



# DEAD FOLKS

by

Tim Byrd

[www.tim-byrd.com](http://www.tim-byrd.com)

[www.docwilde.com](http://www.docwilde.com)

This document is copyrighted material.

You are free:

- \* to **Share** — to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:

- \* **Attribution.** You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

- \* **Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

- \* **No Derivative Works.** You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

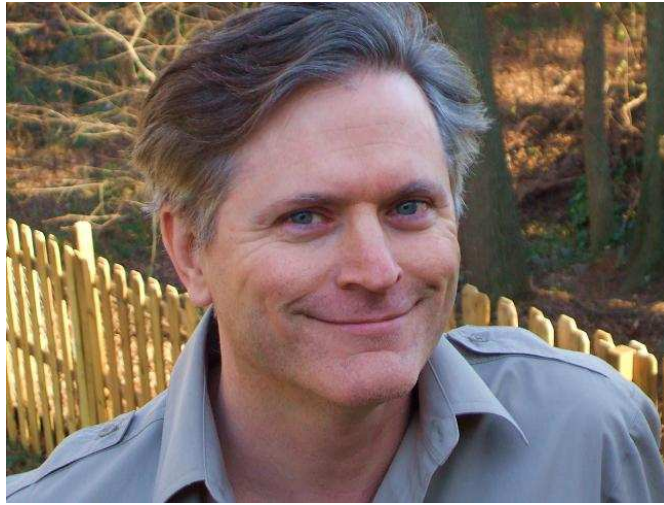
- \* For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.

The best way to do this is with a link to this web page:

*<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>*

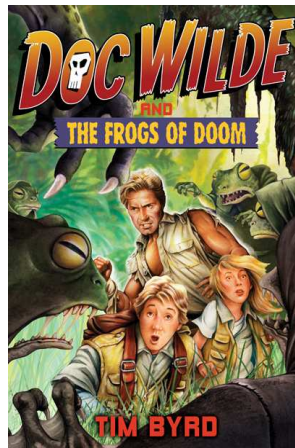
- \* Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

- \* Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the author's moral rights.



**TIM BYRD** lives with his adventurous son and a treacherous cat near Atlanta, Georgia. He is often barefoot, prone to irony, and interested in everything. He knows how to tie a tie, but doesn't care to. He has been a dishwasher, shoe salesman, waiter, soldier, game designer, independent filmmaker, and outdoor guide. He wants to be a kid when he grows up.

Tim is the author of *Doc Wilde and The Frogs of Doom*, the first in a series of pulp adventure novels from G.P. Putnam's Sons.



For more information, please visit [www.DocWilde.com](http://www.DocWilde.com).

## Author's Note

I wrote this story over twenty years ago. It was my first professional sale, to the long defunct but much missed magazine *Pulphouse*, which unfortunately defuncted just before the story was to see print in a special issue celebrating the works of Harlan Ellison, which made the story's non-debut even more heartbreaking.

The story depicts some rather casual and in-your-face racism that some people, even way back in the eighties, thought was over the top for the time. My girlfriend then, a bright young lady from a well-to-do family in Virginia, said the racism seemed unrealistic for a story set in contemporary times, so I took her to Carey's Burgers, a local institution out in Cobb County (the fertile political ground from which sprang Newt Gingrich, and one of those counties that would rather shoot you than teach you about evolution). While we ate our hamburgers, we listened to songs on the jukebox like "She Ran Off With A Nigger" and "Alabama Nigger:" *I'm an Alabama nigger, and I want to be free...To hell with the NAACP...I want to eat where the white folks eat, 'cause I'm white on the heels of my feet...* By the time we finished lunch, my girlfriend realized my story was, alas, more accurate than had seemed possible.

When I was growing up, one of the most common topics of conversation at family gatherings was about how lazy niggers were. I'm not kidding. When I complained about it to my father -- who participated fully in these homey discussions -- he told me it was all about "fittin' in." I didn't, and don't, see any value in bothering to fit in with bigots, not even if I'm related to them.

As I write this, Barack Obama is preparing for his inauguration to the highest office in the land. Clearly, we have made progress, and the racism depicted in this story may seem even more unrealistic than it did in the eighties.

I hope so.

Tim Byrd  
January 9, 2009

## Dead Folks

The dead face floated just under the water like a milky-white balloon. Its mouth hung open, the tongue black and curled, and its clouded eyes stared, looking but not finding. Its hair drifted sparsely, loosely with the current, like white seaweed.

I knew that face, even without its glasses. It was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the thirty-second President of the United States. What he was doing drowned out here in the lake, I didn't know.

"Who is he?" Sheila asked, so I told her. She bent over the boat's edge, peering closer at the face, so that her brown pigtails almost dipped into the water. I could see the reflection of her face superimposed over the distorted features of the water-logged statesman. "Why is he here?" she asked, sitting back up and smoothing her skirt.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Why are any of them here?"

She frowned. "I wish we did know. It's a little scary."

She was right. It *was* a little scary. For a month or so, since the woman we kids always called "Witchy-Poo" had died in her sleep, dead people had been appearing all over the Valley.

There'd been a fire in Old Man McCormack's barn; a Roman gladiator was found inside when the fire was doused, skin mostly scorched from his bones, which *clacked* against his bronze armor as they moved him.

A man who folks figured could only be Henry the Eighth appeared atop the church steeple, his obscene girth skewered bloodily down the length of the lightning rod.

Drew Davis found Abraham Lincoln dead in the trunk of her Volvo, which was particularly ironic considering her "The South Will Rise Again!" bumper sticker. Doc Jackson said he'd choked to death on a fig.

And there'd been others.

"Let's go home," Sheila said, her voice quiet. "Now."

"Why? I thought you wanted to go rowing for a while."

"Not any *more*. C'mon, let's go. What if we find *another* one?"

So we did. Gotta keep my little sis happy, and if she didn't want to stay on the lake, I wasn't going to make her. She's the baby in the family, and all of us – Pa, Ma, and me – tend to spoil her a bit, give her her way.

When we walked in the back door, Pa was talking with Preacher at the kitchen table. They were drinking coffee, and Pa was smoking one of his cherry wood pipes; its sweet-yet-carcinogenic scent hung in the air.

"Hello," Preacher said, and I said it back. I wondered what he thought of all the dead people, 'cause I was still dodging church and hadn't seen him since before the whole riddle started. He couldn't have been too pleased with the mess Fat Henry made of his steeple, anyways.

Pa kissed Sheila on the cheek and told her Ma needed her for something. When she was gone, he looked at me over his pipe, his eyes grim. "Johnny," he said, "they done found another one."

I poured me some coffee and sat. "Me and Sheila just found one too. In the lake."

Preacher shook his head sadly, looking all serious and religious like a man in his position should. "Oh, trouble is coming to the valley, big trouble. The Devil's doings."

"Tell me about the new one," I told Pa.

"Was a black fellow this time, in modern clothes. He was hangin' from a tree in the Horton's back yard."

"Is he still out there?" I kinda wanted to see; I'd missed all but a few of the bodies, and I was sorta fascinated. I know that sounds kinda creepy, but there just isn't a whole lot happening in a little town like ours.

"Naw, they cut him down and put him in the graveyard with the rest of them. I tell you, I'm glad we don't live on that side of town. The whole bunch of 'em's getting' ripe as pigshit."

"Tell us of the one you found," Preacher said.

I told them, and when I told them who it was, Preacher's eyes got big and Pa chuckled a little bit. But Pa has seen a lot of things in his life, and he tends to take things easy. Preacher has always been the uptight type. When I was little, he made me scared to be religious. I thought it meant I had to grow up and be like him.

When I finished telling them, Pa looked at me quietly for a few seconds. "What do you think of all this?" he asked. "Any notions where they might be comin' from?"

Since I turned seventeen, Pa seemed to put more stock in what I had to say about things. It made me feel proud. Now I didn't know what to tell him. I had no idea where the dead people were coming from, but I didn't want to disappoint him by not having anything to say when given the chance. So I said the first thing that popped up in my head.

"I think Witchy-Poo had something to do with it."

"Witchy-Poo?" Preacher asked, looking from me to Pa.

Pa explained. "That's what the kids called the Widow Bradley. They all thought she was a witch."

Some dark thought passed behind Preacher's eyes, and turned to righteous fire. "Well, that woman *was* a witch. A harlot, a slattern, a woman in need of much virtue! I grew up with her and I've never known a more wicked woman in all my days!"

From what I'd heard around the barber shop, what he said was accurate as far as it went. It just didn't go far enough. Preacher had reason to get all torn up about the late Mrs. Bradley; she'd almost become his wife a long, long time ago. Otis Bradley had managed to sweep her away just days before the blessed event, making her his own wife within a month.

Pa peered at Preacher, looking like he was holding back a chuckle. "Now, Preacher, cheap as a woman might be, that don't make her no witch."

Preacher got to looking sheepish then, realizing he'd flown off the handle some. "Well...I'm just sayin', I wouldn't doubt it if she *was* a witch. Her and Otis Bradley both was evil folk, you can't argue with me there." And Pa and me both nodded. We couldn't argue. Otis had been the town roughneck, always drunk and

picking fights. He'd picked a fight with the wrong man, some big John Wayne-lookin' fella, one night, and had his skull cracked terminally with a hefty tire iron. Also, if I remember correctly, he'd been blamed one summer for repeatedly breaking the windows in the church, but I don't know how true that was.

Mrs. Bradley – Witchy-Poo – was known as exactly what Preacher called her: “A harlot, a slattern, a woman in need of much virtue!” Her indiscretion and lack of marital fidelity were noted widely, especially by the very righteous ladies in the Women's Club, and by their husbands in the barbershop, many of whom seemed to know Mrs. Bradley pretty well.

“Well,” Pa said, “regardless of what's causing it, we've gotta put an end to it. We've got more dead folks here than we know what to do with, and they ain't even ours. Most of 'em were already buried a long time ago anyway, so we shouldn't be stuck worrying about them.”

“Seriously, I'm telling you this is the Devil's doin's. Sin has run rampant through our community for too long!”

“You might be right, now, Preacher,” Pa said calmly. “But that don't help us none. Unless you can tell Ol' Scratch to quit tossin' these bodies at us, we've got to find a more practical way of dealing with 'em. Right now, why don't you just go and see if they can pull Mr. President out of the lake. Kids swim in that water, and they don't need to be swimmin' with no dead politicians.”



I wanted to go and help, but Ma nixed that, sayin' I had to drive Sheila down to Whidby so's she could get measured. My little sis was makin' the transition from Brownie to Girl Scout and it was time for a new uniform.

On the drive down in Ma's VW, she was pretty quiet, not like usual when she don't seem to inhale at all, so I reached over and tugged a pigtail.

“Ow,” she said.

“What you thinking about?” I asked.

She shrugged, like it was nothing. I tugged her pigtail again.

“Ow.”



“What you thinking about?” I asked again.

“About that president.” She didn’t look at me, just stared at the road.

“What about him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I like dead folks too much.”

I nodded. I wasn’t overly satisfied with their company myself, when you got right down to it.



While they measured Sheila, I went for a walk around Whidby. It’s the biggest town around the Valley, which still ain’t sayin’ much, so there wasn’t much to see. I looked in some store windows, petted a dog some old man had outside the barber shop, tried to flirt with the few cute girls I saw, and in general wasted valuable moments of my life.

On my way back to get Sheila, I stopped by a little grocery store called Aunt Mary’s Market and grabbed a couple of root beers for me and her. There was a fat lady in overalls running the cash register and she was talking to a red-headed guy with a hairy mole on his chin. I listened in as she rang up the root beers.

“Ya hear ‘bout that nigger we got in here a few days back?” she asked him. He shook his head, but his ears seemed to perk up the way some people’s do when they’re about to hear a good story.

“Well,” she started, “he was a young buck, and ‘bout as city-slickered as they can get. Came in to buy one of my sandwiches.” The red-headed guy chuckled, like it was funny. He had a clod of tobacco lumped in his lip. “Well,” the fat lady said, “we sell to niggers, so that watn’t no problem. Ever’body on God’s sweet Earth’s gotta eat. But there he was in line behind Doris McIntosh, an’ she was ‘bout to piss she was so uncomfitted, an’ then Bill Waterman comes up to git in line, so I told that nigger he had to git at the back an’ let the white folks go first. I mean, I was nice about it. An’ that damn nigger just looked at me like I was crazed. An’ he put down his stuff an’ just strutted outta here. Like he was too good.”

By that point, she'd done rung me up, and I left. It boggles me that people still talk that way, even out here in the country. It felt good to be back out in the sunshine.

Sheila was sitting on a bench in front of the clothes place. I gave her a root beer. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," I said. "Let's go home."



It was pork chops for supper, with sweet corn and sweet potatoes and sweet tea, then we all sat out on the porch and talked a while, then I went to my room and read. I was reading a book called *Cannery Row* by John Steinbeck. It was really good, but after a while I fell off to sleep I was so tired. And I dreamed that I found the fat lady in the overalls floating dead in the lake. I woke up in the middle of the night and didn't fall back asleep for the longest time.



"How the hell'd you do that?" I asked Arnie Bishop, talking about his nose, which was broken and had swelled up all around his eyes, blue and black and puffy.

"Happened th'other night," he said slowly, his voice thick and cottony. "When me an' Ben went to Atlan'a. We got into it with a couple guys an' one got in a lucky punch."

Arnie's brother Ben, who was off in the weeds takin' a whiz, zipped up and walked back to the creek bank where we were sitting. He laughed. "Yeah, lucky punch. Damn dude woulda kilt him if'n I hadn't been there."

"Them Bishop Boys" was what my Ma called them, and they'd been my best friends since I didn't know when. Ben was my age, and Arnie just a year and a half behind us, and all our lives we'd done things together. Huntin' crawdads, shootin' crows with BB guns, goin' fishin', skinny dippin', talkin' about girls like they was the biggest, most important, mystery in the world...basically just doin' friend stuff. Mark Twain would have loved us.

Arnie glared at his brother through his bruised face. “Yeah, right.” Ben started to say somethin’, but then his eyes hit something back behind Arnie and me, and his mouth fell open. “Uhh...” he said.

We turned to see what he was lookin’ at. And it was another body. An Indian. Naked and war-painted and tangled up in Old Man Ebbers’s barb-wire fence like he wasn’t going *nowhere*, dead or not.

We were closest to my house. “C’mon,” I said, scrambling up and brushing off my butt. “Let’s go get my Pa.”



Pa came back with us and we wrapped the Indian in an old sheet and the four of us carried him back to our yard and put him in the back of pa’s pick-up. On the way across town, I rode up front with pa, and Them Bishop Boys stayed in back with the body. At first they’d refused, but Pa told them to get the hell back there, what’d they think, the guy was gonna scalp ‘em, and they climbed in.

“I swear,” Pa said as we approached the graveyard and saw the pile of dead folks. “We gotta do somethin’ about this.”

He parked it a short ways from the pile. There were more of ‘em than I’d expected, more than three dozen, and I figured they were appearing quicker than the gossip could spread and people had just started bringing ‘em here and dumping them with no ruckus, just like we’d done.

The smell was so bad I nearly threw up, and Arnie did, over the edge of the truck. Maybe his broken nose was more sensitive to it. We all got out of the truck and stood there, quiet. Just looking at them.

It was the worst thing I ever saw. I don’t want to get too graphic, but there were about a zillion flies, and the dead folks weren’t in very agreeable shape. Some of them no longer looked like they’d been human. The weather was hot, and some of them had been cooking here for weeks.

We dragged Tonto outta the truck and lugged him to the pile, leaving him wrapped in the sheet when we lay him on it. We sure didn’t want it no more.

They were all there. Abe Lincoln. Fat Henry. The hanged negro. A rotted up guy wearing chaps and a flannel shirt I guess was a cowboy. The Roman Centurion...

And there, still wet and bloated, was Franklin D. Roosevelt. In two days, I'd found two of the bodies. Far as I knew I was the only one with that distinction and I hoped it didn't mean nothing. I didn't want to be singled out for *anything* special concerning this weird-ass business.

I shuddered. Something was bothering me, aside from the obvious things, and I wasn't quite sure what it was. It was like a quiver under my awareness, not too strong, but enough to make me nervous. Then my gaze fell on the dead negro, and it bubbled up, clear as day.

*He wasn't like the others.*

All of them, each and every one, was a historical person, either famous or associated iconically with some specific time. But this guy was wearing *blue jeans*. And a button-down shirt. And loafers. I looked closer, through the flies. He even had on a *watch*, one of those black-rubber Casio digitals like they sell in drug stores.

"Let's go," Pa said, and tugged on my arm. I turned and went. We got back in the truck and drove away quicker than we'd come, eager to get back to where we could breathe again.

The black guy. Maybe he *was* representative of a certain time in history: *now*.

But then again, maybe he wasn't.



I thought on it all day long. That night I dreamed about him. He came shambling into the yard like something out of a George Romero movie, stopping to lean up against Pa's truck like he was outta breath, which I guess he was if you think about it. I was sitting on the swing...and it seems I was reading a Sherlock Holmes book, I ain't sure...and the negro looked in my direction and he didn't have any eyes in his head, just two wrinkly holes.

“How you doin’?” I asked. I know it was pretty stupid, saying something like that, but I was dreaming and couldn’t help it.

“I’m dead,” he said.

I nodded. Course he was. There was a pitcher of fresh lemonade and some glasses, so I asked him if he wanted a glass.

He stepped away from the truck and walked up onto the porch, swaying like he might fall over any moment. “No thank you,” he said. “But I surely would like a root beer.”

“Sorry, we’re outta root beer,” I told him.

Then he bent over and grabbed my shoulders so quick and hard he stopped me swinging, and looked me right in the eyes with those holes, and there were things crawling in there.

“Please,” he said. “Couldn’t you just drive on back to Whidby and buy me a root beer?”



The next morning, I took the VW and headed for Whidby. I didn’t know why. I didn’t know what I was looking for. I didn’t know much of anything except the fact that negro was gettin’ seriously on my nerves and I’d go bugshit crazy if I didn’t try and do something about it.

Whidby was pretty much the same as it’d been two days before, right down to the old man outside the barber shop. I petted his dog again. Then I went into Aunt Mary’s Market and bought a six-pack of IBC root beer. The red-headed man wasn’t there. Neither was the fat lady in overalls. Today a skinny girl with stringy black hair and pimples and a Green Day T-shirt was working the register. She smiled at me, but I had other things on my mind.

Outside, I opened one of the root beers with the bottle opener on my Swiss Army knife and I sat on the curb out front of the store and drank it down without figuring out at all what I was doing there. Finally I just took my IBC and hit the road for home. If the negro came into my dreams again tonight, at least I’d have some root beer for him.

I was about five miles out of Whidby when I noticed the skid-marks. And I knew they were what I'd been looking for.

I pulled the VW to the shoulder and got out. The skids were all over the road, like the car that made 'em had gone into a spin, outta control. I walked up and down 'em, a tingly taste of excitement and nervousness in my mouth. Then I spotted the tire tracks in the dirt by the road, barely there, and went into the woods in the direction they pointed.

The tracks didn't last long. But they didn't have to. The green Kia was hidden only about fifty feet from the road, masked by a rough screen of broken branches and weeds. It was unlocked. Inside I found a suitcase, and a red nylon rucksack, and inside it were several college textbooks and note-filled notebooks. The name on all the books was David Jennings.

I just sat there in that car for a while. Looking at those books. Looking off into the woods. Thinking of that black guy trying to buy himself a sandwich in Whidby. Thinking of him wearing blue jeans and a button-down Oxford and leather loafers and a Casio digital watch. Thinking of somebody running him off the road and then hanging him in Horton's front yard so everybody'd think he was just another of the dead people popping up all over the place.

Suddenly I was scared. There'd been a murder.

And I was the only one who knew.



I knew of a black family named Jennings about twenty miles up the mountain from where we lived, so I drove up there, playing detective, still exploring my options, alternately terrified and excited by this whole situation. I hadn't decided what to do, so I just kept moving, determined to gather more information...

Maybe I could catch the murderer myself.

No. That was crazy. I decided about fifty times on my way up the mountain to turn around and go talk to the sheriff, or at least to Pa, but I never did. I just drove.

When I got to the house, I parked behind a rusted out old Ford pick-up built sometime probably before I was born. There were chickens in the yard, and a dog, and a bunch of little black kids not wearing shirts or shoes, making an obnoxious racket.

A small black woman in a yellow dress came out on the porch of the ashen-colored house and peered through the sunlight at me. "Hello, who we got here?"

I told her.

"Ah, yes, I know your family. You look just like your poppa, boy. Why don't you come on in outta the sun and have yourself some Co-Cola or something. What in the world brings you up here...?"

I followed her into the house. It was neatly-kept, but the Jennings obviously had little money.

I had a Coke and told her I was just out drivin' around, enjoying the sunny day, and she said it was sure a good day for *that*, and I said yes, ma'am, a good day for it, and she asked how I'd done in school, and I said fine, I just graduated, and she said ain't *that* a damn good feelin', and I said it was, and she asked if I was gonna go to college and I told her maybe, I was thinking about UTC or UGA, and she said I *better* go if my life was gonna be worth a dang nickel, and I said I probably would, and she said all hers would if she could help it, and there'd already been one Jennings boy to get on his feet and get that education, her nephew David from Tennessee and *he* was going to UGA too, and maybe I'd run into him down there, that'd be nice...then she paused, and smiled, and said David was supposed to be coming for a visit soon as school let out for him, she wasn't sure when that was, and all the time my throat was tightening up so's I could hardly talk and my heart was like a stone and it was all I could do to keep from crying.

"Well," I said, standing, "thanks a lot for the Coke. I better be goin' now, get my Ma's car back to her before she has a fit."

She laughed a bright laugh. "You're welcome, and feel free to drop on in anytime now, if you want, you're a nice boy, and you *best* get yourself into that school, too."

I forced a smile. "Yes, ma'am."

As I stepped out onto the porch, one of her kids, a boy of about six or seven, jumped out in front of me and assumed an exaggerated Jet Li stance. “*Haii-ya!*” he said.

“Noah, get yer scrawny tail away from here ‘fore I tan you good!” his mother said.

Noah glared at me. “You better not mess with Cousin Davey, he’s a blackbell in k’rate.”

His mom scooted him. “Don’t mind him, he’s just a crazy little hobbit.”

We said goodbye, and I walked to the car. I opened the door. But I didn’t get in. I just stood there, staring into nowhere, thinking about David Jennings knowing karate.

And about Arnie Bishop’s busted nose.



Ben wasn’t around. Arnie didn’t deny it, once he realized I’d figured it out. “Yeah, but we didn’t mean to,” he said, his voice still thick from his hurt nose. “We was drivin’ down the mountain headin’ fer Atlan’a, an’ we saw ‘im drivin’ up. Figgered we’d have a bit of fun, y’know?”

He looked at me. I looked back. The creek burbled peacefully by. We were back where we’d been when we found the Indian. It was one of our favorite sittin’ spots.

“Well, anyway, we turned aroun’ and came up behin’ him...an’ eventually ran him off the road. By that point we was both scared we’d hurt him, so we stopped to see, an’ out he came, cussin’ an’ shoutin’, an’ he hit Ben in the chest and Ben fell on the groun’. Then he kicked me, one of them kung fu kicks, right in the nose, an’ I fell, an’ he was ‘bout to kick me again and Ben conked him on the head with a rock.” Arnie’s eyes watered up some. “An’ he was dead.” He shook his head. “Johnny, we didn’ mean it. It was an acciden’. We was jus’ playin’...”

I just looked at him. My guts were twisted and tight and I wanted to throw up or cry or something.



He peered at me, the question starting in his eyes before it came out his mouth. "What are you goin' to do?" he asked.

I didn't answer. I stood and walked away, and asked myself the same damn thing.



Pa lit his pipe, drawing its first smoke in, puffing, and looked at me over the bowl. "What you goin' to do?" he asked.

"What should I do?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Don't be stupid, boy. You know what I think you should do. I'm askin' you what you are *going* to do."

We were sitting on the porch, me on the swing, him in one of the rockers. Ma was in the kitchen, teaching Sheila how to cook something, I wasn't sure what.

"Does it matter? If I don't turn them in, you will, now that I told you."

He stared at me. "Yes. It matters. You figured it out. They are your friends. If you don't tell nobody, I won't. I respect your right to make your own decisions. You're a man now, boy."

I stood up and started into the house.

"Where ya goin'?"

"To call the sheriff," I said.

He smiled. "You're a good man, Johnny."

"Thanks, Pa."



That night they arrested Them Bishop Boys and got a full confession. Also that night, Mary Gallagher – who was eighty-three and more than a touch senile – sat for two hours with an unexpected guest on her front porch, having a dandy conversation, until she realized she was the only one talking. Turned out the guest was Adolf Hitler, and he was as dead as the rest of 'em had been. She called Preacher, and he went over there and stayed with her to pray her calm while Pa

and me and a few other menfolk carted the little dingleberry away to the graveyard. We heaved him hard onto the pile, like he was burning our hands touching him.

Pa was in a rage. “That does it,” he said, “first thing in the mornin’ we’re gonna end this shit once an’ fer all.”



Witchy-Poo’s house was the same washed-out color as the Jennings family’s house, but on the Jennings’s place the color just looked penniless. On this house, it was the color of old things faded from life, of haunting, of houses holdin’ onto their dead. Shadows seemed darker in its nooks and crannies than they ought to have been. I had cold pimples all over me as I accompanied Pa and Preacher up the twisty dirt drive and the house loomed closer.

It wasn’t one of those Shirley Jackson-style houses, big and stately and ominous, just small and ordinary and ominous. But that was enough for me. I didn’t want to be there. I’d had too much to do with this business already and was about ready to let somebody else take over for a while.

But Pa was so proud of me for turning my best friends in to the law – I felt upright and righteous and very, very sad myself – that I hadn’t had the heart to tell him I’d rather just stay home for this bit o’ business, if he didn’t mind. Now I walked just behind him, toting my huntin’ rifle. Pa had his shotgun, both barrels cocked. And Preacher came behind us, toting the righteous power of a big gold cross in his right hand.

It felt like we was huntin’ vampires. Heck, for all we knew, we were.

We made our way slowly up the yard, up the steps, onto the porch. No one had been here since they’d carried Mrs. Bradley out and stuck her in the ground a month ago. No telling what we’d find, if anything. For all we really knew, Witchy-Poo hadn’t had a thing to do with the dead folks. But the timing seemed significant, and we had to work with what we had.

Pa pulled open the screen door. Tried the knob. It turned. He raised the shotgun, pushed the door open, and went in quick. Me an' Preacher were right behind him.

The living room. Wall to wall books, on shelves and in stacks and stuck in boxes. There wasn't a TV. There was a sofa, and two chairs, one a wooden rocker. And in that rocker sat the Widow Bradley, reading.

She looked up at us, her face old but showing through was the face of the oversexed young beauty who'd scandalized the Valley. "What do you boys want?"

Pa came up short, stumped for a moment. Then he lowered his gun. "We just come by to check on you, Mrs. Bradley. How you feeling?"

"Never been better. How are you?"

"Pretty good, I guess." Pa scratched his head. He was as stumped as I've ever seen him.

"Well, you boys have a good day, then. Think I'll just get on back to my readin'." And she did.

Pa turned and pushed me and Preacher back out onto the porch. He pulled the door to.

"Pa," I started, but he shushed me.

"Now, that woman's dead," he said. "We all know it. Hell, I helped tote her outta here."

Preacher's hands were shaking. "She don't look dead, John."

"That's a fact, she don't."

"What are we gonna do?" I asked.

They both looked at me. Neither of 'em looked like he had a thought in his head.

Finally, Pa blew out a heavy breath. "Well, we're here anyways. An' so's she. Might as well talk to her about it all."

"But—" Preacher started to say, but Pa just grinned at him.

"Now you ain't afeared of that ol' woman in there, are ya?" he asked, and Preacher shook his head, even though his hands were grippin' that cross like it was keepin' him from fallin' off a barn.

And Pa went in again. I railed, feeling more off-balance than scared, though there was enough of that left too that I would've almost rather headed for home. Almost...but not quite. Mrs. Bradley – sittin' there with her books, lookin' up again with a touch of irritation as we came back in, sayin' "Are you boys back *again*?" – wasn't exactly Bela Lugosi, and this was sparkin' my curiosity somethin' awful, so maybe you couldn'ta *made* me go after all.

"Ma'am, we're just real concerned about ya," Pa said, crossing to sit near her, in the other chair. I stepped over and stood by him. Preacher – who'd gone ahead and come in by then – stayed by the door. Guardin' our backs, I guess.

Mrs. Bradley closed the book on a finger to hold her place. I saw that the book was *The Story of Civilization* by Will and Ariel Durant. Or one volume of it, anyhow, since it was a whole big set. They had it in the library at school.

"Now why," she asked my Pa, "would you be concerned about *me*?"

Pa looked over to me, as if I might have an idea what to say. I didn't, really, but said something anyway, though it mighta been the wrong thing. "Well, ma'am, because you're dead."

She frowned a tasted-a-taste-shouldn'ta-been-there frown, her eyes knitting needle points working on my Pa. "I think you boys had better leave. I have no time for this stupidity."

"Ain't no stupidity, ma'am," Pa said. "You're deader'n a doornail."

Preacher gasped behind us. I tensed up, ready, I didn't know what for. And the Widow Bradley just clicked her dentures and stared at Pa. "I am not."

"You are."

She looked plain disgusted. She glanced at me, and I nodded. "Yes'm," I said. "You're dead."

"Don't be silly. How can I be dead when I'm sittin' here talking to you?"

"I don't rightly know," Pa said. "I was a-hopin' you'd shed a little light on that."

"Can't help you. I'm not dead. Now leave me in peace so's I can read." The book clapped open on her lap and she stuck her gaze back in it.

Pa stood. Looked over at me again, but I still didn't know what to do. He paused, then reached out towards her, slow-like, and as his fingers neared her

shoulder, her eyes rolled up so's she was watchin' out their corners. And he touched her. His fingers stopped right there, solid. He pushed a little, and she rocked a little, and looked up at him, sour-pussed.

"Are you *quite* finished, John?"

He stepped back. "I guess I am," he said, and headed back to the door. And out. Preacher hopped out behind him, and I was last out, pulling the door closed.

"I'm stumped," Pa said. And we all looked at each other, not sayin' nothing, which is mighty strange for any of us, but especially for Preacher. We just stood there and looked and thought all around it, and finally Pa said, "I'm still stumped," and we all shook our heads.

I had a thought. "Pa, what if we...reason with her?"

His eyebrows went up. "Reason with her? Like how?"

"Well, I don't know...hit her with Occam's Razor or something."

"Hit her with what?" they both asked, right at the same time.

"Uh, Occam's Razor. It's a tool of logic...you take the facts you know and find the simplest explanation to your problem from that. And...maybe we could, uh, convince her she is dead. If she is." I wasn't too sure anymore, myself.

"I don't know what in the hell you're sayin'," Preacher said to me, and since I'd never heard him cuss before I shoulda been shocked, but I wasn't. It'd been that kind of week.

"I'm not too sure I understand him m'self, Preacher," Pa said. "But it sounds good, and he reads enough to know about that stuff, so I figure he might just have somethin' there." He turned to me. "Johnny, I'm proud to have a son as smart as you. Git in there an' whomp her with that razor thingamajig. Let's see what happens."

At first I didn't really catch his meaning, then I did, and my mouth went dry and cottony and I had no breath for a few seconds. I'm pretty sure my heart just paused a bit, too. "Me?" I said, as stupidly as I'm able.

He nodded, and Preacher was nodding, though he was still so scared-lookin' I'm not sure he wasn't just happy to let me be the one to talk to her again.

So, in I went. And I was scared, too, believe it. And that old woman looked up at me and slapped her book closed and put it down and stood up. Pa stepped in behind me, with Preacher peekin' in behind him, and pointed his chin at her.

I stepped toward her.

"Am I never gonna get no peace?" she asked.

"Ma'am," I said, hearing a slight whine in my voice, "how do you feel?"

"Right lively," she snapped. "How the hell do you feel?"

"Kinda squirrely, all in all, ma'am. But can I ask you some questions? Then we'll leave you alone."

"Hmmp. Go ahead. But I ain't got all day."

"Okay, ma'am. First...uh...well, first, do you remember dyin'?"

"No." Her lips twisted in disgust.

"Okay. Uh...how long you been readin'?"

"Since I was five years old."

"No, ma'am, I mean, how long you been sittin' here this particular time, readin'?"

She paused, and some thought twitted under her features, and it looked like it might've been troublesome. "Well, I don't know, really. I didn't look at the clock when I started."

"Okay. Uh – how much have you read since you sat down?"

She glanced around. "Twelve books." Then her own answer seemed to register, and she squinted at me, mistrustful. "What're you up to?"

"Nothing, ma'am. Have you gotten tired at all while you've read?"

"Just of this idiotic stupidity."

Pa spoke up behind me, his voice soft. "Mrs. Bradley, can you remember at all how long you've been sittin' there readin'? I mean...it wasn't just this mornin' was it?"

She sank into the chair and suddenly looked her age, and tired. "I don't know..."

"Might it have been a few days? Or a couple weeks even?"

She didn't answer for a while. The quiet was deep as a hilltop well. Then she nodded. "Mighta been."

“And have you eaten at all since?” Pa asked. “Or drank anything? Or – and pardon my askin’ – gone to the powder room?”

She shook her head a touch, then tears came rollin’ down. She buried her face in her hands. “I am dead, ain’t I?” she gasped out.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, “you are.”

Then Preacher pushed past me and knelt by her rocking chair and he held her there, in his arms, as she cried it all out, the loneliness the hurt the terror of being dead, in that still, dusty room full of memories and yellowed, cracking paper.



It turned out Mrs. Bradley wasn’t really a witch, as the kids had always said, but she had always had a few knacks you mighta called psychic. Predictive dreams, an occasional ability to get a lost thing to appear where she wanted it to be even if she’d already looked there, maybe even an uncanny ability to sway men’s minds in directions they might not shoulda gone. Of course, that last is an ability a lot of pretty girls have, and may not have any supernatural roots.

The other thing was, she was a nearly-obsessive history buff, always had been. All those books in her house were history books. And when she died, she was lonely, and scared, and she missed her books. And she pretty much just got up and walked back to her house an’ started readin’. We never could make any sense of how or why it happened, but apparently she’d doze every once in a while and dream on what she was readin’, and somehow, out in the Valley, a character from her histories would come to be, only they were dead, but so was she so maybe she couldn’t make living ones. And the weird ways those bodies had died didn’t make any sense, but that’s the way of dreams in general, isn’t it?

“I don’t wanta go back,” she bawled. “It’s lonely bein’ dead,” an’ I guess it was. But Pa told her she had to, no tellin’ what all she was throwin’ outta whack. Then Preacher whispered in her ear a while, and me and Pa backed up, let ‘em be, then they were giggling, an’ they stood up and walked by us and outside and all the way to the graveyard. Word spread, and folks came out and watched, no

matter what was on television. We followed along. When he got her to the grave she planted a humongous, wet-smackin' French kiss on him and he gave it right back – then she just seeped into the ground.

And the big pile of corpses made its own moist, settlin' sound and just melted away, and with it went most of the smell.

Things turned pretty normal for a while after that. Preacher made daily trips to the graveyard to sit by Mrs. Bradley's grave and read history books out loud to her. You'd drive by and see 'em sittin' there like lovebirds in the sun.

Some relationships are just destined, I guess, in spite of the odd wrong turn.

**THE END**