stuff, with oozing blobs and barbed chunks and a hundred other hazy, intangible shapes.

"Oh my God," she breathed.

"People throw away the damndest things, don't they?" Paul asked her, grinning.

"What?" Angie shouted, "What is it? What's down there?"

"What *is* all that stuff, Paul?" Suze asked.

"Well," he said, pointing, "That spiky reddish thing is that bout of bad temper I had last summer and just couldn't get rid of. The dark oily thing there is from when my mother was thinking about suicide-- I brought her out here. But most of them I don't know; they were here before I ever saw the place."

Angie was staring at him, he realized. She probably thought it was a joke, he told himself.

"I learned about it from my grandfather," Paul explained, "And he claimed to have heard about it from an old Indian who said this was the place where men could come and leave whatever evil spirits were troubling them. Granddad called it the spirit dump."

"I never believed in any of that stuff," Suze said, still staring down the slope.

Paul shrugged. "I don't know if it's evil spirits, or if it's something in the air here, or magnetic fields, or maybe it's all hallucinations; I just knew that it worked for me, and that it seemed to work for my mother, and Granddad said it worked for him. And I wanted to see if it would work for everybody, or if maybe it was just my family-- or just my imagination. And when you'd been in a funk for the past week I figured it was a chance to find out."

"What are you *looking* at, Suze?" Angie demanded. "Ain't nothin' down there!"

Suze shuddered. "All that stuff..." she murmured. She stepped back from the edge.

"Let's get back in the car," she said. "I'll tell you about it later."

Paul sat at his desk, tapping a pencil on the blotter as he watched Suze talking brightly to Roger and Amy. He frowned.

He hadn't told her to keep the spirit dump secret; he hadn't thought it was necessary. He didn't suppose it could really hurt if more people found out about it; after all, from the amount of stuff accumulated there already, plenty of people had known about it over the years.

Still, it bothered him. Suze was practically advertising the place, like a missionary seeking converts. Roger and Amy were just the latest in a long series.

But then, why shouldn't she proselytize? What could happen? Was he afraid that the magic would get used up somehow?

Maybe that was it.

Or maybe he was just being selfish; he had this wonderful cure-all, and he was being asked to share it, and he wanted it all for himself.

Maybe that was it. He tapped harder.

When the pencil broke he went back to his paperwork.

* * *

By the end of the second week his agitation had reached such a level that it was interfering with his work, with his driving, with everything.

Obviously, the thing to do was to drive out to the spirit dump and chuck his worry over the cliff. That would prove that the place still worked, for one thing.

So, Saturday morning, he headed out past the Bannersburg landfill.

There were fresh tire tracks at the turn-off, several of them. He realized he had a headache.

Along the narrow access road a tree-branch snapped off against his window, the broken end dragging across the side of his car, and his head began pounding.

And when he reached the strip of meadow and found a Chrysler mini-van half-blocking his path, so that he had to steer carefully between its rear bumper and the trees in order to get out into the clearing, the headache was unbearable. Enraged, he climbed out and shouted.

Faces turned toward him, half a dozen faces-- people he didn't even know. He marched out toward them.

"Hey, Paul," someone called.

Paul followed the voice and spotted Roger. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Roger grinned at him and shrugged. "Suze told us about this place," he said, "So we thought we'd check it out."

Paul stared at him for a moment, then stamped on up to the edge of the cliff and peered over, forcing himself to not just look, but to *see*.

The mass of spiritual debris lay upon the barren slope, stretching a hundred yards in either direction, but with the largest concentration directly below him. And there were dozens of new additions since his last visit-- most of them small, most of them thin and gray and relatively harmless-looking, but still, *dozens*. More, he thought, than had been added in all the years he had been coming here.

"What have you been throwing down there?" he bellowed.

"Nothing much," someone answered.

"A hangover," someone else said, evoking laughter from two or three others. Paul saw that it was one of the strangers, a big, overweight man with ragged black hair. He was holding an open can of beer.

"A *hangover*? For Christ's sake, a hangover goes away by itself!"

"Yeah, well, I'd rather have it doing it down there than in me," the fat man retorted.

"And how do you know it will? Maybe it'll just sit down there and fester!" Paul shouted.

"So what?"

"So d'you want this to *fill up*? What happens then?"

The fat man shrugged.

"Damn it, you get down there and get that hangover back!" Paul ordered.

The fat man snorted. "You're crazy," he said.

"*Get down there!*"

"Make me."

Paul charged.

The fat man sidestepped and swung an arm to fend off his attacker; Paul, half-blind with fury and the pain of his headache, stumbled directly into the blow.

At first he didn't know what had happened; he knew he was falling, that the grass had gone out from underneath his feet, but he thought he would land on his back on the meadow.

Then he realized that it was taking too long, and an instant later he slammed backward into the bare dirt and rolled, involuntarily.

He tried to catch himself, but all he managed to do was to turn his roll into a slide; he still wound up at the bottom of the slope.

At the bottom of the slope, and *underneath* the contents of the dump.

Despair washed over him, thick gray drowning despair, as he lay on his back, trying to gather his senses. He stared up at a sky gone the color of mud and a sun gone dim and brown, and the futility of it all filled him, pressed down on him. Simply to breathe took an effort, and it was horribly tempting to just stop, to let his breath out and forget to take another...

He reached up and pushed the thing off him, and the sun was bright again, the sky blue. His head still hurt, and one foot stung oddly, but the suffocating hopelessness was gone.

Whoever had thrown *that* down here, he thought, had done the right thing.

He looked around. He was sitting on the bare dirt, near the bottom of the slope, and all around him were the vague, indistinct shapes and colors of the dump's contents. Above, at the top of the slope, Roger and half a dozen strangers were staring worriedly down at him.

It didn't look like a particularly difficult climb-- except that it went right through the center of the dump.

Frowning, he looked around. Could he go down the slope the rest of the way, and around?

No; the dump extended well past him, down to the trees, almost as great a distance as that to the meadow atop the ridge. And the walk around either end would be a good, long one, from the look of it.

So he would just have to climb straight up the slope.

"Are you all right?" Roger called.

"I'm okay," Paul called back.

"Can you get back up?"

"Sure," he said. He got to his feet-- or tried to.

There was something clinging to one leg, something sharp and rusty brown, something that stung, that

seemed to twang every nerve and tendon in his ankle. He winced, reached down, and plucked it off.

It burned his hand, and he flung it quickly aside.

Then he started climbing.

He knew, from his very first step, that he was going to be wading through decades, maybe centuries of accumulated psychic detritus; he tried to brace himself for it, but he really didn't know how. Nothing he had ever done had prepared him for something like this.

A green like rotting cheese roiled up his leg, and a rush of envy swept over him. *Roger* was safe up there, the smug bastard...

He tore the envy away and took another step, and a rush of guilt flooded him-- how could he think ill of Roger, who hadn't meant any harm?

He hesitated with that one, and tried an experiment. He reached down and tore off a few fragments-- just little ones, like sickly, gray-black cottonballs.

He hadn't been sure it was possible, but in fact it was easy; easier, he thought, than it should have been. He was sure he was doing something wrong here, that this was immoral somehow, but he forced himself.

He collected about a dozen pieces, then wadded them up and stuffed them in his pocket.

He knew he shouldn't be doing it, it was a really terrible idea...

Then his hand came out of his pocket and he smiled; the idea no longer troubled him at all.

"What are you doing there, Paul?" Roger called.

Paul had just tried to squeeze between two very large, nasty-looking things, and in doing so had run his leg right onto a hot red spike of anger. He snapped his head up and glared at Roger.

"What the hell does it *look* like I'm doing?" he bellowed. "Fat lot of help you are!"

He shook his leg free of the bad temper and took another step.

This was really very boring. Tiresome. Maybe he should just settle down somewhere and rest until it got more interesting. Climbing up the slope wasn't any fun...

He waded on, through depression, ennui, anger, envy, guilt, shame, greed-- and some surprises.

Lust, for one. That, he thought, was probably a relic of a more straitlaced era. It was all he could do to keep his hands out of his pants until he had scrambled up past it.

And pride. Sinful pride, a huge, seething mass of it. He wondered if whoever dumped it had kept any; the sheer quantity was amazing.

Maybe it had grown, since being dumped. Could it *do* that?

Any number of questions piled into his mind, and he realized he'd stepped on a lump of curiosity. He kicked it aside, and lost his balance. He put out an arm to catch himself.

And mindless panic swept over him, abject terror. He froze.

He was near the top, but suddenly he was scared to go any farther.

"Paul?"

He looked up, and Roger's face was there, hanging above him like some looming horror about to pounce. The dirt was soft and crumbling beneath him; at any moment, he knew he would plummet back down the slope, he would break his neck against one of those trees at the bottom, he'd slash himself on the thorns and lie there bleeding and crippled, and Roger would just laugh, Roger had planned it all, the whole thing, he'd put Suze up to it, her depression wasn't real at all.

They were all in it.

He started to take a step back down the slope, away from his enemy up there, that monster that had pretended to be a friend, that had lured him into this trap.

Monster-- that was it. Roger wasn't human at all. He was some kind of demon. He'd planned it all, he'd probably created the spirit dump in the first place just to trap people. He lured his prey out here with his phony cures, then trapped them in the dump where he could torture them, where he could suck out their souls, where he could blind them with thorns and let flies drink the blood and...

If he stepped back, that might be what the fiend wanted. There could be barbed metal spikes there, spring-loaded spears that would thrust up into his belly, his groin. They'd missed him the first time, but now the Roger-thing was trying to drive him back to where the traps, the other monsters, were waiting.

Little things with teeth and claws and shining bright eyes-- he could almost see them, behind him, on either side, everywhere.

He didn't dare move.

But he didn't dare stay where he was, either. He began trembling, not merely with fear, but as he struggled with himself over what to do.

He knew he could never defeat the monsters-- not just the Roger-thing, but all the others that must be lurking up there out of sight, that had been hiding in among the trees. But maybe he could at least try, maybe somebody would hear his screams as he tried to escape and they brought him down, fangs and claws and sharp steel blades gleaming.

He lunged forward, and the fear lost its grip. He sprawled on the slope, his hand reaching the grass at the top of the cliff, his face falling smack into the hangover that someone had thrown down just moments earlier. The world spun, his head throbbed, Roger's shuffling footsteps were like huge grating sandpaper sounds, like fingernails on a blackboard, but at least he wasn't terrified anymore.

Just nauseated.

Then someone had hold of his arm, and he was being pulled up, and he reluctantly managed to get his feet under him and clamber up the last few feet onto the meadow. The hangover came with him, and he blinked owlishly at his rescuers. The light hurt his eyes.

"Are you all right?" someone asked. He winced.

"Don't shout," he whispered.

Someone giggled. "I think he got my hangover," he said.

Paul nodded, then winced again as the movement made his headache worse. When the others released his arms he sank down to sit cross-legged on the grass, where he gradually managed to pry the hangover, bit by bit, out of his head and gut.

When he finally flung it back over the side it was as if the sun had burst through storm clouds, and he took a deep, gasping breath in relief.

Then he sat for a moment, gathering his thoughts, as the others all huddled about him. He stuck a hand in his pocket and pulled out a little wad of guilt.

He felt bad about what he was about to do-- but he told himself that was just the guilt, he didn't let it stop him.

"Give me a hand," he said, reaching out.

Two people took his hands, one on each side, to help him up; when he was upright he made sure to leave a little bit of guilt with each of them.

A little guilt never hurt anybody.

"Roger," he said, after quickly dipping his hand back in his pocket, "Thanks for pulling me up." He reached out to shake hands.

Roger, a bit reluctantly, shook, and took a little guilt away with him.

Two others were clapped on the back.

The last of the group he didn't bother with; the poor woman looked guilty enough already. And he still had a fair-sized lump in his pocket that would come in handy when he talked to Suze on Monday and asked her to stop broadcasting about the place. He wasn't sure how he would store it that long, but he was sure he could manage it.

"Bet you're glad to be out of there," someone said. "I'm really sorry if we caused you trouble."

"It's nothing," Paul said, "Really."

"Yeah, well," Roger said, "*I* wouldn't want to go down there! We could see your face-- it looked awful."

"It wasn't so bad," Paul insisted.

"I'll bet you wouldn't want to do it again!"

"Oh, I don't know," Paul said, looking back, remembering lust, and pride, and the wad of guilt, and thinking of Angie's good old Uncle Bert. "People throw away the damndest things."

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