

Chapter One

Lostwithiel, USA.

"What light through yonder window breaks?" a female voice trills young and tender, posing a reasonable question to her paramour. Her paramour is hung over and while he could not believe he got the girl the night before, by this morning he was having second thoughts as dawn broke and her makeup ran and faded like the going out of the tide. Their first meeting was in a bar with thunderous music, or what passes for music in the new millennium. Both were post high school and knew all that they needed to know in a modern world. They were made for each other.

"It's the fuckin' sun coming over the horizon, or maybe they just drop the fuckin' bomb," he says, wincing at the thought and rolling onto his side of the bed away from her. He breaks wind because he feels like hell and it's the only way he knows to establish his independence. He is a callow youth, immature in character and bearing and typical of the generation entrusted with the running of the world.

"Nasty boy," she says, not really meaning it because she can't believe she finally got a guy when her entire graduating class is already married with multi-kid tribes of their own. He breaks wind again, more quietly this time because he is young and has not yet reached man's estate where he can cause a domestic eruption capable of lifting the bedclothes, and forcing his life-partner to go make the morning coffee.

"Enough, no more," she says. "Tis not so sweet as 'twas before!"

Dawn has broken in the little town of Lostwithiel, USA. The young man pulls on his jeans and takes one look at the girl. "Gimme a break," he says, tripping over a condom on the floor. "Here's looking at you, kid." And he bolts for the exit and the nearest coffee shop.

The girl is romance-struck and will dream of her new found love for the rest of the day. He will tell his buddies about the night of passion and lust that he has just endured, heavy on fiction and short on clinical fact.

"You look as if you caught your dick in a meat grinder," an older coffee drinker and veteran of two hitches in the Marines says just to comfort him. In sympathy, the waitress refills the boy's coffee cup and scowls like a gunnery sergeant with dyspepsia at the older man.

Meanwhile, as a weak and watery sun rises on Lostwithiel, the romance-struck girl is on her cell-phone, calling her circle of friends and enemies left over from her graduating year. The least likely of these girls ask the most questions of the encounter:

"So what did he do then?" Pause. "All night?" Again, but in reverse, short on fiction but heavy on clinical fact. Her friends and enemies, who are married with multi-kid tribes of their own, just grunt. They are past romance, through childbirth and looking forward to Social Security. Grunting becomes an art form and sex only a memory.

And now, the main curtain goes up on Lostwithiel. Not many people are up and about yet. Some are on their way home, caught out after curfew, but by and large Lostwithiel still sleeps, the sleep of the unemployed in a recession. So, before the waking hour I will give you a little background, the Lostwithiel low-down, the skinny on the place.

"Quit yer goddamn bellyaching, Senator," an unknown complainer grinds at his fellow passenger. "Jeeze, your ass is so big you take up three goddamn seats."

We appreciate that buses are not designed to accommodate big asses, but the idea of taking up three seats seems like baloney. We will put it down to male banter. The bus is crowded and slow. It is old and has lost most of its power it had when new and fresh from Detroit. It is a Generous Motor, a G.M., and it has given all it can.

The nickname 'Senator' does not imply that the man with the big ass has a seat in the upper house of any congressional or parliamentary system. It simply means that our man with a big ass exerts a lot of power.

"If I didn't like you, Ape," the Senator replies, "I would complain to the management."

It is early, so early that the sun might burn your eyeballs out if a heavy fog does not snort or snuffle over Lake Marazion and dampen everything in range, including the thirty men as they disembark from the government bus. You can see it is a government bus because it says so on the side. Don't argue with me. If you look close enough, if the fog allows you, the words State Correctional Department appear in several places. This does not imply any correctional value set upon patent purges but to the Correctional Service of that happy place. This last term is an oxymoron because jail never corrected anyone.

The thirty disembarkees form up in two lines to be counted. This takes a little time and in the fresh foggy air, early as it is, the cold brings on a spattering of cussing:

"Heh, Ape," the trusted and long-serving member of the Correctional Senate calls to the senior custodian. "Let's git to the cawfee and quit the fuckin' math. You caint count to thirty, anyway, Ape."

"Shut yer gap, Senator," the Ape replies, not unkindly. He knows he is backed up by two younger zealots of the state's Correctional faculty, so he can afford to be benevolent.

We have stumbled across a chainless gang that All-American institution used to keep felons at work and their minds away from mischief. This particular chainless gang has a form of internal organization independent of any official hierarchy. Among its members are three shakers and movers who have been promised lengthy stays as guests of the correctional facility. Moreover, the State Legislature has guaranteed their room and board for many years, which, all things considered, is a pretty chummy thing to do.

These shakers and movers are all innocent men. In fact the correctional service houses thousands of innocent men. Criminologists will tell you that they have never met a single prisoner who was ever guilty of anything more than a parking ticket - and that itself is currently under review or appeal.

Quite naturally, the three shakers and movers have lengthy appeals before the Supreme Court, which is only one step short of 'getting religion.' One gentleman is addressed by his initials, J-C, but prescience tells us that it stands for Jean-Claud, a common enough handle in the National Hockey League. One would be forgiven for believing on J-C in a more religious light because he is a leader of men. His many disciples would tell you that J-C has great influence with all the guards right up to the prison warden, while some believe he has a hot line to the Governor's office.

J-C has not always been a leader. Until incarceration he was low on the totem pole and serf to his companion and disciple, Crowe - the banker of last resort, and Lou-the-Lizard - the odds giver. But jail brought out the latent quality of leadership and now J-C shines as a correctional godfather. Simply put, there has been a reversal of roles.

So, J-C and his disciples dispense benevolence among prisoners and guards alike, keeping life peaceful. This benevolence comes in shredded leaf form and is smoked for therapeutic reasons. Without a doubt the facility where J-C, Crowe and Lou-the-Lizard reside is run after the style of a happy country manor.

You will observe, from time to time, if you drive on State highways in Texas or Mississippi, or Alabama that chain gangs work on such meaningless tasks as breaking rocks, or digging drainage ditches and in one case - cleaning up the garbage dropped by irresponsible citizens. But due to J-C's influence with the prison governor, this chain less gang is into bush carpentry and they have a sizable contract for building rough furniture for the State Parks and

Conservancies. In fact, their work is so highly valued that they recently secured an order for building roadside outhouses for the Interstate System!

On the day in question, 'Ape' the senior custodian, is serving his last day before retiring on full pension. J-C has advised Ape about his investments so he will have no financial worries; his portfolio carefully balanced between blue chip stocks, U.S. municipal bonds and medium risk tech stocks. Ape has a retirement fund heavy on guarantee and light on growth.

They have a large coffeecake and the coffee is brewed, hot, sweet and strong just like the women in their lives. Let us depart and allow this fond farewell. The trio consisting of J-C, Crowe and Lou-the-Lizard are central to our story and we will soon meet them again. Ape will retire to a little cottage in the hills with roses around the door. Within six months of retirement, Ape's wife will have enough of him around the house, borrow a .44 Magnum and shoot him dead.

Retirement is not for everyone.

It was a short working day. Ape took the chain less gang back to the correctional facility early so he could spare the warden a few moments before accepting his illuminated long service certificate. We will say goodbye to Ape, knowing he will only have a short retirement and look in briefly to the cell occupied by J-C, Crowe and Lou-the-Lizard.

The cell is a little crowded, but that is due to space being dedicated to a television set and a computer. Bookshelves line one wall and tasteful prints of the Masters bring a little culture to the scene. Seated at the tiny folding table, J-C opens a legal sized envelope from their appeals lawyer, Sol Wiesenstein.

"Sol says our best chance is with the search and seizure the State Police inflict upon us while we go about our lawful occasions," J-C announces.

That is a good start for any appeal - even for a parking ticket - so we will leave any further commentary in suspension. We will step back in time to when our trio of felons was free and innocent. The curtain goes up. The play begins.

In 1901, Teddy Roosevelt became the 26th President of the United States and Queen Victoria, Queen of England and Empress of India died. Even though Lostwithiel is part of the United States, the whole town went into mourning with black crepe armbands worn by the gentlemen and black veils by the ladies. The horses wore black plumes and all businesses closed for a week, with the exception of the taverns, which remained open for discussion and planning purposes. Teddy Roosevelt was not as popular in Lostwithiel as Queen Victoria.

Right after that, a Big City company built a plant to refine the bog mud that had been an obstacle to progress in the whole county. All experts believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that mud from the Lostwithiel bogs possessed unsurpassed healing qualities when it was shipped over to Europe and slapped onto the dissipated bodies of Europeans in their high fashioned health spas, Europeans being what they are. It was a sure cure for skin diseases, rheumatism, gout, Norwegian Itch and toothache. It never cured one single person in the whole of Lostwithiel or Runcible County, but it was a sure-fire cure for anyone without a job who didn't mind paddling about in bog mud.

The mud was packed into lead-lined boxes for shipment to Europe and labeled 'Krankenschist', the name chosen by the company's marketing genius. Locally, the product was called by a vulgar variation of that name, but that was probably an accident of pronunciation, the native dialect of Runcible County being what it is. The plant turned out Krankenschist until the great crash of Twenty-Nine, and then it closed its doors, praying for a financial miracle.

There was another boom after World War II. The mud plant reopened with a state economic grant and a defense contract from Washington, the modern equivalent of a financial miracle. This time the mud was exported to California, and the Lostwithiel operation became a branch plant of a pharmaceutical company with Swiss ownership. Some Lostwithiel people went to work and certain personalities, who had political connections with the financial miracle side of things, got salaried positions as managers and supervisors.

The plant closed when Krankenschist became a suspected carcinogen.

There's talk of reopening the Krankenschist plant. Apparently Krankenschist was never a carcinogen anyway and everyone in Lostwithiel and the Big City, and Offices in the State knew it all along, but that was how business got done. The talk generally coincides with state elections, and at the same time there are usually some handouts when a few people get town or county jobs long enough to go back on poge. The town hall gets painted, and there's money for geranium baskets on State Street, and some people are hired as flag-persons on the county highways. If they are students, they are referred to as Roads Scholars.

The Krankenschist plant will never reopen; anyone with half a brain knows that, because the Environmental Protection Lobbies at State and Federal levels say that taking mud from the bog disturbs the spawning habits of the Marazion carp.

You have to be from Lostwithiel to know it. And if you come back to visit for Christmas, Thanksgiving or the wedding of someone who didn't have the sense to leave town, you'd better drive. They closed the rail link five years ago.

You have to be from Lostwithiel to know it. And then you leave on the bus and go to live in Minneapolis or Detroit or New York, or anywhere except Chicago. You played ball for Piggy's Pizza Poopery and hockey for the Natural Gas Crematorium, unless you had weak

wrists. In that case you played ringette. You went to Lostwithiel High and you scraped together enough credits to graduate and impress a potential employer.

You never go back to Lostwithiel unless you visit for Christmas, Thanksgiving, funerals or the wedding of someone who didn't have the sense to leave town. If you do visit you might run into the girl you made it with at high school, but she's married now with three kids.

You don't believe me? That's small town USA from Punkeydoodle Corners to Fort Whoopup. From Trois Pistoles to Rat Portage it's exactly the same, except some places do it in Spanish and it sounds better.

Lostwithiel is the seat of Marazion County, set in the mysterious Marazion Lakes. The Marazions are not jewels like the Finger Lakes of New York. The Marazions are shallow, weedy and boggy. So Lostwithiel is known as the trapdoor to the Marazions. This has never done anything to attract the tourists, but it is good bass country.

By 1899, the population of Lostwithiel had doubled, the County had its own telephone company, the first automobile had spluttered and expectorated its way up State Street and back, and Lostwithiel became deeply divided along family lines concerning the pros and cons of free trade with the whole darned world. The street rhetoric of those times about Free Trade would be familiar to present day scholars who study those two grand old alternatives to stoop work, Economics and Political Science; only the actors have changed. In 1899, it was the Democrats who were the avid proponents of Free Trade, while the Republicans were dead set against it.

As you leave Lostwithiel you have to avoid some of the larger potholes in the County Road. They've been there a long time and you know where they are. When you were young and drove your father's truck you didn't bother to miss them, but barreled straight through

with a spine shattering crash as the springs bottomed out. The shocks were already done for, you'd seen to that. But this time you are driving your own car and you still have twenty-seven payments left on it, so you are careful.

There is one other reason for avoiding the County Road potholes. You have a pounding headache due to your overindulgence at the previous day's festivity (Christmas, Thanksgiving, a funeral or the wedding of someone who didn't have the sense to leave town). You did run into the girl you made it with at high school, and she was happily married, and she did have three kids. The woman you are married to is not from Lostwithiel, and she sized up your high school sweetheart and told you afterwards that she was a slut.

You speed past the potholes as you leave town, where the new shopping plaza was being built but the developer ran out of money. The derelict buildings grin at you as you pass. The town police have a speed trap around here and you wave to the cop on duty. He has a Styrofoam cup of coffee from the donut shop and crushed coffee cups thrown into the ditch identify the speed trap. The cop was one of those who didn't have enough sense to leave Lostwithiel even though he was in your high school year and voted the boy most likely to succeed.

The woman you are married to talks incessantly about the low-life in your hometown and how low-life your relatives are, the ones who didn't have enough sense to leave Lostwithiel, that is. Your relatives who went to the Big City and made it big, bigger than you made it, are A-OK, according to the woman you are married to. She keeps talking, and finally you tell her to shut up, because after all you are low-life and she's interrupting your thoughts about Lostwithiel. This woman also has three kids that just happen to be yours as well, so you tell them to shut up, which makes you feel better; after all none of them are from Lostwithiel either.

The seed of a pipe dream was placed in your mind last night by another alumnus you hadn't seen since high school. According to this genius the Krankenschist in the bog has a highly

decomposed peat base and he's done some chemical tests on samples. "It's high in the sort of bitumens, carbohydrates, sugars and hydrolysates needed to start off a whole new chemical industry," he told you, rather unsteady on his feet. And you are wondering what it would take to start the Krankenschist plant up again if you sold the house in The Big City, got some loan guarantees and government grants, and developed a business plan to re-employ some Lostwithiel citizens.

As you drive past the Krankenschist bog you tell the woman to whom you are married, to button it and the kids to can it. You wind the window down and the moon is reflected off the wetlands. The woman to whom you are married has lapsed into a cold, stony rage and the kids are silently pinching each other in the back seat. As you drive over the causeway towards the main highway you think you can hear the Spirit of the Marazions calling to you, and you hope that the long hand of destiny will reach out and pull you by the balls back to Lostwithiel.

But it is only the wind blowing in from one of the back lakes. You give a dramatic shrug, wind the window back up and tune the radio to a Big City channel. The wind moans through the wetlands and you hear a ghostly voice, "Lostwithiel, Lostwithiel, where the fuck is Lostwithiel?"

The description of Lostwithiel fades to black and we are back with the young girl who has just bade a fond farewell to her boyfriend, now hung over in the coffee shop with the ex-marine. This former hero has almost persuaded the young man to high tail it down to the recruiting office and sign up for the rest of his natural life (be it short or long), as one of the few good men that the Marine Corps is seeking. I would personally prefer this young man to serve out his sorrow in the French Foreign Legion; it is a far more democratic organization, but the boy has never heard of the Legion.

The girl in question is still in the very lists of love and is speaking long distance to her mother. Her mother works in Minneapolis, a dispatcher with the Police Department. They are analyzing the boy's pedigree and lineage a difficult task in Lostwithiel because not all citizens come from liaisons blessed by matrimony, either holy or civil.

In the ensuing analysis we find that, while a father is common to many children, there are diverse mothers within these liaisons, and it seems that our two star-crossed lovers have the same sire but different dams! "He's your half-brother, you nit-wit," the girl's mother screams down the phone line from the Big City.

No permanent record was kept at the time of the girl's response because she fainted upon hearing that she had just slept with and surrendered her virginity to a close blood relative!

Chapter Two

A Mystery in the Making

Down through history, each community has had some central place where its pulse of opinion could be taken, where vitally important intelligence could be disseminated, where reputations could be examined and dissected as skillfully as filleting a lake trout. Now, not all such information has its foundation in truth, so there is a necessity for this central place to operate under the guise of ‘Rumor Control’ where such information can be tempered before being served up for public consumption. Such a place is the barbershop of old, a place where extremes can be examined and, with due process, reshaped into a middle course. For this is Lostwithiel, USA, the Land of the Loon and Compromise.

In a market place of tonsorial artists, this old fashioned barbershop is almost a forgotten place. The in-thing now is a hairdresser where Kurls and Kuts take the place of the traditional short-back-and-sides styling of more enlightened times. The barber, that fountain of opinion and folklore, is now either a woman or an expatriate weirdo from England. Except in Lostwithiel. The last of the barbershop traditions is here, alive and well in this little town. This fountain of opinion, so reliable on subjects such as social justice, politics, sport and the restoration of public strangulation are preserved in Lostwithiel. The barbershop is the guardian of free speech and it will only cost you two bucks for a Legion draw ticket. Bob the Bald Barber holds forth six days of the week. Part historian, part raconteur and part pain in the ass, Bob the Bald Barber took the shop over from his father, Old Bob, when he dropped dead while trimming a customer’s nose hairs.

“Just does me eyebrows, he does,” the still-shocked customer tells the assembly, “and he has the clippers up me left nostril, when I hears this rattling sound.” He rattles realistically to

show what he means. "I turns around and Old Bob goes. He just goes. Then I see he's on the floor, rattling like a good 'un, and he shakes and then goes still." The assembly looks at each other in awe.

"You mean he croaks?" one waiting customer asks, after a decent interval. "Perhaps he has a fart caught crossways," another suggests sympathetically. But of course, dead he is, as dead as a passenger pigeon. And Young Bob, the Bald Barber, promptly succeeds him in articulo mortis.

It should be explained that Young Bob is not bald. In fact he has a full head of hair, just as full as his father did. No, Young Bob is a barber to bald men, which is an art in itself because the cutting technique is applied to the sides, polish being addressed to the scalp, while rhetoric has to take up sufficient time to account for the lack of activity upon the head itself. This recreational rhetoric is accompanied by passages of timpanic tapping of scissors against comb. The practice of barbershop tapping probably has its origins in war. Historians feel that the Minute Men during the Revolutionary War passed coded messages through the Rotten British lines from barbershop to barbershop using this method of scissors-on-comb tapping. But in times of peace it is considered to be either an art form or a method of shedding surplus dandruff.

None of this is learned in the modern school of hairdressing. In fact, hairdressing schools do not have the art of conversation or scissors-on-comb tapping in their curricula. And with the traditional barbershop fading into obsolescence in these dot.com times, the lights of civilization are therefore threatened as they are extinguished one by one.

On this particular evening at the start of this story, the Bald Barber is seated comfortably in his own chair. Surrounding him are the passive tools of his trade; old copies of National Geographic Magazine, Playboar, Cowsmopolitan, News-squeak, all as equally out of date as those in the dentist's office, which must surely qualify the traditional barbershop as professional

premises. After all, the barber was the original surgeon who bled his patients when bleeding was the fashionable form of therapy, before Freud escaped from the bottle. Now, successive government finance departments have taken over the traditional bleeding therapy, not stopping until the victim turns translucent.

It is near to closing time, that time of day when people are going home from work and expecting the clock on the Catholic Church to strike six bells. We are not sure about this clock. Sometimes it strikes and, then, sometimes it goes on strike. It freezes in winter and strikes when it feels like it should. Then come spring and the thaw, and it strikes every quarter hour out of sheer jubilation. Some people who live close to the church and who are disturbed by this clock during the night, think that the right to strike should be taken away and the clockworks legislated as an essential service, but only during daylight hours.

Young Bob has no customers at this time, leastwise not customers who pay. There are two rather shady and seedy characters occupying chairs provided for fee-paying patrons during normal times. Sean Brendan Finnegan and Gus Dominic Pantorelli are partners of sorts in an unregistered, unnumbered and unmentionable enterprise based loosely on the construction industry. 'No Job Too Small, No Distance Too Great' is the advertising horsehair surrounding their non-existent logo. Neither Finnegan nor Pantorelli have worked in years and they spend all their waking hours avoiding physical activity of any kind. Instead, they prefer a consulting role and collect their fees in cash. Finnegan and Pantorelli, Contractors, is a firm that deals in coin of the republic, never has a bank account and keeps its books and assets in leather wallets chained to the partners' belts. You might say they are part of the growing subterranean economic system.

Both partners dress in the same uniform; care-worn jeans, plaid shirts and sweat shirts. They wear ruined baseball caps celebrating unsuccessful ball clubs and their boots are patterned on work boots, but any mention of actual work is strictly out of line. Their boots are strictly for

effect, worn only to keep their cuffs out of the mud. But there the likeness ends. Finnegan is tall and thin with a squint like a pie-eyed piper. Pantorelli, on the other hand is short and adipose, the result of his mother following the guidelines of Signora Beeton.

“I guess there’s a place for you guys somewhere in business,” the Bald Barber says, as we omnisciently intrude into the conversation. “We’re taxed to hell by the Orifices of the Potomac, so if you two can lay your hands on enough stuff for my patio one dark night, we might just enter into a mutually beneficial relationship.”

Finnegan gets first kick at the cat. “We fill a gap in the sub strata of local commerce because we are what you might term a finishing trade. When people move into a new subdivision, they go through a culture adjustment because they find that landscaping comes extra. It’s a tradition. For example, take the tradition of the All American Patio, complete with lawn furniture designed to last until exactly one day before Labor Day.” Finnegan sits back to let that sink in and allow his partner to take over the sales patter.

“We design these All American Patios to come with their own built-in supply of beer as a cultural aid to the barbecue cook, always providing that such a feature is still politically correct.”

The partners have a long record, attested to by the Town Police Sergeant, at sourcing material for such projects via their vast subterranean economic knowledge. “You might consider,” Finnegan says, “paving the patio area with a pattern of hubcaps after the style of a Roman villa. Police cruisers left unattended outside the courthouse are always a source of this desirable hardware.”

“And you can always use a hubcap for frying fish,” Pantorelli chips in. (Droll fellow).

Pantorelli is always a Leaning Tower of Strength in these difficult negotiations. He takes up the sales patter from Finnegan. “There are many useful and practical supplies of materials available for procurement by expert contractors like us, just yearning for inclusion in your patio

scheme of things. All that is needed is a slight adjustment to morality known as the Five Finger Discount and, hey presto, the supply is satisfied.”

“That’s downright larceny,” Young Bob says, endorsing his literary tendencies by turning the *Color Purple* while reaching for his Valium capsules in a bilateral mode. “When can you start? The Missus says she must have the patio paved before her family visits from Crawford, Texas!”

Finnegan explains the subtle relationship or fine line, which exists between larceny and liberation. Like all Americans he is a staunch supporter of teaching foreign languages in school, so he uses the term ‘trouvailles’ to define the potential source of patio stones.

“Around and about construction sites, upon which your new residence sits in a Flanders-like sea of flodden mud. Within this landscape in which you will spend countless hours working it to an arable tilth, there lies an unending supply of bricks, rocks, flat stones, base boards, flooring and drywall, all for the not-asking.

“The rules of this game are quite simple. For example, if some bricks are still on a pallet they are not ‘trouvailles’, being still untouchable by the do-it-yourselfer, and of obvious commercial benefit to their owners. But should they fall from the pallet, or be caused to fall, then they have, as it were, passed into the public domain, and a swift reassignment of ownership is quite in order.”

Young Bob ponders this a while, mentally sketching out his new patio, neatly executed in a ‘pave’ of house bricks and bordered with scaffold boards. “I suppose if you look at it in a practical light the amount of material left laying around as ‘trouvailles’ is all paid for in the original costs.”

The two partners appear to have a new consulting contract in their pockets when Young Bob dashes their hopes. “Well that takes care of the material, but what about labor? Who’s laying the trouvailles?”

The smile on Finnegan’s face, a smile caused by counting pre-hatched chickens, leaves faster than a Snow Bird when the first snowflake hits his windshield in December. Pantorelli goes ashen at the suggestion of physical work. For years now, he has suffered bad back pains at the mere mention of work and the only known cure is a case of beer and the opening of the trout season. In a flash, faster than a Town employee heading for the yard at four o’clock, the two partners leave their client to his trouvailles-planning and go in search of some anesthetic, in short anything drinkable to put them out of their misery.

It is gathering dusk as Finnegan leaves the Bald Barber’s premises with Pantorelli and they head for the vacant lots that are still the subject of a complicated bankruptcy. Nobody knows why dusk gathers in Lostwithiel. In most towns dusk falls, but in Lostwithiel it gathers. It must all be part of the Marazion County dialect. After all, in Lostwithiel we are a distinct society, and we take great pains to keep ourselves distinct from the Big City People who come here to live. They will never be accepted because they are not Lostwithiel people like those born here with their roots embedded deep in the boggy Marazion Lakes. Many people in America have feet, but Lostwithiel people have roots.

It is a clear night as the two cross the vacant lots towards the old railway bridge. The moon is just rising and shines down on them, reflecting from the black waters of the sewage lagoon. Only an expert can tell where the sewage lagoon ends and the Marazion Bog begins. It’s about as mystic as where the left of the Republican Party commits incest with the right of the Democrats, and that has a lot of mystique about it. (There is no question of visiting the political

gray area concerning the gaps between the Christian Democrats in Europe and the Green Party. Only a clairvoyant could understand that).

The land around the sewage lagoon is safe from any inquisitive and prying cop, especially if there is a secret bottle of home brew of the previous week's distillation stashed away for emergencies. Tonight is just such an emergency because they are both short of funds; in fact a total lack of funds is experienced at this time.

"I just wonder about this Post Office," Pantorelli says, as he uncorks the home brew and takes an exploratory gulp. His voice is coarsened by the fiery liquor. "The compensation check seems to come later each month."

We must feel sorry for Pantorelli. Ever since the accident at the sawmill Pantorelli has a back. He never works again since the accident, the mill management people promised him that much, and we see this kindness has its roots in a sensible business policy because he was transferred to the compensation plan together with his back. He passes the bottle to Finnegan who takes his first blast of the hard stuff that day partner. "Could you touch Ev for a temporary loan?" Pantorelli asks Finnegan. "It would only be a sort of bridging loan." Evelyn is Pantorelli's wife and she works as a bedroom maid at the Star and Amulet Motel. Ev has been the principle source of bridge financing to Finnegan and Pantorelli Contracting for many years.

Pantorelli sighs, the sort of sigh that is full of negative vibes. "The trouble with bridging loans from Ev is that she expects them to be repaid. We're in the hole for two prior pieces of bridge financing as it is."

Finnegan is nonplussed; a mathematical term often associated with loan arrangements or points spread on a college football game. Not only is he shocked that Pantorelli has not repaid Ev, Finnegan is more deeply shocked that Ev expects repayment. Finnegan is not married, well, not currently. And he firmly believes that Ev should regard loans as convertible to an equity

investment in the future. One should realize that Finnegan and Pantorelli Contractors is a solid enough enterprise in the eyes of its founders.

“The last time I ask for money she calls me a bum,” Pantorelli reflects, sadly. “She also calls you a bum. I do not remember when our stock is as low as this.”

They think about this stock deficit position and pass the bottle back and forth. Pretty soon they have a new problem because the bottle goes past the halfway mark, from optimism to pessimism. The Marazion home brew is strong, stronger than store bought stuff and they get it from an old and respected source out in Wit’s End Township, where it is marketed under the label of Panther Piss. Wit’s End is a place where the State Police cannot go because it is four-fifths swamp and one-fifth home brew. The only way the cops could get there would be in an airboat, and you hear those things from miles away because airboats sound like road graders with flatulence.

“What we need is one enormous, once-and-for-all kick at the feline, a master stroke that would keep us in luxury for the rest of our days and a bit left over.” Finnegan sits back, the warmth of the Marazion Panther Piss spreading expansively throughout his body, and by capillary action to his extremities, like his ear lobes and toenails.

“Nobody believes me when I say that there are supernatural beings around here. I see them with my own eyes; lights flashing and moans and groans at night even in the middle of Ev’s peat bog.” Pantorelli is obsessed with the supernatural, especially where Ev’s peat bog is concerned. Ev inherited this bog from her father, Old Man O’Grady, who hand-harvested peat on a cash-and-carry basis. He hauled the peat around on a donkey cart, selling from door to door. Sometimes the donkey did the hauling and the selling because the old man had bought a bottle of Panther Piss early in the day and became too lyrical for hard business. So it is fortunate that the

O'Grady family had an eye for an intelligent donkey when they chose this one because they did not have much of an eye for anything else, especially the time when Ev first eyed Pantorelli.

Panther Piss does funny things to the perception. It is close in its pharmacology to the many Celtic spirits of the Atlantic coast, notably the screech or swish of Newfoundland, often referred to as Irish chloroform. To Pantorelli this perception means the supernatural, and every time he has a sighting the Town Police make him their guest for the night.

Finnegan claims to be different. "I can take Panther Piss without ill effects. I won't say that I don't have certain experiences of psychic phenomena, but it's genuine, not to be attributed to home-brewed liquor." Pantorelli looks at him without enthusiasm. "It's no use us finding anything supernatural. Nobody believes us and that's only because we holler miracle too many times before. What we need is an outside expert, someone who can lead these jarheads for us into the right path, someone whose credibility is not stretched further than a bungee cord with elastic fatigue."

"You mean a mugwump, a patsy, someone to spin a convincing, scientific yarn." Pantorelli is thinking hard and takes another belt at the Panther Piss for inspiration. "You mean an out-of-town consultant, don't you?"

Finnegan nods. "We have to make sure the mugwump, patsy or consultant makes his discovery of the century in a place which will accrue much benefit to us." Finnegan has suddenly become eloquent, one of the many benefits of Panther Piss, and he strikes a pose like a lanky Napoleon. "It's no use giving this away, people will just not understand. If we are going to bring money into the region we'll have to make sure the laundering of the funds will occur in our pockets for both the wash and rinse cycles, to say nothing of a little siphon process of skimming our commission off the top."

“What about the peat bog?” Pantorelli asks, after another swallow of Panther Piss. “It’s close enough to town and nobody knows it’s Ev’s because nobody is working it these past fifteen years, not since Old Man O’Grady croaks and turns his prehensile toes up towards the Great Celestial Senate.”

It looks like our dynamic duo has the beginning of a good idea. Ev’s peat bog is still there and nobody has thought of moving it. In fact nobody has thought of working it since Ev’s old man received the last rites from Father Ignatius. And nobody has drained it in fifteen years, so if the township needs it for a baseball diamond, then the Lostwithiel Brew Jays will have to play in hip waders.

“Why the hell would anyone want to work a peat bog?” Pantorelli asks. “Hand-harvesting peat makes my back ache. Just the thought of it makes my back ache. That’s stoop work and it’s liable to complicate my future entitlements with the Workers’ Contemplation Board. Stoop work is for damp dorsals!

“You know, this is serious stuff,” he goes on. “We can’t put a business plan together sitting out here on a couple of concrete slabs. Serious stuff needs some serious investment and Ev’s gone to Bingo tonight. We’ll go to find the Lender of Last Resort. When all else fails, Crowe is the only resort.”

Finnegan knows that Pantorelli is in deadly earnest when he mentions Crowe. The name is synonymous with usury in Lostwithiel and strikes at the hearts of many and causes them to shiver in their boots, but desperate men know desperate measures. Finnegan finishes the last dram of Panther Piss and Pantorelli tosses the bottle like a Celtic caber into the Stygian depths of the sewage lagoon.

They take off and head for the Krankenschist Arms where Crowe holds his royal court.

I'm sitting in the police cruiser, the unmarked one, the inconspicuous one that the Chief uses every Thursday afternoon when he is visiting Ms. Lovey (Sweetass) Lasalle for his therapy. The Chief isn't knowing that Ms. Lovey Lasalle's other name is the Civil Whore, or that the inconspicuous, unmarked cruiser is sticking out like a charleyhorse on an exotic dancer's keyster. So, everyone knows where the Chief is going for his therapy each Thursday afternoon and they say, "Aha, that's the unmarked, inconspicuous police cruiser," and that furthermore the therapy always starts with a little spot of lap dancing.

I ask myself why I am sitting here, the only sergeant on the Lostwithiel Police Force, at midnight, watching the only surf and turf joint in town. 'Conducting a steak-out?' you are asking. You need a little Marazion humor at midnight, when you are bored right up to your anterior dentures and you hope no law abiding citizen recognizes the unmarked car, and comes over to say a polite, 'Hi,' blowing your cover and all the hours of sitting still.

I am on the Lostwithiel Force for nearly twenty-five years and I am up for retirement soon. When I take the oath back when the Dead Sea is still alive, 'I, William Carstairs Muldoon, do solemnly swear...', I never believe I am staying in Lostwithiel all this time. So I know all the local characters and chance artists, and I am seeing Chiefs come and go, and they are all taking their unmarked cruisers over to Ms. Lovey Lasalle's place for therapy every Thursday afternoon.

The plainclothes man, half of our detective force, calls on the radio from his plainclothes car. "Sarge. Nothing is doing. The place is dead and I am thinking we are flagellating an equine cadaver. This steak-out may be tough, but I am having a tender ass just sitting here."

I grunt into the mike. "Patience. Be virtuous. A bird by the bush is good in the hand." He snorts back, being from the Big City and not used to the Marazion County proverbs, and I wonder if the Chief finds it good to have a bird by the bush at his therapy each Thursday

afternoon. “We give it another hour because they may be stopping for a little therapy themselves. We wait this long that a little longer is not mattering.”

Just then, the Reverend Fodder’s Blazer swings into Queen Street and roars down to the surf and turf joint. Fodder is a chaplain in the army, back when MacArthur makes his comeback and dips his pants and second-best shoes in the Pacific, so we call him Canon Fodder but his real handle is Cecil. He spots my unmarked cruiser and burns rubber, braking hard where I am parked. He is slap-bang across me and completely blows all our waiting. There is no way out. I am blocked in, and six months of patience, trying to bust the surf and turf operator on a drug deal, is lost.

The car stops with a jerk and the jerk jumps out. He rushes up, leaving the doors wide open, all flustered, panicky and breathless. It has to be the Second Coming, nothing less is so important, not even the Second Coming of MacArthur.

“You’re out late, Cecil,” I say, trying to bring some calm to the scene.

He is unable to answer. He leaves his motor running, so I get out of the cruiser, shut the thing off, and pocket his keys. Even loose canons need a little police protection on occasion, if only from themselves. I see that he is close to a cardiac arrest, a type of arrest I never make. I sit Canon Fodder in the cruiser and tell the other half of the detective force on the steak-out to go home.

“I am a code sixty-nine here and we are losing the whole operation for religious reasons.” He grunts a ten-four acknowledgement.

By this time Cecil is breathing a little easier, but he is still pale, the sort of pale you see on his ‘dust to dust’ clients before they screw the casket lid down and sing about eternity.

“I see the light, Sergeant Muldoon,” he says. “The light, the light.”

I am thinking the Canon is seeing a little too much of the light rum, but I am not smelling anything except a faint odor of peppermint, and I am not giving a breathalyzer for peppermint. I pull in the local radio station for a little Runcible County and Western, hoping it calms his nerves.

Finally he gives a big sigh and says like this. "I am out in Wit's End Township to see the Widow McCarthy's mother. She is also a widow these past thirty years." The young Widow McCarthy is married to Hereward McCarthy until he disappears without a trace. There are theories about this disappearance, not the least of which concerns a 'crime passionel' and Ms. Lovey Lasalle, frequently known as the Civil Whore. This 'disappearance' we are still having in our accident pending files for twenty-five years and linked historically to the Civil Whore. Accident my aspidistra!

"When I am coming to the peat bogs," the good canon twitters on, "you know where I mean?" I nod. "I see these lights and they go up and down, and side to side, and there is this terrible roaring. The bog is being thrashed and the surface water is being splashed all over the side road. I swear it is ten feet tall and all coils with lights. The smell is like the fireworks on the Fourth of July, or when the sewer backs up on River Street, and then it swishes away into the bog and disappears."

I nod. "Probably someone with an airboat or an all terrain vehicle."

"No, no. It is not man-made, but the work of the devil, himself. There is a foul creature in the peat bog, a creature that God did not create, but it is the foulest mystery of them all. You are remembering First Corinthians?"

I am trying to remember, but it is years since I am in church, except in the case of births, deaths and marriages with a little fire and brimstone thrown in for good measure. Corinthians are not being part of my hard drive.

“Behold, I show you a mystery,” the Canon says, presumably quoting Corinthians. “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

I think that hearts are being trumps in this respect, if the Canon is going into a cardiac arrest on me. So I lock his Blazer and drive him home to Mrs. Canon Fodder. All the way home he is raving about the Monster in the Marazion Bog, but when I hand him over to his wife I know he is soon being as right as the merciful quality that falleth as the acid rain from Heaven. For Evangeline Fodder is a kind lady. She is the sort who mothers other people’s children and looks after stray cats. I suppose that’s why she takes up with Cecil in the first place.

We now witness a gathering of four, seated very respectfully in the taproom of the Krankenschist Tavern. The taproom is a very quiet place, especially for those who do not have currency enough to raise a pitcher of beer, and on the evening in question Finnegan and Pantorelli are two such people. Not only are they unable to raise a pitcher of beer, but the proprietor of the taproom, a high class Lostwithiel citizen by the name of Jacques the Ripoff, is about to show them the quality of the sidewalk in front of his bar if they don’t flash a few bucks.

But of course they cannot do that, being at the bottom end of the market. In fact the two are so bottom end that they are flat-dab broke and on their cans. And they are not getting any dibs in the pitcher from the other side of the quartet, consisting of Crowe, the Lender of Last Resort, and J-C Lesage, a person of some mystery, much known to Sergeant Muldoon of the Lostwithiel Gendarmes. In fact J-C Lesage is so well known to Sergeant Muldoon as to be almost family. One time Muldoon says to J-C as he is being helped into the Nick by a Town

Gendarme, “Jesus Christ, not you again.” So I know they are on a first name basis, and Sergeant Muldoon is in a state of grace as defined by Father Ignatius.

J-C Lesage works for Crowe, the Lender of Last Resort. Crowe is never called anything but Crowe. Nobody knows if Crowe has another name. The chances are that he has one, but it is lost during the recent sub-prime mortgage upheaval of the financial world. J-C is what you might term the Eyes and Ears for Crowe and he is in charge of certain items of communication which concern the transference of funds from one game of chance to another, or between tracks of his choice. Because Crowe, apart from being the Last Resort in Lostwithiel, is also a prominent citizen when it comes to the profession of turf accountancy. Crowe is the best odds-maker that man or beast ever meets. In addition to the racing odds he gives a very civilized points spread on the N.F.L., the N.H.L. and the N.A.A.C.P.

“You guys want money for what?” Crowe asks, about as friendly-like as a snowplow in heat. “You gotta be outa your tiny little bird-brain minds. What kinda collateral you got?”

Finnegan explains that they need a few items of scratch to bridge the time gap until Pantorelli’s compensation check comes in. And for collateral they can sling in Ev’s peat bog, which is only two feet under water, but can be pumped out as easy as separating Crowe from a few of his spondoolaks.

And then Pantorelli tells Crowe about the very strange goings-on at the peat bog and about the supernatural sightings and other psychic phenomena all just right for exploitation by unorthodox sources of investment.

“You two re-treads oughta leave that home brew alone. The only reason you see little green men, and experience psychic phenomena is ‘cos your goddamn brains are scrambled inside your tiny, pointed craniums.” He pours them a glass each from the fresh pitcher that Jacques the

Ripoff brings over. "Drink up and get the hell outa here." Crowe is nothing if not polite to his clients.

All the time, J-C Lesage is nodding his cranium and agreeing with his boss, which is what a subordinate is supposed to do. Suddenly, the door to the taproom is flung open and in comes King Kwong, the proprietor and short order cook at Kwong's Truck Stop and Deli, up on the highway.

Kwong's is a twenty-four hour a day, seven days a week, dollar a plate joint, which deals exclusively in the three Cs of life; caffeine, cholesterol and carbohydrate. It is such a place where you take your wife when you have enough spare change, or somebody else's wife when you are flat dab broke.

Of course, Kwong's is strictly on the up and up, and is considered the best diner in town. In fact it's the only diner in town. Furthermore, when Finnegan and Pantorelli are out of spondoolaks they personally make sure they give King Kwong their custom for coffee and sinkers, which is all that King Kwong will spring for if citizens have no spondoolaks. But the King is considered by one and all to be a big man when you have no spondoolaks, even though he only stands four feet eleven, soaking wet. Four feet eleven is considered the perfect height for a short order cook or any jockey daft enough to fly an F-18.

So, when King Kwong comes short ordering through the taproom door of the Krankenschist, the congregation see that something is up, something is afoot, something is happening. King Kwong slides onto a banquette with our group of four and raises his hand to Jacques the Ripoff for another pitcher, which everybody feels, one and all, is a decent sporting gesture under the circumstances.

The taproom is as quiet as the White House back in the days when Monika Lewinsky runs happy hour. There are many other citizens who stay home because there is a current famine

of moolah right now, it being a pre-pogey period, which leaves the taproom a peaceful and tranquil place. So Jacques the Ripoff brings the fresh pitcher over and also brings his own drink with him, and settles down as if the place can run itself, saying like this: “Hello, King Kwong. What brings you into my taproom?” which is the sort of question that no ordinary citizen will ask in case he is told to mind it, and end up on the painful end of a set of knuckle joints. But Jacques the Ripoff is reckoned to be privileged, being the owner of the taproom, and therefore free to ask such things without fear of retribution. This is known by one and all to be a basic clause in the Marquis of Queensbury Rules.

“I am just talking to a hauler of fine merchandise.” King Kwong means a truck driver with a load of cattle. “And he is telling me about coming south through Wit’s End Township. He is saying that the Martians land out there in the bogs. There are flashing lights and things going bumpity-bump-bump, and his load of cattle is all covered in bullshit.”

King Kwong is overcome and has to be revived with a glass of beer from his own pitcher, which is already down to the dregs because the King talks a lot while the rest drink his beer and listen.

Things must be near to crisis point, the sort of crisis the world hears about at Pearl Harbor or when Joe Louis knocks out Max Schmelling, because suddenly Jacques the Ripoff takes the empty pitcher and fills it at his own expense. Nobody has ever seen him do this before, so it is Guinness Book of Records stuff and goes into the history books along with the Sox throwing the World Series and dreams of the Lostwithiel Rinky Dinks becoming Stanley Cup Champions.

“Oh what a tangled web we weave,” Pantorelli whispers to Finnegan through a mouthful of beer. “All we have to do is sit back and watch Ev’s peat bog become the Cape Carnivorous of the Monster World.”

Finnegan tells him to hush down because he will only split the peas under the ether. They leave the taproom and Pantorelli gives a beery belch outside. It echoes down Queen Street like morning flatulence after New Year's Eve and startles Sergeant Muldoon who is helping poor old Cecil Fodder, the Convicted Vicar, into the unmarked Town cruiser.

“Hush down, you two. Lostwithiel sleeps.” They do not wish any trouble from the old Sarge because he has their number, lock, stock and firing pin. In fact, they know that if they don't remove themselves from the long-armed scrutiny of the law within a brief time period, there is every expectation of emerging from the ether in a police cell.

They head for Pantorelli's place in the hope that Ev has put up a fresh crock of beans.

Who would believe, on this particular night, that a tiny place like Lostwithiel, USA, at this very moment, is about to become the center of worldwide controversy, particularly among the international scientific community? For while Lostwithiel sleeps, the news of the lights and the coils and the roaring out in the peat bog is being tooted from the grass roots until it falls onto the ears of a stringer for a Big City newspaper. The stringer is just leaving Ms. Lovey Lasalle's comfortable little therapy parlor when the word tinkles into his shell-like oracular organ. At first he thinks it's his blood pressure playing up, Ms. Lovey Lasalle's place being what it is, and then he figures it might be a drop of acid rain come down from Sudbury all the way up there in northern Canada. Finally, his newspaper instinct tells him what it really is. It's a news story. He goes into the taproom of the Krankenschist Tavern for research purposes. Within five minutes he is an expert. Within six minutes he is on his laptop filing his story with the Big City paper. The story is nothing like the one they told him in the taproom, but that is not important. After all, this is a news story and has to be massaged into a sensational form for publication!

His copy comes up on the night editor's monitor. The night editor has a problem with white space on page one because on this particular night peace has broken out, the worst condition for a night editor. There are no disasters this night, no brushfire wars, no juicy gang slayings, no rock star sex scandals, no Royal revelations, no suicide bombings, no government policy leaks. In short, there is nothing of the night editor's stock-in-trade coming in over the wires that go to make up what is hilariously called a newspaper, the sort of copy that exists purely to keep the advertising apart. All our night editor needs is filler, a few column inches, when the Lostwithiel piece pops up silently on his screen. Perfect. The stringer from Marazion County makes the big time, he now has a by-line in the Big City, and when the paper hits the street, there it is: 'Strange sightings in the Marazion Lakes. Prehistoric monster of the ancient inland seas reported from Marazion County. Lostwithiel Louise frightens local people.'

During the night, United Press picks up the story. Associated Press follows suit and then Reuters gets hold of it. The stringer is offered a permanent job with a new car and an expense account, and his story goes over the wire to every subscriber around the globe and to every fourth grade kid on the Internet. Before dawn, there are television crews on the road from the Big City. They figure to get to Lostwithiel before any foreign TV channels wake up.

Meanwhile Lostwithiel sleeps, and Finnegan and Pantorelli finish off the whole crock of Ev's beans.

Chapter Three

Wit's End

Finnegan shivers violently in the morning air like an aspen in a midsummer breeze because he has just spent the night round at Pantorelli's place, and Ev made him sleep out on the front porch after telling him that he is a bum.

It is early, too early for Finnegan, but he suddenly realizes what woke him at this unholy hour. He has just experienced his first flying saucer sighting. It is not such a sighting as you see on *Unsolved Mysteries*, but, nevertheless, it is a good sighting. The flying saucer is followed by two of Ev's second-best dinner plates – the ones that came from the Baptist Church sale – closely encountered by a cereal bowl. The bowl has Special K and milk, although the milk is doing a little migration type of flying of its own after the close encounter with the plates.

There is a crash when the screen door is flung back, closely pursued by Pantorelli as the house mop comes through the opening faster than an Olympic javelin. The mop takes Pantorelli squarely in the back of the neck and Ev screams at him like this: "You bum. You and that bum, Finnegan. You're both bums. You eat that whole crock of beans I slave and slather over. Get the hell out and get a job. I can't keep the two of us on what I make as a darned housemaid. Just get out and find some work; anything that brings in money without that bum Finnegan getting involved."

Naturally, Finnegan and Pantorelli are quite vexed at hearing Ev call them bad names, but they understand that women can become a little testy due to their hormones, so naturally they make allowances for that fact. Pantorelli picks himself up from the mud in front of the stoop and brushes himself off. You can tell he is embarrassed at Ev's breach of manners because he even forgets to return the broken crockery to her.

“Hell hath no fury,” he says briefly, badly misquoting the bard of bards. “There is nothing for it. We have to work because the coffers are empty and Ev will not make a small investment, even in such a blue chip stock as Finnegan and Pantorelli.”

They zip their jackets and walk away from the house, hands in pockets. The morning is fresh and chilly, even though the sun is up and fast rising to the elevation of the yardarm, or would be if you could see through the thick fog covering Lostwithiel and the Townships. Everyone knows that when the sun goes over the yardarm it is time to open the tavern or review the situation in the fridge and for that reason many Lostwithiel citizens have installed adjustable yardarms outside their houses. In some jurisdictions the yard has been replaced by the meter, but in the United States we still use yards. Whoever heard of a meter-arm?

But this morning they need an eye opener and something to lay the home brew and beer of the night before. It has to be the Final Solution; King Kwong’s truck stop for coffee and sinkers. It takes them ten minutes to walk as far as King Kwong’s place up on the highway. They go along the old railroad bed because no railroad has run through Lostwithiel these past five years due to the nature of being restructured. The government in Washington tells everyone that it is good to be restructured even though it means coffee and sinkers instead of pancakes and maple syrup. Naturally, all Lostwithiel citizens are patriotic Americans and fully respect the government’s judgment in these matters.

They push themselves into the truck stop, eager to keep a low profile due to their economic circumstances. There are certain citizens at the counter to whom they owe several debts of gratitude and these, of course, they ignore because they lack the financial strength to be magnanimous and offer them a coffee. Naturally, these citizens realize their circumstances because news travels fast in Lostwithiel, particularly over flying saucer sightings, and so they

know that Ev's uncharitable acts have preceded them to Kwong's, and there is a general air of sympathy from those citizens who are taking breakfast.

Lola the Lips pushes two coffees across the counter with two sinkers on napkins. The coffee is just like Lola the Lips, hot, strong and sweet. Finnegan and Pantorelli like Lola. She is kind and generous, and has the top two buttons of her blouse unfastened because waitressing is hot stuff in King Kwong's little truck stop, and the place is not air conditioned. Some citizens feel that the top buttons of Lola's blouse are never fastened and that the scenery behind the buttons is a drawing card that Kwong settles from his advertising budget. Notwithstanding the general feeling about this costume maladjustment, the effect is such as you imagine the figurehead of the Queen Mary Two would be like, if the Queen Mary Two had a figurehead.

The coffee and sinkers go down faster than great expectations on an octogenarian's honeymoon. While Kwong computes a customer's check on his electronic abacus, Lola the Lips fills their coffee mugs again. She is a soft touch, this Lola, and Finnegan gets to thinking that a man could be comfortable with her, but not such a man as him, naturally, because he has already tried married life, and for him it was full of odor not ardor.

King Kwong goes over to the largest table, the one usually reserved for the haulage industry. There are ten truckers at this table enjoying the Three Cs of Life. And they are not the sort of citizens who are likely to take advice from any dietitian writing in the New England Journal of Medicine. The epicenter of this group is the cattle hauler who King Kwong says had a strange sighting out in Wit's End Township the night before, and is none other than Eighteen-Wheel Ernie Gismondi. 'Wheels' is a big man in all senses of the word. His work boots are size twelve, while his pants are forty-eight round the waist on the avoirdupois scale and are held in place by a leather belt like the transmission off a combine harvester. He is also in the ways of being a distant cousin to Pantorelli. Sometimes that distance could be construed as a certain

aloofness, but this is generally assumed to be a preoccupation with his business. Wheels is holding forth to the other truckers at the table and everyone else in earshot. In Marazion County an earshot is generally calculated as three townships in range. He goes about two-ninety, dry weight and is waving a large crust of Kwong's home made bread at his audience. The crust is soaked in an amalgam of egg yolk, bacon fat and bean juice, from a side order of Kwong's beans and molasses. Furthermore, it is such a crust as would be breakfast for Pantorelli or Finnegan for a whole week.

King Kwong is going the rounds with the coffeepot and in the confusion he tops up Finnegan and Pantorelli's mugs before he realizes his mistake and he scowls at them. He is about to tell them to hit the road when Wheels ups and speaks like this. "I never see anything like it before." He stops to take a bite from the grease-soaked bread crust, which creates a pause for dramatic effect as he waves it at his audience like he's conducting the New York Symphony. He then continues to speak with his mouth full, which is considered quite couth behavior at King Kwong's, the quality and importance of the oration being the major concern. "I never see such lights moving so fast and crossing each other. And the noise is like D-Day. There is roaring and screaming and moaning way out in them peat bogs. The lights, they are blue and white, and you can see they are like eyes trying to see through the mist. You know how Wit's End is always fog and mist?" The audience nods in unison like they're bobble-heads on a dashboard. Nobody ever disagrees with the speaker at Kwong's, no matter who it is. Such a course of action would have no couth whatsoever and any citizen going against that code of ethics would be ostracized, an unusual penalty because ostriches are not indigenous to Runcible County.

"Well," Wheels goes on, "there is something fishy in Wit's End and I don't like it. If I am not so busy I would investigate it myself, but I have these cattle for the Big City....." He leaves the sentence unfinished and they all know what he means because they understand business

pressures, but not lately, though – not since the recession. Suddenly Wheels spots Pantorelli. “Pantorelli,” Wheels roars, pushing his breakfast plate back and calling for an order of toast and marmalade, Keiller’s Scotch Marmalade, the sort that Kwong keeps for important people like Wheels Gismondi. “Pantorelli, my little cousin.” Everyone in Kwong’s thinks there is an edge of either sarcasm or bitterness in his voice, and they see Pantorelli go ashen, then white. It is common knowledge that Pantorelli is under an obligation to Wheels, chiefly an obligation concerning some steaks and stew beef while they were still on the hoof. And it is still such an obligation as to be also of some interest to Sergeant Muldoon of the Lostwithiel Coppers and several other gendarmes of the State persuasion, who have elephantine memories.

But if Wheels remembers the beef obligato he says nothing and it is acknowledged by one and all that Wheels is nothing but a gentleman in such circumstances. Instead he has their coffee mugs filled again and asks them to sit down. Naturally, King Kwong sits down as well because he still has hold of the coffeepot and if Wheels is going to make any further plans, especially in his truck stop, then he, Kwong, will need to be a party thereto. Wheels beckons Lola over to the table and turns to Finnegan and Pantorelli, saying as follows. “Have you guys had breakfast?” Now, straight away they both perceive that their fortunes could change because they are suddenly elevated from the rank of 'bums' to that of 'guys,' a vertical move of several links in the chain of society only accorded to those who have just landed themselves a job. Naturally, they are more socially acceptable to King Kwong and he adopts what passes for a smile, but maybe it is only due to a little gas in his guts generated by the three Cs of life.

Lola smiles too, as she stands there with her order book and she nudges Finnegan’s shoulder gently with her hips. Finnegan endures such a nudge, even though it is his bad shoulder, the one he damaged unloading a freight car, before unloading freight cars comes under the Compensation. Of course even if he tried out for the Compensation it could prove a little tricky

because the owner of the freight car preferred to keep his property where it was. And now it has become one of those Unsolved Mysteries when his property kept turning up in places like Chicago or Detroit or maybe even Timbuktu at unbeatable prices.

“What are you having, boys?” Lola asks, as she caresses Finnegan with her hips again, making his sore shoulder feel warm and vibrant. “You want the breakfast special? It’s bacon, ham or farmer sausage, two eggs, home fries, toast and jam with coffee for three ninety-nine.”

Wheels makes a gesture to Lola which means it’s on his tab, all taxes included, but Lola is way ahead of him because she doesn’t need a Dun and Bradstreet report to know that Finnegan and Pantorelli are bent, folded, perforated and broke. Finnegan orders a crock of beans with pork and molasses, and homemade bread on the side. Finnegan is on a health kick and wishes to avoid cholesterol. Pantorelli says he’ll have a large poutine, which, for those who don’t live in the elevated cuisine of truck stops, is a plate of fries, covered with brown meat gravy, topped by melted cheese. After sober second thought, Finnegan asks for a ladle of meat gravy on top of his pork and beans.

“You can’t work on an empty stomach,” Wheels tells them both. They feel a little queezy at the mention of work and hope that Wheels only uses that term as a figure of speech. “You know these peat bogs better than most people, ain’t that a fact?” Wheels asks. They both nod as non-committal as possible, a sort of middle-of-the-road kind of nod, because they don’t want to get into another obligation, but can’t bear the thought of having their short orders of beans and poutine canceled on them.

“Ev still owns a small piece of the bog in Wit’s End,” Pantorelli volunteers, reminding Finnegan of when they last worked the bog, hand harvesting peat, stoop work worse than what the Israelites did in Ancient Egypt. Of course, this was all before the Dead Sea reported sick and the federal debt sounded like the population of China. “Of course, it’s under water,” Pantorelli

explains, rather unnecessarily. “Most of Wit’s End is soaked. It wouldn’t be called Wit’s End if it wasn’t.”

Wheels and Kwong laugh politely. Everybody can see that both are couth men. The breakfasts are banged down on the table in front of the two hungry partners and Pantorelli says a quick grace before forking the first consignment of poutine into his mouth.

Finnegan is on his third spoonful of beans when the Kid with the Big City Newspaper comes into Kwong’s. He explains that everything is late that morning due to the fog and nothing moves north of the Equator (meaning the highway). They all nod to him without comment because fog north of the Equator is nothing new. In fact if it is ever a clear day with no fog, they would remark on it.

“We make the headlines,” the Kid says, and everybody is uncertain whether he means Antarctica making the headlines, or the Phoenix Coyotes on a losing streak, or the Jays buying more Puerto Ricans, or the Craptors selling out to a rich businessman in Taiwan. The chances are it won’t be Lostwithiel in the headlines because nobody in the Big City knows where Lostwithiel is or even what street it’s on.

“Really,” he continues. “We make the headlines.” And everyone with six bits buys a copy while Lola reads from the front page. “ ‘Lostwithiel Louise,’ a strange prehistoric monster of the ancient seas is seen in Runcible County. Lostwithiel is the County Town of Runcible and is the administrative center of the Marazion Lakes.’ Well, any asshole knows that.” Lola says. “I suppose the Big City is having more assholes than us.”

They all crowd round and read from the papers, everyone conflicting with each other. Nobody can remember anything newsworthy about Lostwithiel before; well, not since the Krankenschist days, anyway. Everyone talks at once, except for Finnegan and Pantorelli because

they are still going at the beans and the homemade bread, not to forget the poutine and meat gravy.

Kwong is quicker than most. He is what you might call 'quick on the uptake'. Within seconds he is talking to Eighteen-Wheel Ernie Gismondi as if he's a Dutch uncle, which would be strange because Kwong is Chinese and moreover, Gismondi is Eytallian. More to the point, Pantorelli and Finnegan can see they are being inexorably drawn into this new strategic alliance.

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave," Pantorelli misquotes, for the second time in twenty-four hours. "Methinks I perceive a local, home plate patsy." He says all this between mouthfuls of poutine, which is perfectly understandable because Finnegan is listening intently between spoonfuls of beans.

They are just wiping their plates clean with the last of the bread as if the First Lady had thrown them both a posh nosh-up in the White House, when Wheels speaks up like this. "Supposing you two guys have a little day work, but not such work that would exacerbate your physical condition or endanger any social assistance that you are currently enjoying." They nod agreement because looking like work is only one thing and is normally acceptable. Actually performing work is contra to their business policies.

"You go to see Crowe," Kwong tells them. "I have his marker, more than one marker, and you get hand tools and waders, and the loan of the pick-up truck." They nod again, not knowing that Crowe is obligated to Kwong for several markers of a sporting nature.

"You poke around Wit's End," Wheels tells them. "You look like you know nothing and yet you spin a good yarn to the news jackals when they get here. Lose a few of them in the swamp, then find them again. You'll be on television and you'll be heroes." He peels off two twenties and a ten from a wad of currency thicker than a Gideon Bible and shoves the money

across the table at them. “Just a little folding stuff on account,” he says, and Kwong promptly matches the fifty from his chained-up purse.

From the Slough of Despond, Finnegan and Pantorelli now have breakfast and a hundred bucks-worth of folding money. They take off to see Crowe from a position of strength representing their newborn enterprise of Finnegan and Pantorelli, Peat Brokers. They have their faith in private enterprise re-affirmed.

“Once more into the breach, dear friend,” Pantorelli says. Finnegan doesn’t have the heart to say he misquotes Shakespeare yet again, in case it might be taken as a breach of friendship.

At this very moment (what many of the unlettered refer to as, “At this point in time,” and promptly send Strunk and White up the proverbial Great Wall of Sino-America), at this time, a small car is heading north, away from the highway, towards the Town of Lostwithiel, self-styled as the trapdoor to the Marazion Lakes. Strangely, this car has a driver who happens to be from Lostwithiel, which accounts for the way she speaks. She is one of those who had the sense to leave town ten years before and go to the Big City. She never speaks in the Marazion dialect to anyone in the Big City in case they think she is nuts. Being nuts in the Big City is synonymous with being from Rube Town.

This newcomer to our story works for the Big City Newspaper. Her by-line is Maureen Muldoon and she has worked from time to time for more than one paper. Newspapers being what they are, sometimes she has her own column and at other times she is classified as a bum or freelancer, which is lower than a bum, being an unemployed bum. Most times, though, she is a bum, which is a state that most female journalists are in, vis-à-vis male editors. As Maureen Muldoon frequently says, “If God made man in a woman’s image how come She made male editors in the image of a jackass?”

The fog gets thicker as she drives north, but that is nothing to a Runcible County girl. Many a time she is out with a guy in his car and he says they have to stay the night by the lake because the fog is too bad to drive back. Maureen has no trouble with fog, especially when she tells the guy she is Sergeant Muldoon's daughter, and then she drives the guy home to his mommy. When he finds out that Maureen is a cop's daughter he gets an attack of nerves. Maureen can go for a roll in the swamp like any other Lostwithiel girl, and the Big City is one ginormous swamp full of guys on the make.

Maureen thinks she has upstaged all the other reporters from the other papers, not to mention the TV crews, because they do not know the way through the Marazions. Especially when the fog gets thicker than a bowl of cold, Minnesotan pea soup, a dish much favored by cold Minnesotans.

Naturally, Maureen is thrilled to get this assignment back in the old neighborhood. The circumstances are strange and originate from some half-baked story by a stringer who filed like a thief in the night and was picked up by the night editor, a nocturnal species much addicted to strong spirits of the bourbon distillation and prone to wild flights of fancy. By a strange series of events the story hit the syndicates and was wired to everyone around the world with a wire subscription. The story immediately hit the dot-com, dot-org and dot-net world, so by the morning the Big City Newspaper had a lot of people asking like this. "Where the fuck is Lostwithiel, USA? what is Runcible County when it's at home, and why do the Marazion Lakes have a trapdoor?" When you sum it all up these are pretty reasonable questions to anyone who has never heard of Lostwithiel, USA. or somewhere like Wagga-Wagga, Australia, or Timbuktu – wherever that is! And furthermore, what kind of boon dock bayou has trapdoors in its lakes?

Maureen drives further into Wit's End Township, a little slower now because the fog thickens worse than she ever remembers when she is out with some guy who wants to stay all

night by a lake. She loses the road a couple of times, but makes it back onto the gravel, until she realizes that the road has run out of gravel and she's driving on sand. Suddenly, it dawns upon her that she's lost and doesn't have the slightest idea where she is. She pulls off the road and sees that she is by a shallow lake; the black water ripples against the tires like a miniature tide.

Maureen kills the motor and listens to the expansions and contractions under the hood, which may account for the stretch marks on the bodywork. There is no movement except for the water rippling and the motor cooling. Stretch marks make no noise. The fog blankets her car like a shroud at a Teamster's wake and she starts to smell foul odors.

The water starts to rush at the tires instead of gently rippling. Maureen sees that something is making waves, pushing the black waters of the shallow lake against her car and covering the sandy track. She sits there behind the wheel with the window rolled down, the waters rushing around the car and across the track. With several roars, two dim, prehistoric forms emerge through the thick fog. They approach the shoreline, their eyes like giant lenses in their heads, rocking and swaying as they thrash the waters of the lake into a frenzied turmoil. She is frozen to the seat and liable to pee at any minute as the two monsters rear up from the water, whistling to each other in the fog. The noise of both creatures is nothing like she has ever heard before except for the noise a male editor made when he had to cough up a little cash in greenback form. The two monsters snort and wheeze, followed by groans and more whistles, and what might be conceivably a prehistoric fart. Maureen remembers when her old man made noises like that in his sleep and it was one reason why she left home.

The creatures spot the car and turn away, disappearing again into the fog as quickly as they came. The waters swamp the track and when Maureen reaches to start the motor, her hands are trembling, but she manages to turn the key. She is glad she is not standing because her legs have just turned to Jell-O and she is hyperventilating, which may cause her to pee at any minute.

The roars and rushing of water penetrate the fog, reaching her in the car as the motor fires and she backs to the gravel road again. It is only then that Maureen remembers the camera lying unused by her on the seat. She has just missed the scoop of the century.

Somehow she makes it away from the lake and the road takes her up a rise overlooking the whole area. Below, all is fog-bound and still the two mysterious creatures are swimming and thrashing about unseen in the fog as they leave the shore and make their way towards the far side of the lake. She does not wait to see any more, but drives, anywhere away from that place, hoping to reach the county road before the creatures come back and drag her into the swamp.

As she drives down the other side of the hill, she sees an ancient pick-up come up the hill towards her car and disappear the way she has just come. She sees two guys inside, just a glimpse. An alarm sounds in her head because she knows these two from somewhere, and the alarm tells her they are poison.

Maureen makes for the police department. Somewhere between the Third Degree, the Fourth Estate and the Fifth Column, she might just find some hook into a story about all this. And instinct tells her that that the two poisonous citizens in the pick-up know much, but are not saying the square root of fuck all, which is a very complicated calculation, indeed.

Another part of this story's web is entangling itself while Maureen nearly pees herself out in the swamp. Finnegan and Pantorelli are driving through Wit's End Township in the old pick-up they have just liberated from Crowe, the Banker of Last Resort. It is clear when they talk with Crowe that King Kwong has a hold over him, which seems to take the form of several outstanding markers held in escrow at the truck stop. Furthermore they are gratified that Crowe is now acting like the Central Bank lending a few more billions to General Motors, because he fawns, licks their work boots in a metaphorical fashion, and brays like a jackass in general. It is

clear to one and all that the stock of Finnegan and Pantorelli has taken a quantum leap on the stock exchange of life. Always provided that they were ever quoted on the exchange and not confined to the unlisted penny shares or be downgraded by Poor's to the status of junk bonds.

So, they are heading into monster country, heeding the thick fog as only two born-in-the-Marazions boys can, when they spot a small, foreign car traveling in the other direction. They see it is a reporter's car because there is a large PRESS ticket in the windshield and this generally means someone is connected to the media, like the Chicago Daily Liar or the Detroit Holy Post. They see that the reporter is a girl with moon glasses and hair that looks like a mourning dove's nest, all tangled and straggly. Furthermore, there is a wild look about her and a wild way about her driving as she tops the rise overlooking Ev's peat bog, on her way to the County Road. Her car looks like something out of the Demolition Derby and straight away they know she is strictly on the bottom rung in the news reporting business.

Pantorelli sighs. One assumes he sighs because he sees a woman, even one who resembles a scarecrow and drives a car looking like an oxidized pail, frequently referred to as a rust bucket in Lostwithiel. But Finnegan feels for him because he was just chucked out by Ev and he takes it hard, especially when he remembers Ev chucking his grips at his head and calling him an uncultured name. "You restructured bum," she yells at him. "You're history; in fact you're pre-history. Go and live in the peat bog and don't darken my threshold again."

"Is this your final word, Ev?" Pantorelli says, sounding very much like Orsino in Twelfth Night, when he's pissed off with Olivia because she gives him the colder shoulder. Finnegan is standing there like Sir Toby Belch, most especially since he is suffering from morning gas after eating the whole crock of Ev's baked beans the night before, followed by a large side order of the same confection at Kwong's Gag and Vomit out on the highway. In fact Finnegan is in such pain from the beans that he has to find somewhere quiet like a church, where he can have a long

chain reaction fart because his lower intestine reaches a state of critical mass, rather like the plastic casing on a salami. In desperation Finnegan releases a muted, localized fart based on the Marazions' capacity for compromise. It is such a fart affording a gentle relief of pressure that one feels after visiting the confessional. "Wheesht," he said to himself in admonishment.

Pantorelli's heart finally broke when Ev threw his fishing pole at his head, closely followed by the tackle box. Any man of the Marazions knows what the flying tackle box means; his one and only files her petition. And this was particularly true of Pantorelli because the fishing pole was his prized possession, a trout rod by Shoff of Kent, Washington, given to him as a wedding present by Ev, herself.

So, Finnegan knows that the very sight of a girl, even one sighted briefly through the windshield of a small foreign rust-bucket, goes like Cupid's arrow straight to Pantorelli's ulcer.

"That's Sergeant Muldoon's daughter," Pantorelli tells Finnegan, between sighs. "She goes to the Big City five years or so back and works as a news scrivener." Finnegan encourages him to speak because it takes his mind off Ev heaving the tackle box at his head. "She must be here for a story, and I think maybe we make one up for her." He breathes deeply and Finnegan sees he is trying manfully to shake the old Slough of Despond from his mood bank.

"What the heck. Wheels and Kwong put us onto this assignment and if we do a job with it we may find the crock of gold at the foot of the rainbow."

"Finnegan's Rainbow," Finnegan reminds him. But there is a large culture gap here, Pantorellis never have been the Sons of the Gael, so to speak, and so Finnegan just humors him.

"Whatever," Pantorelli says, rather evenly, as they pull up at the bottom of the rise where the lake water laps over the road. Finnegan kills the motor, but it diesels on for a few seconds and then finally dies with a dramatic shudder. He turns on the four-way flashers and is surprised to see that they work. The silence is deafening after driving all the way out from Lostwithiel with

a noisy, perforated muffler shot with holes like Gorgonzola. Kwong is not one to spend money on truck maintenance, or license plates, or insurance, but then many citizens in the Marazions have business policies very similar to Kwong's.

They climb out and stretch. In the dead quiet of the bog country Finnegan finally releases such an explosive fart as to rouse any prehistoric monster slumbering in the depths, on the basis that it could be taken for the mating call of the Bronto-sore-ass. Pantorelli complains at such an ungentlemanly act, more especially when Finnegan blames Ev's beans, an unfortunate abuse of hospitality. "You should not pollute the air so," Pantorelli says, all the time taking a long, noisy leak into the lake, a leak that could challenge the Great Falls at Niagara.

"I think I detect a faint odor of decay in the air," Pantorelli states, rather too sarcastically for Finnegan's liking. "In fact there is a certain element of sulfur about the whole atmosphere."

Finnegan sniffs the air delicately and reluctantly agrees. And then with a quick piece of mental deduction he states that sulfur cannot be blamed on beans, even when served in molasses, so there must be some other source of this element fermenting in the bog. They quickly slide into their hip waders. Like the pick-up, these waders have seen better days, and those better days were back when Lot's wife was still in a pre saline condition. These waders also have rust, although they have to admit to one and all that the rust only starts at the gallus clips, streaking the rest of the ensemble with quite fashionable camouflage stripes.

Pantorelli wades into the bog and Finnegan follows. They both know this part of the bog from bitter experience when they used to hand harvest peat, back before Pantorelli developed a Compensation Lower Spine. This was a time when he would do anything for his one-and-only, Ev. And Finnegan had to say that any man who would hand-harvest peat for a woman must be deeply in love, or have eggnog for brains, or maybe both. Because hand-harvesting peat is

strictly for the birds, mostly loons, and has to be such an operation as to be categorized as stoop work.

It is only about twenty yards in with their waders that they come to the sand spit where they have done some of their best bass fishing. Bass fishing and Panther Piss go together and the whole of the Marazion Lakes has to say that many a trophy small mouth has been taken on a live frog soaked overnight in Panther Piss. Sometimes Finnegan and Pantorelli are soaked overnight, but this has never been considered conducive to taking one's limit on small mouth bass. The secret of live frog soaking was passed down from the Lesages and Lasalles of Lostwithiel, their ethnic background making them pioneers of bass fishing.

The sand spit has several jack pines hanging on for dear life and many argue that Paul Bunyan takes all the other jack pines out of the Marazions and chops them into toothpicks, although some citizens feel that this is nothing but fiction. When they waded up to the spit they see that the trees have finally given up the ghost and are now totally reduced to a group of gnarled stumps. They see the stumps are gnawed by what seem to be giant sets of beaver dentures, and Pantorelli turns to Finnegan and shrugs. He finds it difficult to shrug because the waders are completely waterlogged and the weight of water on the suspenders makes his shoulders droop in a depressed fashion.

Beyond the spit is the deep lake, Lake Marazion itself. The sand of the spit is crisscrossed by tracks of the monsters and they see the huge slither marks as they pulled themselves on their bellies from the bog into the big lake. They have only just missed them because the deeper water is still roiled and full of sand. So, they walk to the lake edge and listen intently. The smell of sulfur lies heavily on the fog and Pantorelli chokes when he realizes he might be able to add allergies to his compensation package. Far out in Lake Marazion they hear a deep whistle. It is an eerie whistle, not plaintive like a loon's, but something that makes their flesh crawl. They

shiver, not just from the cold and damp, but from fear of the unknown, and they both wish they had brought the bottle of home brew from the truck.

The deep whistle is answered by another, this time about an octave higher. There is a series of both whistles back and forth and they see lights and fire through the fog. There are rushing noises out in the lake and in seconds waves roll in, swamping the sand spit. They take off, back to the truck and the home brew bottle as fast as their waders will allow them. All is not well in Wit's End Township.