

1. Cruces Gate-That Morning



“Don’t want to end up a cartoon in a cartoon grave yard”- Paul Simon

The old man sighed; OK, he thought, gazing at the wrinkled, browning apple in the fruit bowl, it isn't going to get any fresher. He had watched it deteriorating for three days now and, nope, it wasn't filling back out or getting any smoother. "I guess it figures," he murmured, "We're all just apples in the end." Pushing back from the table he rose and walked into the bathroom. As if to define the truth of what he had just said he looked at his face in the mirror. Yep, he thought, there's the apple turning to rot. With a sigh he turned and walked to the back door and went outside for the fourth time today. His thoughts went back a couple hours to morning.

When he awoke his back was hurting him. It hurt most every morning now and, though he hid the pain from his wife and grown children as best he could, he had already acknowledged that the pain was just another step down the staircase to death. He didn't want to think this way but the numbers didn't lie; he was 70. No, he certainly didn't want to think this way. Not in the least. His was not a voluntary melancholy. What he wanted was to be healthy again. Sitting outside in the back, looking at the oaks which he knew would outlive him, his focus switched to watching the birds. He lived on the border of an oak woodland. A creek gurgled in the backdrop of nature's sound track, easily missed if one didn't know it was there. It was a harmony which didn't get past him. A harmony that seemed to him like a symphony. Each instrument tuned to perfection and blending in a chorale of sound far surpassing

Beethoven or Bach. Far more complex than computer generated noise which some called music. He had played guitar for many, many years. He loved harmonies and acoustic guitar and, while listening to the natural sounds of the woodland, harkened back to when he first gotten interested and started playing his instrument; a Martin D28 six string.

It had been Paul Simon whose playing of guitar, lyrics, and finger picking first intrigued him to buy an inexpensive gut-string guitar. He took to that guitar with a vengeance not allowing anything to get in his way while trying to master it. At least, to master Travis picking and replicate the plucking of Peter, Paul and Mary as well as Mr. Simon. The hours that he had spent learning guitar had been during his growing from adolescence to manhood. For the first time in his life he had built a road on which only he had traveled. While Led Zeppelin and Cream were screaming out their songs he played and developed his own finger picking style. learned that he had a voice which, though not on par with most, could hold a tune. All of which cemented the guitar as a friend for life. He called his guitar Mr. Martin and it went with him through great times, to death of family, and, lord knows, the turmoil of his life.

His young life had been stormy. A family once solid turned to griping and fighting on a daily basis. There had even been an exchange of blows. He was far to young, aged someplace between 6-9, to understand what had taken place but the result of the dysfunction (he later coined this word as dysfucktion) was to sew the seeds of personal dysfunction which damn near killed him. It had gotten so bad that he had joined the U.S. Navy, knowing full-well that going to war in Vietnam was virtually inevitable, just to get away from the screaming maelstrom of dysfunction and impending doom of his family.

It was in the Navy that he first injured his back. It hadn't been combat related and he hadn't reported to sick bay when he injured it. A bad move which he would later regret. Had he had

confirmed that he had injured it while on duty he would have had his back covered for the rest of his life by the government. As it was, he had just toughed through each siege of back pain as it occurred. A few days off and being careful as he could then going back to work. That had sufficed for all these years. Now, however, the pain was chronic and somewhat debilitating and probably more than enough reason for the age in his face. Still, there were birds.

He had purchased a birding book many years ago just to learn the names of the different species. He immediately threw out the latin nomenclature of naming birds. He'd had enough latin growing up in the Catholic church which he quit when he was fifteen. That had caused a round of mortar attacks from his father which he had shrugged off as more of the same and never went back. All that latin would do is make more work when he just wanted to know a Flicker from a Chickadee. A crow from a hawk. He already was fairly sure that, in the wild, he could tell a penguin from an ostrich so he never learned the latin.

This late morning, however, there was peace and tranquility for him. When the weather was this pleasant, and the birds so busy doing what birds do, he tended to let his eyes and mind to unfocus, allowing the Earth's symphony to take him away where ever it wanted him to travel. It was sometimes hard to come back from a few places he went. Hard to return to the real. In one place was a grey gravel road cut into the grassy earthen banks of a hillside. Inevitably here, the sun was bright, the air cool and the colors intense. The sky was so achingly blue and close that he feared to raise his hand as it seemed doing so would pierce the blue letting in the black cold of space. It was also quiet and still. He found himself walking towards a ridge where the road cut a thin horizon line at its summit. What was over that hill he didn't know. Sometimes he got close to the top of the hill and others he pretty much stayed still and listened to the lack of sound. Perhaps, he mused, a lack of sound isn't quite correct. More

likened to the ocean sound of a sea shell to the ear. Yes, that's it, the quiet of space in which currents moved unseen. Well, he reasoned, that's as close as this mind can get. It was clear to him that sitting, mesmerized, was probably a foolish waste of time when dishes needed to be washed and rinsed and put away. Still, it was a place he liked to go. There was never any discord here. Never a sound that wasn't soothing. Not a care in the world just for that short, heavenly minute.

2. Cruces Gate-Subournem

**Keep a-movin', Dan, don't you listen to
him, Dan
He's a devil not a man
And he spreads the burning sand with
water. – Sons of the Pioneers**

The pain in the old man's chest came on suddenly; like a hammer to an anvil. Falling back into his chair he groped with his right hand for the object almost out of sight. He knew that it was death if he didn't get to it quickly.

Unable to breathe, nearly paralyzed, his head thrown back by the sudden onset of pain, he missed it. Straining against his frozen neck muscles he somehow managed to glimpse what he needed out of the corner of his right eye rolled downward; his head paralyzed in that position. The pain swelled by the second and he passed his hand over the object once, twice and

then a third.

On the third try he grabbed it: the Chryseal: his lifeline. He squeezed opposite sides. There was an audible high pitched whine. As sudden as it began the pain disappeared. With that relief came the vision of a terrifying expanse of black sand to the horizon. He held in his hand the familiar weight of the Chryseal.

Replacing the old man was a young man of 26 years. Standing there, white as a ghost. It had been a near thing this time.

"That was close, " he said attempting to catch his breath. "Much too close. Gotta switch off much sooner." The immediate jolt of the ambient temperature was no surprise. From horizon to horizon there was only black sand and the hot, killing atmosphere of Subournem.

Oh, there was air, no lack of it. What there wasn't, he'd been told, was water. The Chryseal could shelter his mind and body from this hell for a short, indeterminate respite. He understood his problem, however. When his mind was interchanged in someplace he was unfamiliar with, allowing some transfer of another mind which, each time, somehow saved him. It also nourished him through the phantom usurpation of that other mind. He'd had to learn this on the fly which had left him at a deficit at the start. He had gotten too hungry and too thirsty he had earned this. Each time he used it cost one month of his life. Food and water, or, longevity. Such was justice here. Justice levied by a council of scientific magistrates who made and enforced law. Their own law.

If there was an out, though, it was "The Gate." At the end of the road. He had become aware of the "Gate" while using the old man's mind. It was a symbol as far as he could tell. A symbol of escape. Whatever this "Gate" was to the old man it had become his way out. At least, he hoped so. There was

little to lose even if he was wrong about it. His life had now come down to The Gate. It was here on this interminable stretch of living torture called the "Land." A place many were sent and few returned. Where the Land was known only to the scientist magistrates. It completely unknown to him. Of that he was certain. He now had spent three months in the land on Subournem and the Chrysleat, through its nature, took untold months from his lifeline as he used it to survive. Double jeopardy. All for as simple a crime as lying to a scientist. He was innocent but no one had cared. Certainly not the Scientific counsel: the Minasi. It didn't matter now, though. He had been convicted and all that mattered now was The Gate. The Gate and, more necessary, his respites when he was forced to use them.

Standing there lost in thought had cost him. He was soaked with sweat. Dehydration was another deadly problem. He was getting weaker by the day. He thought of the wrinkled apple and wished he had eaten it. There was no "taking it to go" here. It had to be consumed in the universe he took respite in. He would have to but the respite was a hard place in which to balance the thought of two minds. Was it he or the old man who was hungry or thirsty? It wasn't easy to tell. Each respite so far had always come with that hazy road in the old man's mind. It was wearing on him as he couldn't keep an intact plan with two minds mixed in such a manner. He didn't know whether to cringe or smile? But, then, there was still the question of the Gate.

He had found that the Gate existed both places. Somewhere on that old man's road and somewhere here. He thought, *How can I find the gate when I damn near die before I get to the top of that road. Every single time, I see my death before I can top the hill. I can't even get a hint of the Gate or where it is.* It was what he always thought after giving the Chrysleat a month of his life; with no result.

Next time! Next time sounded good. No, sounded GREAT! If,

however, it didn't happen soon there would be no next time. He knew that his weakness was multiplied each time he rested and knew that the weaker he got the closer to the end of his life he would come. His defender told him when he was sentenced that if it got too bad just go through the death and end it all. The old man's death.

Thanks for sharing, old man, came to mind.

Bull Shit! I shouldn't be here at all! The defender can go kill himself for what he's worth!

Which direction? Did it matter a wit? He didn't think so. Nevertheless he turned left as this was the one direction he had not taken. He had gone forward, backwards and right, and everything in between so far. Nothing, but nothing, any way he turned. So, why not left? Why hadn't he gone left yet? He didn't know other than the undulations of sand which went sloped steeply upward on the left. Climbing that slope was going to be difficult even if he had wasn't exhausted. Now he was dehydrated and half emaciated. With the little energy left in him he thought; without mirth *I probably didn't go left because I'm right handed?* A question he might never answer.

He climbed to the top of the slope and lay on his stomach. It was even harder than it first looked. Gasping and spent he looked out and saw only the same black expanse. Or was it? Was that an aberration, a speck on the horizon? It looked quite a small from here if it was there at all. So small he could think of no good reason to even go that direction. He would have flipped a coin but he had none. The speck was, however, more than he had yet seen. Feeling somewhat uplifted he started down the slope tripping and falling twice. How far was that speck? Twenty miles? Ten? It really didn't matter. At this point reality was sinking in almost as deeply as his feet were sinking in the sand. Either he would go this way and hope or he could just sit down and use the Chrysler back to the old man and, either way, die. A Hobson's choice if ever there

was one.

As night came and temperatures cooled he thought about what lay before him. *At this point*, he considered, *I am sure as hell committed; no matter what I do*. He didn't know how far he had walked but as the sun set behind him and his shadow lengthened he was spent. He had to have sleep. Water was not in short supply here; it was non-existent. People sent here died. *Finis!* He recalled now that his awareness of this place, this land, was almost as old as himself. Only then, it had been legend. Fairy tales told by his mother. Sometime in his childhood he had overheard a friend of his father speaking about a brother or relative of some kind that was sent here. They never heard of or from him again.

That memory came to him like a slap in the face. *Holy shit! I had forgotten that! Who was the guy telling that to my father? His name was...ummm... think, think...Shit yeah! Bradley. Bradley's brother had been arrested for some crime or other. He had been guilty as sin and they sent him here; to the Land. All the family got back was his bones after less than 2 years. And, I remember Bradley saying that the bones had returned blackened.*

That was long ago and why the thought of a 20 year old conversation had crossed his mind now, with clarity, puzzled him. In all this wasteland and as close to the edge of death as he ever wanted to be why that thought? Why now?

He sat down with the thought fresh in his mind but, for now, he had a decision to make. Chryseat? Or just sleep? He tried again to guess how far he had trekked. To his exhausted reckoning he guessed he had come more than half the distance to the speck on the horizon. Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll have to use the Chryseat.

He lay back and drifted off to sleep.

3. Cruces Gate-Dreams

Hearing her husband's moans the old man's wife dropped the plate she was washing, breaking it to shards. She rushed to the cupboard in which his medicine resided. Grabbing the nitro-glycerin she ran to the back patio as quickly as she could. It hurt her knees badly when she rushed but she paid it no mind as she dashed to his side.

"Wake up, wake up!" she shouted. "I have your medicine!" her voice rising with her concern. "That's it, good, now, open your mouth and lift up your tongue." As he slowly complied she placed the nitro under his tongue. For a moment he sat there, pale as plaster. The wife thought she had been too late. This wasn't the first time but now it was becoming much more critical. How long did he have?

"Is it working? How are you feeling now?" Her questions were jumbled together as her voice quaked to force the sound out. The old man nodded after a minute.

"I think I'm Ok now." He was taking in huge gulps of air. Gradually, his color started to come back as the nitro-glycerin worked its magic: once again. Within three minutes he had returned enough to consciousness to gasp, haltingly, "It's the dreams." "Why do I have these dreams," he implored his wife with a face which was strained trying to understand and looking at her with eyes which begged for answers.

"I saw a place, a desert or wilderness of black. It was so hot! I'm thirsty," he whined. Dutifully, still overwhelmed with concern, his wife went to the kitchen, cursed herself for the broken dish, and brought a glass of water back to her husband.

“I don’t know what causes them,” she said. “They came on so sudden. Maybe it’s just stuff and nonsense a tired old mind comes up with.”

She couldn’t say more than this. Who could? Dreams. What are dreams in reality? Stuff and nonsense might have been the best answer anyone could have given. As she watched him she pulled up another patio chair and sat down close to him. “Are you feeling better now?”

Looking at her he nodded, muttering, “OK. I’m OK. Guess I dropped off to sleep for a minute.” Smiling at him she prayed to herself, *Don’t take him from me Lord. Please, I know we both have to go but let us go at the same time...or, me first. I don’t want to live without him.*

“I need to go clean up the kitchen. Just sit here and take it very easy for me, OK? I’ll be right back.”

Nodding, the old man turned his eyes back toward the creek. He heard it babbling and plunking over rocks and thought of the grandkids, nephews and nieces he had hiked there with in the past. *No more, he thought, those times are gone. So glad to have had them though.* Sighing, he let those thoughts go, like so many of his years, already gone by.

4. Cruces Gate-The Monolith

He awoke to the simmering, scorching glare of the sun. Wincing from thirst he dreaded the very thought of rising to walk. What choice was there? He could lay here and bake himself to death or he could get up and get started. Gritting his teeth he rose and began to stride, limping and weak, toward the speck on the horizon. His contemplation of using

the Chryseal again had been put off when he clearly saw that the speck was now standing out in relief and much closer than he had dared hope, the evening before. In truth, he was afraid that his donor would die if he used the Chryseal again. So long as he had the energy to rise he would wait and hope that the monolith was more than a gargantuan black rock.

Cursing and wiping black sand from his lips and eyes he started out gauging his distance at less than two miles. In stark disbelief he now recognized that the former speck was a monolith of huge proportion, as jet black as the sand it protruded from. Black on black it was glass-like; almost obsidian in nature, complete with shining facets. It caught the rays of the morning sun, scattering them in all directions. Manmade? He couldn't be sure; not from this distance. It was, he was glad to see, close to 75 feet tall; at least. Enough height to cast shadows along its length it sat ninety degrees to the path of the sun. This meant there would be shade on one side or the other except for midday. From the angle he stood at he was looking at a corner of the monolith but he could not see one side. Only the corner of the end-face closest to him and its length as it faded off toward the horizon line. It was unnaturally long it seemed to him. *Must be manmade. gotta be!*

Distances in a desert are tough to gauge. A heat mirage can easily fool the eye and the mind. The mirror-like shimmer of heat had fooled more than a few men in his straits. On top of this the man was too weak to make quick progress forward. Heat was baking his head and blistering his lips and skin. He had long since forgotten why he had chosen to come this way. But, the monolith supplied him the slimmest of fading hope. Without which, he understood, even the Chryseal would not save him. His donor on the other end was probably dead and there was no longer a way to acquire a new one. He didn't, in fact, know if reacquisition of a new donor was even possible. Another small detail left out of his incarceration manual.

He fell. Laying there he felt himself want to sleep again. He instinctively knew what would happen if he did so. Death was starting to get much more insistent now; tapping at the door. Trying to gather what was left of his strength he pushed his body upwards with his arms. Collapse seemed imminent. With pure force of will he got to a standing position, unable to move his legs forward. Instead, he stood, teetering for a moment when the downslope of the dune exercised its inertia to get him stumbling forward and down. Somehow, he managed to keep his legs and feet synchronized until he arrived at the bottom where he went to his knees as gravity exerted force. The monolith was close now. The sun was at its zenith and he gazed at the monolith wondering if he had come this close just to die right here on this very spot. Again, he moved forward strictly by force of will. Inching ever closer to the monolith he saw plainly what was here: corpses.

There had been corpses all along his meandering path. Some he smelled before he saw. But they had been few and far between. Now, as he surveyed the scene, he saw hundreds of them. Some were skeletons and others were in various stages of decay. The macabre scene screamed finality. No hope. Had he any tears he would have weeped at the carnage and horror of the scene. As it was, he could only keep moving while he had the energy. Down the near length of the monolith he could see only black sand forming a small berm against the monolith's base. Certainly nothing to make him explore that length. So he turned from the shorter face he was closest to and stumbled toward its corner. As he neared the corner he heard it; the unreal sound of water trickling onto water. Trying to move faster he outdistanced his weak legs and fell again, facedown in the burning black sand. With impetus newly gained he pushed himself to his feet and rounded the corner.

There, issuing from the side of the monolith, was a small stream of water. The stream was larger than it had sounded from behind the corner and it flowed down from a crack in the

long side of the monolith where it, over time unknown, had formed a small pond. Around the pond were plants and moss within the wet, irregular border of the pond. Damp sand had allowed flora to get a foothold either with seeds or from hands planting them, although the latter seemed unlikely. Too weary to run he walked slowly and staggering to the shore.

He dropped to his knees then, fell face down, head submerged in glorious relief as the coolness of the water soothed his lips and head. Pausing long enough to lift his face from the pond he started to drink; a handful at a time. It wasn't until he had swallowed a few mouths full of water that it dawned whether it was fit to drink. Only partially sated he stopped drinking. His stomach roiled at the introduction of liquid so cool and he came close to vomiting. Choking it down he waited. Five, ten minutes he waited. There was no ill effect so he took another drink, then sat on his haunches in wonder. Where had this come from and what did its existence imply for his situation? More, he wondered what this black hulk was for; if anything at all.

For several minutes he rested there among the plants listening to the magic sounds of trickling water. Never had he been so grateful. Yet, he was also suspicious. He didn't fully trust this good fortune. No, he was quite unsure if this was good or had some more diabolical purpose; given the dead around him. Watching the sun glide from straight overhead to the other side of the monolith he found himself more and more in shade. With a sigh he heaved himself upright. He moved away from the water to put himself in the shade of the Monolith now that the sun's angle afforded him this retreat. Exploration could wait. He had glimpsed his blistered and swollen face and lips in the water's reflection. The sight of his face, so damaged, had clicked a response within his mind to rest. He needed shade. He needed the Chryslat. Reaching to his belt he pulled it forward in front of him. Palming the ridge of the side he escaped to his host.

9. Cruces Gate-Delivery

It was four weeks to the day since the ham radio episode. The Old Man had been briefly captured by something in the low frequency carrier wave which had assailed his radio set. He had instantly recognized the side band wave but could do nothing to stop it.

He sat on his patio reading the little post-it note on which he had written the Morse code which had come through. It simply read, "I am sorry for what happened. I am sending you a gift. Please forgive me, I didn't know this could happen." A strange looking grouping of letters which the Old Man took to be a signature had followed: "Tleackeh." The Old Man was angered, thinking that someone was playing a cruel hoax on him. The thing was, not long after that radio incident he started feeling really chipper. Better than he had felt when he was only fifty.

In the weeks that had followed his energy level, spent after 70 something years, had gone up and a visit to the doctor let him know that his heart murmur was gone and his blood work was sublime. The doctor wanted to know what had changed in his regimen. Not knowing how to answer the doc he could only stammer that he his dreams were much better and he was finally sleeping again. *Weak as water*, he thought of his response, *but it will have to do. I'm sure as hell not going to tell him I got cured by a space alien! Stone Bridge, here I come. Nest stop, LOONEY BIN!*

In the middle of this reverie he heard his wife call out from the kitchen, "What are you expecting from UPS?" Nothing, was his quiet response. He was expecting nothing. "Did you order more radio parts? The UPS driver is getting out his hand cart!

What did you order?"

Giving up his wool gathering he rose and walked into the house. "I ordered nothing. What the heck are you yelling so loud for! You're gonna wake the dead! You already wake me up!"

Looking at him suspiciously she cut at him with her voice, "You promised me that the last thousand dollars worth of computer parts was all you were going to do with the radio from now on!"

Shook his head in disgust he raised his voice to her. "I didn't order ANYTHING!"

The UPS driver had just carted a large package up to the front door. "I better help you in with this. It weighs 53 pounds 6 ounces. Where shall we put it.

"Not on the dining room table," his wife said in a grousing voice. "It'll collapse with all that weight." If looks could kill the Old Man wouldn't have to worry anymore about his potential heart health. His wife could kill with a glance.

They took the package to the spare bedroom where her sewing table was. It was sturdily built by the Old Man twenty years ago out of four by four posts for legs and two by four transverse framing. It could probably hold a small car.

It took the UPS driver on one side and the Old Man and his wife on the other to lift the package and set it on the table. This was after another pointed glance at her husband as she cleared her sewing out of the way. "You'll get buttons on your work shirt when I get my table back and not until!"

With that last joust under her belt she went outside, ostensibly to cool off. the Old Man shook his head when she left. "Ain't life grand?" he said to the air.

"Let me give you a hand opening that." The UPS driver was actually curious as to what was in the package. Usually,

people were thrilled to get a large package and the Unibomber had long been imprisoned so it was cool to see what some people got.

The Old Man shook his head firmly. "No thanks. I'll open it when I'm ready. Probably a bit later after some lunch...which I'll probably have to make myself." The UPS driver nodded and saw himself out the front door. "Another happy customer," he cracked wise and under his breath. The of the truck's motor faded into the distance.

"Shit!" At that point it was all the Old Man could think to say; just "shit!" Walking back to what he called "the roost;" his chair under his tree on his patio as he referred to his spot when his dander was up. Sitting down he got to thinking. He wondered if, per chance, this package had anything to do with the alien being he thought he had seen. You see, he was starting to think the whole dilemma might be the onset of Alzheimer's. It ran in his family and he feared it more than death itself. He never made mention to his wife. He loved her too much to worry her unnecessarily. Still, it was a threat and he knew that only too well. It had concerned him since his 40's. The last thing he wanted was to be a burden on anyone. He also recognized, or had in recent days, that his radio building had become an obsession and he had spent far too much on the hobby. He fully understood her temper about it and now he was feeling guilty as sin.

"Well' he thought, "I guess I better open it to prove that it has nothing to do with the radio." he would remember those words until his dying day.

When he came back to the house he brought with him a pry bar and hammer plus a Phillips screwdriver and a large flat blade should there be any fasteners he needed to contend with. using the pry bar he timidly tried the top. Surprisingly, it moved and came away with almost no effort. Underneath as a cardboard container; taped shut. Again he muttered shit under his breath

and went back out for a utility knife having left his pocket knife in his bib overalls a couple of days ago. He dreaded asking his wife to help him find it because he thought he was already getting forgetful. It was right where he left it and, coming back in, he sliced open the top to reveal some type of packing he had never seen before. Expecting styrofoam he was surprised because the packing looked an awful lot like crab grass. It didn't feel like it though. Still, he was going to dispose of it very carefully as he had spent a couple of years to finally, successfully rid his lawn of the stubborn weed. he carefull pulled the top of the mass aside, peering down into the box.

What he saw there didn't surprise him so much as made him feel faint and dizzy. In the box was a spheroidal shaped green stone that looked for all the world like glass. What got his attention, though, was the sheen it refracted and in its heart he saw a reddish -orange glow. It looked much like Opal in the middle of a green glass football. Lifting it out, carefully, hardly daring to breathe, he placed it in the sunlight steaming through the window. He was looking for sees which bubbles are called in formed glass. There were none. Crystal? he opined. It's heavy enough. It was at that moment that his wife walked in.

"Lord in Heaven! What *is* that!" she shouted. Hurrying over to see what the Old Man had received she knew almost instantly what the stone was. She had seen the stone before in rings and jewelry but something this huge took her breath away. "You know what I think that is?" she queried.

The Old Man looked at her, puzzled look on his face. "Crystal I think. Fine green crystal by the look. it reminds me of Depression Glass that my mother had once upon a time. Until her sister Ruth stole all of it all before the Will was read and kept it for herself.

"No, you old fool, that's an Emerald."

The particulars of what happened with that stone, which, indeed, was an Emerald (an Emerald that weighed 28 pounds and was flawless with just a bit of fire Opal in the center) was dwarfed by the fact that it came from a planetoid on which thousands of green stones littered the surface. Indeed, a worthless stone but for its rarity and alien presence in a little house in Iowa. A little house in a little Iowa town in which an Old Man and Old Woman came to fortune in the oddest manner.

Some may worry about the legal issues or the Feds coming to take it away as happens so often. The Old Man took care of that by painting the spheroidal stone to look like an implement of play. On their mantle sits a football complete with collegian stripes and a short word which emblazons the spheroid with a simple names: Wilson.

And, yes, They lived quite happily ever after. Thanks for asking!

THE END

5. Cruces Gate-The Old Man

The old woman was worried. Her husband's sudden illness had come out of nowhere. He hadn't been hungry nor had he moved from the patio all afternoon. He sat there, in the shade, nodding off and coming to; off and on for a few hours. He'd told her he would be alright and she long ago learned of his stubbornness. Without a fight she could not get him to come inside and lay down. What was more disconcerting was that a blister had come up on his lower lip. To her it looked like a

blister from a second degree burn. The result of too much time for his fair skin to be in the sun. He was, however, under the shade tree he had planted many years ago for the patio. He had carefully pruned it to force longer branches over the patio. He did so by shortening the length of the opposite branches thus forcing the growth to the patio-side for shade. That is where he had been sitting. In dappled shade with the ever present breeze from the west.

She had seen, finally, that he slept, although fitfully. His breathing was regular and he seemed at ease but for the blisters the second of which had come up on his forehead an hour after the one on his lip. She thought to call the emergency but was fearful of his reaction. He had told her that his most fervent wish was to pass away with no muss or fuss over him; right here, where he loved to be. She would only accede to that because he had made her promise him this some years ago. Now, however, things were different as reality tried to push away past promises. When he suddenly called to her she didn't know whether to panic or be relieved.

He was standing by his chair with a grin on his face. When she came to his side, a little more quickly than she meant to, he simply said that he felt like a man that just got a drink of cold water after almost dying of thirst. She took the statement as an analogy for his swing from ill to spry in so short a time. His mood had indeed improved as he stated that he could use some lunch. As he started past her to walk inside she held back a step or two to watch his progress. She was pleasantly surprised as he entered the house going straight to the kitchen to get a plate of cold chicken out of the fridge. As he sat down with knife and fork she could only shake her head. What is all this? The thought crossed her mind for the thousandth time in the last few days. She had never seen him act this way in the last 46 years. The plaintive moaning in his dreams, feeling sickly part of the day and spry the next part had left her flustered at best and marveling at his

ability to overcome it almost at the snap of his fingers. She wanted to get him to the doctor and was stiffening her spine to insist that he do so when she heard him ask: "Have you ever seen or heard of a piece of obsidian that's as big as a couple of football fields?" He asked with a mouthful of chicken.

"No. Where did you hear of something like that?" She asked in return.

"I guess it was a dream is all I can figure. Those weird dreams. It was so damned hot in the dreams, until I found the water and shade. I felt better after that. I don't know. Maybe I'm getting senile." He went on devouring his food.

6. Cruces Gate-Inside

That's odd. I never tasted anything like this before.

The man finally resorted to use the Chryseal. Despite the refreshment of water, he needed sustenance. It had, he reasoned, become a necessary risk. His hunger had arisen treble. Although he didn't know the being that was his host he knew instinctively that this being was not young. This knowledge had partially discouraged him from using the Chryseal, except sparingly until now. At first, he had been tentative with its use. Almost snooping on padded feet as he merged with his host. Immediately he understood that his host was eating which also meant that he wouldn't have to draw nourishment from his hosts reserves. Although the meal would not fill the man up as it normally would the man didn't need a lot to satisfy and nourish himself. He knew that his metabolic process needed little more than a few tastes to rectify his hunger. Water, liquid, was different. His metabolism required much more water and it was just the Old Man's good fortune

that the man had come across the Monolith when he did. He had consumed over a gallon of water over the past few hours so actual food was not needed and he was relieved that he could spare his host what might otherwise have been a life threatening acquisition of nourishment.

Gradually and carefully he withdrew his consciousness from his host. Again, trying to stay on padded feet so as not to upset the Old Man anymore than could be helped. He hated this thing he was starting to realize was leeching. Over the past several days he had realized that he was nothing more than a, what was the symbol he saw in the Old Man's mind, a mosquito. He had seen one on the Old Man's arm through his eyes as the Old Man cursed and swatted it from his arm. The smear of blood on his arm was enough to inform him that the mosquito and what he was doing was one in the same.

As he gingerly backed out of the Old Man's mind he caught a glimpse there that should not have been. No, certainly not. He saw the Monolith behind him in the mind of his host. Perhaps it was his slow withdrawal or the acute awareness of the Old Man but there it was in stark relief; and he, himself, was in the picture. Just as suddenly, he saw the Old Man's eyes piercing through lightyears at him as the Old Man said to him, "I see you! You **SON OF A BITCH!**"

Like a rock propelled from a sling the impact of cognitive recognition slammed into his head. He staggered backward and went down like a sack of meal. The connection closed like pulling a plug from a socket but the shock continued; wave after wave. He lay on the sand twitching and jerking; guttural sounds gurgling from his throat as he contorted from the shock of time waves. Uncontrollably, he vomited a vile brownish bile; what was not absorbed from the meal he had just stolen. He realized, deeply and utterly, how wrong this was for him to participate in. Whether or not he was forced by others of his race to do so it was wrong to the core essence of any living being. As he convulsed he slipped from consciousness and lie

on the sand, in the shade, in a puddle of bile. The convulsions soon stopped though he was unaware in the blackness.

7. Cruces Gate-Eye of the Beholder

“Dear, what’s wrong! Are you all right?” Heart racing the woman rushed to the old man’s side. He was gasping while leaning on the dining room table. She had heard him swear, loudly, using words he rarely used. “Son of a bitch” was an expletive she could not remember him ever using. But, the yelling! So loud it had startled and shaken her. At first she guessed there might be an intruder in their house. She had briefly envisioned her husband being accosted.

“Help me sit down,” the old man said. “No, not here. On the patio. Help me outside. I need fresh air.” There was nothing else she could do. She wanted to take him into bed. He was pale and, once again, it scared her.

“Shall I call the doctor?” she almost pleaded to do so.

“No, I’m fine. I thought I saw something; that’s all.” I saw something all right, he thought, I saw something that wasn’t from here. He shook visibly for another minute then waved his wife away. “I’m fine! I just need to think. By myself.” The old man had almost let slip his having seen the man. He was old, yes, but he wasn’t unaware. A dream was one thing to discuss but a vision of another planet was quite another. Especially at his age and in his health. The looney bin in

Stonebridge was not a place he wanted to be sent and this was pretty damned looney; even for him. No, what he needed was time for consideration of something he suspected but, until now, had no idea of. He was, in fact, wondering if he had merely hallucinated the being. Shit! was all he could come up with but he muttered that under his breath.

On the patio she brought him a glass of ice water. The day was warm and the old shade tree always kept the temperature 10 degrees cooler than the ambient temperature. She looked at him as she handed him the glass of ice water; thinking that he looked fine...for his age. She knew better than to start an inquisition though. She had to be satisfied with what she already knew. Which, she figured, was absolutely nothing. "Shall I sit with you, dear?" she asked, tepidly. He shook his head and said he'd be fine; he just needed some quiet for a few minutes.

As she walked away he was already assessing what had happened.

The Old Man sat still for a number of minutes trying to re-conjure the image of the face he'd seen. It wasn't a man as he understood a man to be. Not in the least. First off, this man had been as black as obsidian and the skin, was that skin?, had a glass-like sheen about it. He recalled that the face or head had been a prolate spheroid; a football without the dimples or threads. As he concentrated, more of the image came back in graphic relief. Yep, a football was closest but the face had a large, bony forehead that tapered to, a nose?, he wasn't sure but the overall impression he got was that the forehead and nose, on a singular plane, resembled a golf tee with the point of the tee morphing down to a small, fish-like mouth, reminding him of a goldfish's mouth. But, this was all black and shiny but for interspersed subtle, grainy reddish-brown streaks which reminded him of a piece of ebony or blackened rosewood. He hadn't seen the face long enough to discern eyes or see much of the body except that his quick glance told him that this guy? was skinnier than man? he had

ever seen before. Not skinny as a snake, perhaps, rather, more like an ill fed child. And tall! Maybe eight feet? And, again, all black with interspersed subtle streaks of reddish-brown. But the eyes! Were those eyes? He had seen them so quickly. Roundish, hexagonal patches that looked like fine sponges. There were two of them, one on either side of the forehead. Not eyes but...sensors? He couldn't tell. He had no idea if this being had been clothed or not. He hadn't the time to take in any but the most shocking details before his mind shut off in defense.

What did this tell him? That was the next logical path he felt he should go on. He knew the effects that this being had had on him. He knew that in some way that being was using him. But, the how and why...well, he had no clue. What struck him more than anything else was that he, the Old Man, had to shut up about this. Shut up about all of this. The Stonebridge looney bin was beckoning him with a ghastly, sickish smile on its face and a wagging "cometh thou hither" curled, skeletal finger. If he said squat about any of this...! In fact, he determined, he wouldn't write any of this, none of this, in his journal. In a way, he smirked mentally, he was glad he was getting old. That meant less time to have to keep this secret. His wife, *no*. She would have to stay out of the loop. What then? He knew only that he had some weird, unbidden connection with this being. Until he gave this a lot of deep consideration he needed to just put it out of his mind. He wasn't crazy. This he knew. The thought of "why me" was instantly dismissed. It was me and me has to deal with this somehow, some way.

Dinner that night was unusually quiet. Normally, the talk at the table was about the grandkids or the days events or what the neighbors were up to. Never TV at dinner. That was a hard and fast rule. The world their births had brought them to live in was out of its mind and they allowed no intrusion of it into something as solemn as the evening meal. No way, Freddy

Mac or Fannie May!

The next morning was like most. Up at 6 and getting the day started per routine. A quick breakfast of fresh fruit and oatmeal, the wife off to the market and the Old Man out to the shed to finish rebuilding an old ham radio. He loved shortwave and had his engineers license since the late 1960's. Morse code was like snapping his fingers and he knew that he was now one of the few radio operators left that still knew Morse. It was no longer required but was, he thought, a hell of a good thing to know if push came to shove in this fucked up world. He called the world fucked up as an allowance of one curse word as long as it adequately described a situation he was forced to live with. He was forced to live with the world and, he got to thinking, maybe the being he now knew had a similar situation someplace else. He hoped so because, now that he considered it, he hoped it wasn't just this planet that was so fucked up. He rather felt that earthlings might not be lone Indians. Nope, he surmised, fuckedupedness should be equally shared throughout the universe. After all, what was right was right and: vice versa.

The radio he was working on was an old "Heathkit Explorer" ham radio which he had owned since purchasing it in the late 60's. Over the years he had repaired and modified it adding components which converted it to a rather impressive ham station capable of sending and receiving signals all over the world. What had been a small and crude device had turned into a bench filling radio conglomerate of dials, meters and switches that dwarfed the 8 x 10 shed he had built. At one point he had even had to install air conditioning into the shed much to the chagrin of his wife. "How much is that going to cost a month for your hobby?" still rang in his ears.

With it he had made close friends from many different countries and, having added a computer to it, could even get some fraction of the signals which SETI was interested in. The Old Man was not an electronics tech by trade. He was pretty

much a genius in understanding how electronics worked. A skill that was natural to him. As he described it, "I don't know a thing about electronics. It just makes sense to me and seems to work no matter how hard I try to screw it up."

Melting the last solder joint in he removed the heat sync and let it cool. After a few minutes he plugged it back in and, as he had learned to expect, it hummed back to life brilliantly. He sat and tuned the dials to one of the frequencies he knew SETI used and began listening. There was the the background thrum of ultra-low frequency waves which, he thought, could put one to sleep quite easily if one were susceptible. It was suddenly interrupted by something else coming through. *A carrier wave, he thought? Something on a sideband?* He listened intently. This was new to him and he immediately became excited. *Holy criminoly! What have I just found?!* He almost felt like shouting and dancing as this was perhaps a one in a lifetime discovery. It was then that he sensed it. Instantly, he knew what was happening but, try as he might, he couldn't move to shut it down. The On/Off switch was two feet away but may as well have been a mile. His face turned ashen and his heart rate increased. It was a communication. This he knew instinctively. He also knew who it was from. Scared to death, he could only sit and wait. Then came the code: Morse code.

8. Cruces Gate-Fair is Fair?

He finally opened his senses. Gradually, he became aware of the night sky. Focusing, he realized there were no stars, no sister planet. It soon came to him that there was no sand and,

turning his head from side to side, knew that he must be on a table. Trying to sit upright he felt restraints. *What?* The question reared its ugly head. *Where?* quickly followed. For an instant, terror gripped the being. He was tied down on a table and that made no sense. He thought he had been resting but then remembered the Old Man. The Old Man had seen him and the breaking of the link had convulsed him into unconsciousness. He also remembered an utterance he didn't understand. It had not come from him, it had been from the Old Man himself, "Son of a Bitch!" Him? Was that a statement addressed to him. It shouldn't have been possible. The Chryslat was supposed to be surreptitious, shielded from others when used. Now, however, he was sure. The Old Man was aware of him and, following, must be aware of his presence. The ramifications of this stunned him to his core. No one, no "being" was ever supposed to be aware of he or his people or planet. This was ancient law and the punishment was death for allowing this to happen.

Now his predicament carried far more weight. If he were strapped down, non-ambulatory, it could only mean one thing. He had been caught out. Cold sweat broke out and he shivered. Arrested and punished for something I didn't do and now...now this! It was absolutely unintentional. I didn't make the Chryslat or use it any way but the way I was told. And, at that, I used it sparingly, He remembered a thought, a phrase he had seen in the Old Man's mind. "This is fucked up!" He wasn't sure what the phrase meant but it sounded applicable to his situation. So applicable that he only wished he could shout it out! This is so very fucked up and so is the universe. Then he wept. Or, more to the point, his species version of weeping. He convulsed again, shaking his head from side to side in staccato fashion. Mewling sounds came from his sensory receptacles.

"Well, Tleackeh, I see you're sensory apt again! Stop the expressive's and pull yourself together. How do you feel? Drained? Weary? You should! You've passed the test. Did you

see all the corpses? Did you recognize what the Chryslat can do? Are you now ready for another challenge?"

Slowly and with agony, Tleackeh stopped the mewling. When the infrared light issued from the walls of obsidian he recognized where he was. He was inside the Monolith. Deep within it. Having never seen a way-station before he had no idea where he was. Death, he had felt, was imminent when he had convulsed from the time surges. To be awake and aware was surprising and this other who was speaking to him, he also realized, was a teacher, an instructor of children who guided them to adulthood; unseen and unrecognized. At 70 earth years, Tleackeh was now a man in his culture. He was not being punished for something he did not do. Instead, he had been unknowingly challenged in the way of his people. As this sunk in he realized that all the corpses he'd seen were the failures of this very test. This planet (or planetoid) was a place of trial. Having almost killed him he knew that he was destined for something far above the caliber of those who had perished here. What that would be he had no idea. Responding to his teacher he quietly said, "I am ready for what lies ahead. First, however, I must make amends to the host. I think I almost killed it."

"Ah yes, it was a close thing. Having studied this species I believe I can assist you in your amends. Go out, when you are ready, and gather one Emiynat. Make it a large one and we will be sure that your host receives it. It is prevalent here but rare on his planet. He will, I am certain, appreciate it for its form and color. A "kingly" gift for one so put upon.

"Now, your sparing use of the Chryslat for the sake of your host was exceptional. You put your life in danger rather than further injure the being of that world. Exemplary in all facets. My faith in you was not unfulfilled.

Though you don't know me, I know you from the egg. I have intensely and minutely followed you from your first day. I

have watched your growth and seen your sensories had compassion from the start. I am well gratified that you have proven my faith in you; almost unto death. It was a close thing, your convulsions. We brought you in when consciousness fled you and refortified you as needed with plenth-ti-hom."

"Now, go and find a fine specimen of Emiynat. Head sized should do nicely; don't you think?"

Tleackeh rose and, surprisingly, knew his way out. Outside the Monolith he looked around for the green stone. He took this quite seriously and looked at hundreds in the blazing planetoid sun. At last he picked one up and gazed at the sky through it. It was a clear, deep green and he saw no flaws in it. He did not understand why the teacher thought this would be a wonderful gift as the Emiynats were normally used as ground-up fill for structural development. The earth equivalent of gravel for concrete. He knew better than to question his teacher, now that he understood the importance of this person, and brought the stone back inside without a murmur of questioning.

Bringing it unflinching back to where he had started he presented it to the teacher. "With your approval I believe this will suit?"

"Ahh, a beautiful specimen. Wait here, while I send it with appropriate embellishment."

A few hours later the teacher came back. Tleackeh had not moved from the point he was when the teacher left the compartment. To do so would have been utter disrespect. Upon his return the teacher informed Tleackeh that all appropriate disguise and transport had taken place. It wouldn't do for the Old Man to receive a gift from another planet in forward fashion such as a flash on the dining room table and, voila, a huge green rock appeared in the middle of diner.

No, these gifts to hosts who had to put up with being drained

was taken care of after years of errors, surprise, heart attacks, practice and learning the expected customs of "donor planets."

"It is sent." With that, the teacher repaired away to his office leaving Tleackeh to fend for himself.

First, he went to what was a communications center in the Monolith. Plugging his Chryslat into the radio he tried to send a personal apology to his host in the only way he could. He wasn't, however, certain that it worked. He had only rudimentary knowledge of the radio but he felt that he had to try. He carried it on a low frequency wavelength to try to beat the lightyears of distance. Without knowing if he had reached the Old Man he soon gave up.

Realizing how famished he was he also surprised himself that he knew how to get to the cafeteria. It would be sometime later before all was explained. Such as the genetic engineering which had transformed him into the explorer he was soon to become. This entire test was in order to prove that the new genetic process developed over centuries was now ready to be utilized in space if the proper candidates could be found. Tleackeh was merely the first to survive. The hundreds of corpses were the result of the trials of a century of attempts to perfect the clinical experiments. Tleackeh was the first successfully enhanced version of his kind. He was to be a leader of men whose sole task, now, was to get back to the home planet: Earth.