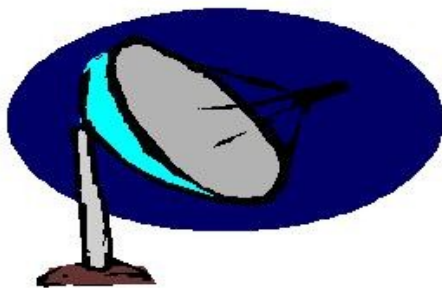
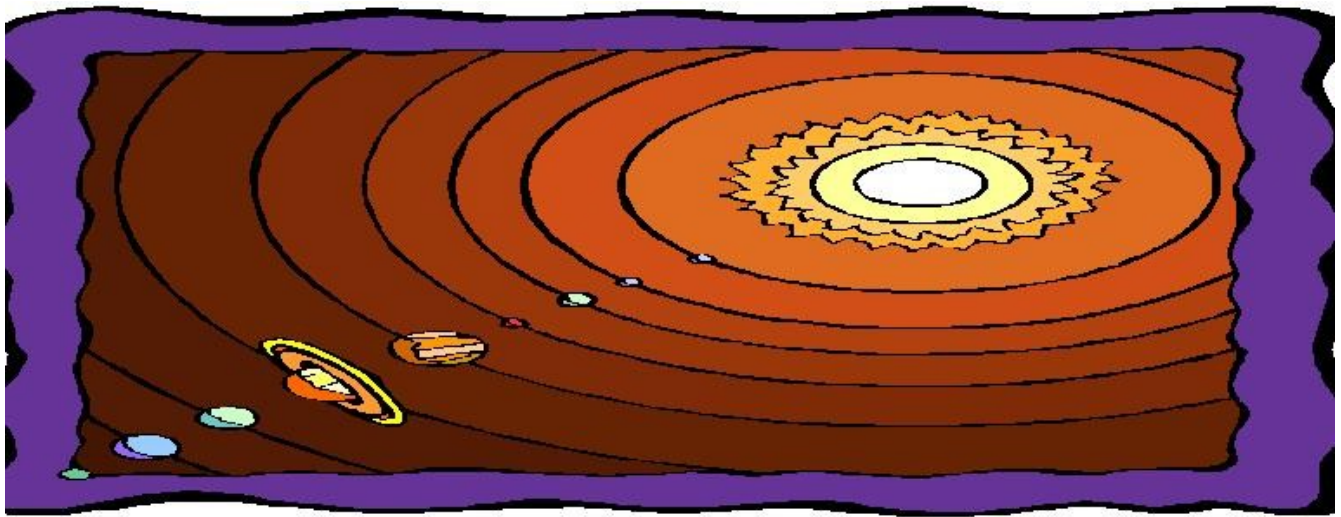


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It Came From Planet TV

By Michael J Renner

Intro

It was all Michael Chapin's fault. If he was just a bit more diligent the universe wouldn't be in the mess it is in right now. Just a better grasp of the little details by him and his staff, if only they knew how to do their jobs, then this universal disaster, unleashing this disease with no cure upon the universe, would have never happened.

Chapter 1

Michael Chapin was the head of programming and satellite control at "The Earth Center Network". This particular evening he was left all alone in the studio. The "Earth Center Network (ECN)" was failing, not just in the conventional sense, but big time. This was the last night that they would broadcast, and they had one more show, finished two months ago, and they were out of business. All Michael had to do was to let the show run, turn off the equipment, lock the shows in the vault in the basement, and then turn off the lights and lock the doors behind him.

ECN was launched two years and \$100 million ago. It couldn't miss, it took cheap programs from first time producers and from third world countries and beamed them out all over the world. They were hip, they were edgy, they were the coolest thing since the ice age. But regrettably the people just didn't seem to care. The biggest demographic, the 16-30 year olds, just didn't care, even though they were the ones producing the content. Guess they really didn't mind older people telling them what to think was the thought. The overseas ratings were even worse as they guessed it must have been banned in most countries because of the fear of "American Propaganda", in the form of commercials getting through and making the populace realize that they could have a better life.

Strange but ratings were great at the beginning, but lately they turned abysmal, basically nothing. But it wasn't really the network's fault. There was one piece of the puzzle they were missing, and they never figured it out.

The last show called "Marlon's Inquest", featured a bumbling detective who hated to work after dark. He would solve his crimes between 9-5 daily. At night he was a dedicated video gamer. It should have been right up the demographics alley, but alas it wasn't so. Now as Marlon Jones was solving his last crime, the network wound its way down. Marlon was confronting his arch enemy, one he pursued all season long and as they both pulled out their guns, Marlon was shot, and went down severely wounded. He raised his gun and about to let out a witty retort, the screens went blank.

Michael inadvertently pulled the plug 10 minutes early. It really didn't matter as no one really was watching, and no one seemed to care. He wrapped up the broadcast tapes and secured them in the vault. Shut down all the equipment, servers, and other computers, shut out the lights, locked the doors, dropped the keys in the drop slot and went off to his new job as a network administrator for an online publisher. His life in TV was over.

The reason no one saw this last program, was that 18 months previously the satellite got out of kilter and instead of beaming the signal across the globe, it redirected the shows into outer space. Of course the local cable system got the low level broadcasts, but the rest of the world saw nothing. They

assumed the station was just out of business. And no one at ECN knew enough about marketing and distribution to check up on these few little details that could have made them "The World's Network", as their motto suggested. But instead they were to go out as just another failed try at mass media, with no viewers.

Or so they thought.

Chapter 2

The planet of Prussia 3 was a very prosperous planet. They got their strength from being industrious and just a bit on the aggressive side when it came to dealing with neighboring planets. They were a scant 10 light years from Earth, but of course the Earthers didn't know life existed here. In fact they probably still thought they were still the only life in the universe. If they had known, however, they would never have been able to reach them as their low technology and small brain capacity didn't allow them to think outside of their own logic. They thought they had all the answers and that was that.

The Prussians carried out a sweep of their section of the galaxy and those they couldn't get to agree to join them, they would attack them with a ferocity that was unparalleled in the history of the sector. Their reputation spread, and soon all the known planets and systems in this section of the galaxy were under their rule.

Those that accepted their rule were rewarded with many freedoms and allowed to prosper. It became known that they were benign rulers and soon all were at peace. A reign of prosperity hit the galaxy and it was a time of renaissance of arts and crafts.

Then disaster struck. It came not as a natural disaster, nor was it a catastrophe from outside. It wasn't a virus or a disease in the common usage of those words. It was something that crept up to them in the form of fun.

A prominent inventor, Galileonius came up with a new visioscope. It was said to have a range of infinity. With it one could reach out even further into the cosmos and listen and watch broadcasts from distant star systems, if they had the intelligence to send out such waves. They people were agog when they saw this invention and soon everyone had to have one. It was then that the populous of Prussia 3 discovered ECN.

At first they wondered what they were watching. The media argued about the morals of peeking in on other cultures. But after a while it was decided that this was just entertainment and everyone settled down to watch this new wonderful discovery.

They watch programs and are amazed at the mini dramas, i.e. commercials, that were interlaced in the programs. They were intelligent enough to realize what Earthers called "reality TV" was not real and definitely scripted. Once they realized that, the leader of Prussia decided that they wanted the planet of origin needed to be in their empire as their entertainment planet. It seems that they liked to have things orderly and each planet had its own major industry (of course other activities would go on, but for the most part each planet in the empire had a specific function). The so-called "SitComs" amused everyone, but they seemed confused why the separate episodes seemed to be disconnected from each other.

The dramas were the favorites. It seemed that the "Law and Order" type of shows appealed to the

disciplined nature of the populous. The most popular of all was "Marlon's Inquest", a detective show that ran for three years and was rumored to be ending soon. It was about a tough ex-cop that helped the downtrodden victims get revenge and justice. Again, this hit at the core beliefs of the Prussinians.

Then the shows just stopped. Right in the middle of the most popular of all the shows. There was a collective outcry. Something must be done, someone must pay, someone must find out what happened to Marlon Jones!

Chapter 3

Emperor Fredicious and his wife Victoriana were just as aghast as the rest of the populous. They counted on this entertainment to fill their new found leisure life. Yes they had their music, their art, but this was much better, as it assaulted all the senses at once, and one could lose themselves in the stories without thinking. Now was time for action!

The Emperor called in his top advisers and they quickly traced the source of the broadcasts and dispatched two of their quickest scout ships to do a recon of this planet. It took their ships about seven days to cover the 300 light years, so they would have to be patient and spend the time mobilizing an attack force and get the ships and troops ready for battle once again.

The plan and objective was clear, show us the rest of the last episode of "Marlon's Inquest", resume broadcasting shows, agree to Prussinians rule or face obliteration. It was clear to the council that this planet would be the "Entertainment Center" of the Empire. Producing these visioscope shows would be their contribution. They seem to be so good at it, and the only skill needed to want to act like an idiot, and it seemed everyone on their planet wanted to be a visioscope star so why not?

The scout ships streamed through the galaxy towards this unsuspecting primitive planet. This was the first time anyone ventured out this far as intelligent life was thought to be unsustainable in this sector. So they were taking their time mapping out the different systems as they passed through them, marking planets found to be able to sustain life for future colonization projects. They also mapped out the uninhabitable ones that contained valuable ores, minerals and other materials needed for industry. They felt like the early explorers they read about in their youth, but ever aware of their main mission.

They arrived on the seventh day and took up their positions around the planet and started analyzing the defense, space capability, weapon types, and other important information that the high command needed. Plus the stealth cloaking technology made them all but invisible to the primitive radar located on the planet and their satellites.

The defense systems were all but non-existent as the beings below thought they were alone in the universe. In fact it was surprising that they made any progress at all considering their small cranial capacity.

They knew that it would be easy pickings and all that was needed was the order to attack.

Chapter 4

General Lunder was anxiously waiting for the response to the message he sent to Prussia 3. He knew that with the limited and primitive weapons of the Earthers, he could easily conquer this planet in less than a day. After all they seemed to be divided and squabbling amongst themselves over the limited

and scarce resources. He saw that here were 3 centers of power , and that these were the only ones that seemed to have the capability of limited space travel. He knew his lasers, even the limited ones on the scout ship, could easily neutralize the most modern weapons and of course taking over the planet's communication satellites would be a snap. Even though he had only 700 troops, the primitive weapons and tactics would be no match for his seasoned and well armed and armored battalion. Even the atmosphere, though much dirtier and heavier in CO2 than the home planet, was breathable and they wouldn't have to resort to cumbersome environment suits.

It was just that waiting, which allows doubt, fears and uncertainty in, is a soldier's worst enemy.

Down on the surface, life went on as usual. The SETI participants and observatories around the world failed to detect the Prussinians and their ships, as the ships were designed to absorb any radio waves and send back a null response. Their Pulso-Laser Communications systems were so advanced that they couldn't be picked up by the usual microwave or radio, and so their messages couldn't be picked up by primitive societies.

This is how they became rulers of such vast planetary systems.

This is why Earth never knew what was coming.

This is why when the message to attack came, there was no question of failure.

Chapter 5

General Lunder paced nervously about the bridge. He knew that it only took an hour for his battle hardened vets to get into fighting gear and be ready to attack. He had his attack crews over the positions that would ensure easy and almost bloodless victory. That was their ways. They liked to incorporate the peoples into their system, not necessarily destroy a planet or civilization. Besides each planet had its own purpose within the Empire.

This particular planet seemed best for entertainment purposes as everyone wants to be on chat shows or some other form of visual movie, musical group or show. So they might as well entertain the whole Empire.

“They are just primitive enough to be a good laugh”, thought the General.

Besides everything that they have seen through the older transmissions were a boon to the Empire as they were able to distract enough of the citizens so that the government could do as they liked and no one seemed to care. That was until the transmissions stopped. The transmissions must start up again. That is why they were here. For the Common Good!

General Lunder called in his battalion Commanders and went over the plan one more time. Each of his Battalion Commanders were ready and just as anxious as Lunder to get things underway. They all recognized the need for speed and timing in reaching their objectives. Each battalion was assigned one of the major power centers identified in order to subdue the planet. They all agreed that since the planet was divided it was going to be easy, and even possible to get one or more of the local powers to ally with them and help to subdue the rest of the planet.

The power centers that were identified represented the major centers of influence. These were:

Washington D.C., Brussels, Moscow, Beijing, New Delhi, and Tokyo. They were chosen based upon the communications intercepted and monitored since arriving. It was obvious that all the major governmental bodies and military centers were run out of these.

The plan was simple enough, each Battalion would transport down and secure their areas and set up communication devices. With the small and primitive communications bands that were used, it was easy to setup the broadcast system and patch into their messages. Every device, radios, TV's, cellular phones would receive the message all at once.

All the dangerous missile and rocket sites would be destroyed or neutralized. General Lunder would then make his speech demanding surrender and if need be make a few demonstrations of the Prussinians' power and might. They would then patch into the home planet and have the Emperor make his speech and welcome the planet to the Empire. They would then explain their purpose for the planet and start the assimilation process. The less the bloodshed the better, as bloodshed always led to resentment and rebellion. That was the Prussian way of conquest.

General Lunder dismissed his commanders and went to the observation deck of his ship. He peered out at the sleepy planet below. He was impressed by the lights he saw on the dark side and of the diversity of landforms. He sighed and thought of the beauty of his own planet, Carthagiana. He remembers hearing as a boy how the Prussinians came and took over their planet and how they were recognized for their ability as soldiers. He also remembered how the stories told of the peaceful transition, and how everyone seemed to support the new way. Of course there were tales of some rebellions and uprisings, and how they were brutally put down, but they stopped once the rebellions stopped. But as each society in the system surrendered themselves, they were given autonomy and a mission within the Empire. No one was really treated bad or as second class citizens. Of course the Prussian Emperors and Empresses were the only ones allowed to lead the Empire, everyone was treated well, and the system seemed to work.

His meditations and thoughts were interrupted by an excited communications runner.

“General Sir, I was told to bring this to you immediately”.

General Lunder took the paper from the runner's hands and read. A broad smile crossed his face, and he started to move hurriedly to the bridge.

“Battle Stations, everyone prepare for attack”, he screamed into his hand communicator. All the the commanders acknowledged the message and within an hour each sent the “ready code”.

The order for the conquest of Earth was given!

Chapter 6

The attack was over within an hour. There was just nothing the poor Earthers could do against the Prussian fleet. On the plus side casualties were a scant few, and these were mainly accident, not bad for a population of 8 billion.

It was as simple as it was efficient. A thing of beauty from a military point of view. One sided as it may have been, there was a lot to be admired in the execution of the attack.

First of all there was little or no resistance at any of the sites. When the Prussinian forces appeared the emotion was shock, then fear then eventually resignation. What resistance existed, was easily put down once the defenders realized that their weapons were useless. Most of the casualties happened because of panic, as the Prussinians rarely tried to kill their conquests, owing more to their “Warrior's Code” that frowned upon killing unarmed, or over match opposition. They would merely “stun” their opponents and move through their defenses owing to their superior body armor techniques that primitive laser and projectile weapons couldn't pierce. So there was no need to kill as the danger of their own forces was all but non-existent.

The communication relays were put into place and the leaders of each block was found and brought in front of each. At that time General Lunder turned on his communicator and every device on the planet was activated. Every radio, TV, mobile phone, personal music player, computer, everything was activated and relayed his message.

“People of Earth, as you call this planet, I am General Lunder of the Prussinian Empire. I hereby claim your planet a member of the Prussinian Empire under the Great Emperor Fredicious and the Empress Victoriana. On their behalf I welcome you, and warn you not to resist. Our technology is way advanced over yours, and we really do not wish to harm you, just bring you peacefully into our glorious Empire.”

All around the world people we just stunned, and wondering what sort of joke this was.

“I am extending an invitation to all the leaders of your various factions and their advisors to meet with me to discuss the terms of your incorporation into our fold. We are looking forward to a long and peaceful alliance and mutual cooperation amongst the many planets of our beloved Empire. Your planet holds a special place in our Emperor's and Empress' hearts as wonderful entertainers and invite you to be our entertainment capital. Details will be discussed at our meeting later this day.”

“All glory and honor to the Empire, and long life to Emperor Fredicious and his Empress Victoriana.”

With that he signed off and gave orders to each commander as when and where to bring the leaders.

“Hmm I think I'll have a nice state dinner set for them, and make sure that part of the meeting is broadcast”, he thought as he gleefully left the bridge on his way to prepare for the all important meeting.

A fateful meeting that would change the face and direction of the galaxy forever.

END PART ONE.

Intermission – time for a word from our sponsor....

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Now back to the stories!

Three Men On A Match - "Pig People Of The Corn"

By Michael J Renner

Chapter 1

I never got my head around the game of golf. I mean what fun is there in hitting a ball then going and chasing it down so you can just hit it again? Plus the fact one has to pay exorbitant fees to play after spending a "King's Ransom" on equipment that can't be of any use elsewhere.

I mean at least with a baseball bat one can use it as an emergency key to get in through a window when locked out, or as a defensive club against rabid squirrels and rat dogs. Footballs make nice foot massagers and hockey pucks are great as paper weights. Besides when you hit a baseball someone else fetches it for you, and someone else is usually on the other side when you throw a football. But Golf Clubs, bags and Balls? Nothing else comes to mind, and of course you have to fetch it yourself. What am I a dog playing fetch with itself? You would never catch a cat playing golf that is for sure.

Throw in the fact that the game was invented in Scotland of all places. I mean what good comes from a place that gave the world haggis, kilts, "The Bay City Rollers" and bagpipes? I tell you even their whiskey tastes moldy, and that they do on purpose! So we should adopt a game from them as well? One that costs us tons of money from a country that is known for its penny pinching ways?

Do you see the problem I am having getting my mind around this thing?

All my adult life people were trying to get me to play this game, which I did against my will, as it seemed to be important for a Computer Software Salesman to play with clients. Especially if one works for a large corporation and deals with high end units like I did at Evermore Software. Luckily I was so bad that the clients loved me as I was good for their egos, and the company loved me because I sold a lot by being bad at golf.

I am widowed and semi-retired, not by choice but because of the state of the industry and the fact I am over 50. For some reason Computer people trust younger less knowledgeable people to buy from. Oh well I got a good severance, and only work part-time doing odd jobs on occasion to fill in some corners. I have lots of free time these days, which I spend with my 2 friends from High School days, Charlie Fillmore and Arnold Maxfield.

It is because of Arnold that we are here today as he has decided we needed to do something "productive" with our time, not just mosey about and drink tea, beer and enjoy ourselves doing nothing. He is always like that being a retired Sergeant Major from the Army, an MP I believe was his specialty. He is always trying to get us in shape or something evil like that.

I think he fell on his head once too often during paratrooper training.

Charlie on the other hand has always been a layabout. He's not really a bad person, but never really wanted to amount to much, and has succeeded in his goal very well. He is a bit of a mooch, but never takes unless offered, so one can trust him in one's home. Just wish he wouldn't dress so nattily and maybe sew up a few holes in his trousers, shirts, sweaters, etc. Maybe do laundry more than once a year would help as well. I know he has other clothes, he just doesn't seem to like to wear them. I think

it's because it upsets Arnold so much, and tweaking Arnold is what Charlie likes to do best.

“Cmon Mark, let's get a move on we don't have all day. We're up next.”

Oh that was a bellow from Arnold, he likes to bellow. Mark is me of course, Mark DaCapo at your service. Oh well better go see what the fuss is about.

It appears that Arnold is trying to instruct Charlie on the finer points of teeing off.

“No, No, No, not that way you scruffy little imp.”

“But that's how I see others doing it on TV.”

“No you don't, you don't even know how to turn a TV on let alone pay your cable bill.”

“I do too, it's the little red button on the remote, and beside the landlady takes care of the cable bill.”

“Now just listen to me and things will be all right..”

“You always say that, but they ain't always right are they? Let's face it Arnie your track record here isn't the best.”

Charlie likes to call Arnold “Arnie” because he knows it irks him and his face tends to turn that nice beet reddish purple it is turning right now, which is my cue to butt in and calm things down.

“Now Arnold, Charlie please let's not make this game any worse than it is already. I mean it is bad enough we are wasting this fine autumn day in this overly manicured cow pasture, so let's not argue okay?”

“Fine as long as that scrag muffin acts right.”

“Hey it's you who gets all bossy and everything, but fine I'll try to play along. No promises though.”

“Fair enough. Now Charlie listen to Arnold he knows what he's talking about this time.”

Of course I can feel Arnold at first beaming then boring a hole into my back after that last statement, but I do try to lighten up the mood a bit.

I pulled out our customary cigars that we smoke whenever doing something like this. I struck the match and lit my cigar. Arnold then lit his off my match, then Charlie bowed in with a stub of a cigar with the band from last week's cigar outing.

“Hey”, said Arnold, “Don't you know it's bad luck to be the third man on a match?”

“Ah that's just balderdash, I mean sure maybe in wartime, but there aren't any German snipers around here now?”

“If only, if only.”

“What I want to know “, I interrupted, “Is why you have that stub from last week?”

“Why waste a good thing, this way I have a full cigar for later tonight if I want it.”

“Good point, just I think that may have been my stub, I recognize the way the band is curled and cut.”

“What does it matter, not like I'll die from your spittle.”

“True what he puts in his mouth, germs probably die from just thinking about getting near him”, piped Arnold. Then he sneered at Charlie.

“Maxfield party of 3” booms the loudspeaker, and I guess that means we're up.

As we go to the tee box Arnold sets up the ground rules for us.

“Okay now, no mulligans, no kicking or pushing the ball for a better lie. Play it as you hit it and as it lies. If you have a problem call the others over for a ruling before you hit, high score buys the first round after the 9th and 18th holes. Got it? Any questions?”

“Yea”, says Charlie, “What's this mulligun you talk about and who's lying to who?”

“Whom you mean.” I chip in.

Arnold just turned red again and gave us both a look that would have stopped a mad rhino in its tracks.

“Okay you two just shut up and do what I do.”

Arnold stepped up to the tee and placed the ball on it, stepped back and took a practice swing.

“Ya missed you mouthy fascist” snapped Charlie with a wry smile.

“No I didn't this is a practice swing, I'm just loosening up.”

“Are you sure? It looked like a real swing to me.”

“Quit your jabbering it is very rude and even a cretin like yourself should know a little etiquette.”

Arnold stepped back and took a deep breath. As he took a mighty swing, Charlie coughed really loud and started hacking as if he was choking. The ball shot off the tee at about 3 feet off the ground and skimmed for about 150 yards.

Arnold turned that reddish purple again.

I stepped up and hit a decent enough drive going about 250 yards and surprisingly in the fairway. It rolled at least 25 or so yards before coming to rest. I usually get two or three of them a round. The rest of the time I'm in the woods to the right or left and playing between the branches.

Charlie then hit one high and hard. It was definitely hooking into the woods, though it went at least 300 yards, more if you take in the curvature and who knows how far it rolled.

“Oh dear it looks like I would rather walk in the woods than play golf today hey fellas?”

“It looks that way to me Charlie, I guess we can help you look after we hit.”

“Fair enough.”

Arnold just grinned as if to say, gotcha, it's your karma scruffy.

I just thought to myself, in the woods, nothing good ever comes out of the woods. I mean you have your bugs, poison ivy, snakes, rabid squirrels, birds pooping on one's head, funguses, mud, lions, tigers and bears, OH MY!. Not to mention how easy it is to get lost in the woods and eaten by badgers.

We got to Arnold's ball and as he lined up his next shot he stared at Charlie, who gave him a “Who Me?” look. As he went into his back swing everything was silent. Then coming down Charlie sneezed.

Arnold topped the ball and the “snake killer” went about 100 yards, almost where my ball was lieing.

“Sorry, couldn't help it, really don't be mad at me, be mad at nature.”

“Look you scruffified bag of odor, stop doing this. I know you are doing this on purpose and I am not going to put up with this any longer.”

“Forget you, you smarmy fascist, This was your idea, and stop blaming me because you aren't any good at his game.”

“Fellas, Fellas, peace remember?” I quickly butted in between them.

They retreated to their corners and Arnold was getting ready to address his ball for his third shot (he was still short of mine by a few feet). He stopped and stared angrily at Charlie.

“Why doesn't that scruffy stinkbomb go and try to find his ball?” He asked me, obviously refusing to talk to Charlie anymore.

“I know when I'm not wanted”, huffed Charlie and he went on ahead to scout out his ball in the woods.

“Good”, said Arnold, “Now I'll show you how a 'Master Golfer' plays. Besides I just wanted to give you a chance and keep the score close.”

With that he lined himself up and took his practice swings. He neared the ball, bent his knees and bounced up and down as if he was settling into a couch. He raised his head to take one more look at the flag and then back at the ball. He adjusted his grip, and wiggled his bottom as if fitting a pillow. He slowly raised the club backwards, keeping his arm straight, his head down and as he released his backswing as smooth as possible and then....

“Heya come here I think I found my ball, but need some help on a ruling.”

...topped the ball and another “worm burner” that went about another 100 yards and another slow burn from Arnold.

“You little scruffy dolt, I am going to kill you. You're ruining my game on purpose you degenerate little monkey. You couldn't wait a second could you?”

“Sorry, I wasn't watching, but you guys need to get over here and help me with this.”

“What's the problem? Just hit the damn thing and get over it already.”

I broke in, “Is it really important or are you just pulling our chains?”

“Come here and see for yourself. I really need some advice here.”

“What's the problem, behind a tree? Fall down a rabbit hole? Caught in a hole in your trousers? Go d knows there's a lot of those.”

“Ha ha very funny, just come here and see for yourself. It's just that, well it's not that easy to explain. I think this guy is holding my ball in his hand and I'm not sure how to play it.”

“Tell him to release it and carry on, it's that easy.”

“Well no it's not, I really need your help.”

“Okay we'll be there in a sec, keep your pants on, that is if they haven't fallen apart yet. Still have that clothes line?”

“Yes I got it new from the landlady. Well not exactly from her, I mean he doesn't know I have it yet.”

Arnold just gave me an disgusted look and slammed his 2 Iron back into his bag. I walked over to where Charlie was standing. Arnold just stayed behind fuming about his last 3 shots and how it was unfair that he has already taken 3 shots and I was yet to take my second. There was Charlie, in the woods looking down in a ditch where his ball was indeed being held by a stranger. Only we could see why he couldn't ask him to let it go. It appears the man wasn't able to hear us as his ears seemed to be missing.

Probably still attached to his head, wherever that may have gotten to.

Chapter 2

Charlie and I just stood there looking at this torso lying on it's back. I guess the saving grace was that since the head was missing, there were no haunting eyes to look back up at us. But here he (it?) was, laying in a ditch under a big oak tree surrounded by reeds and tall grass. And yes in one of the outstretched hands was indeed Charlie's ball. It was as if he was handing it out of the ditch, as if saying , “Here you take it”, as if trying one last attempt to do a good deed before it was time to meet his maker.

How long it's been there I couldn't say. I was a marketer and salesman not a doctor. Heck I never even played one on TV, so there I would just have to wait for the experts to come along and tell us then.

“So what'd think a wedge or a 5 Iron?” asked Charlie, apparently trying to lighten up the scene.

“Well I think that a 7 Iron shot back into the fairway is your best bet as there are those trees in front

and you can't depend upon more bodies to help your lie.”

We went back to being silent as our attempt at humor was overrode by the disgust and nausea I was feeling in my stomach. I never was good at blood or gore, and a dead body, well except for wakes I don't think I ever saw one like this. However the lack of blood was at least reducing the nausea I felt.

“So what's he doing here?”

“Not a lot.”

Charlie just gave me a “Nobody likes a smart-ass” look.

There was a yell behind us that made me jump with fear. It was just Arnold jumping around and pointing in the direction of the green. Apparently he made his next shot and was happy with it.

He came running over to us all glad and laughing.

“Did you see that? Did you? What a shot, Arnie Palmer couldn't have done better. I told you that I was good at this. Must be maybe a foot from the hole no more. Couldn't have placed it better. So what's eating you guys?”

We both just pointed at the torso in the ditch.

Arnold looked and at first he just shrugged his shoulders as if he didn't see anything. The nit clicked and he let out a gasp.

“My God, what have you done Charlie? “

“Charlie didn't do anything you pillock, it obviously was here for a while.”

“I knew it, you guys did this on purpose. Just because you guys don't like exercise, you feel that you have to just ruin my enjoyment didn't you?”

“Arnold, this guy is dead and in case you haven't noticed he is missing a certain part of his anatomy. Let me point out the emptiness above his shoulder area for starters.”

“Well yea sure, uhm yea, I can see that.”

“So”, piped in Charlie,”What do we do now? You seem to always want to be in charge. So tell us what to do now,do we tell someone or do we just go on with our game so you can 'enjoy yourself'.”

“Uhm yea, I guess we need to call the course steward and have them call the police. Did either of you touch anything?”

“No of course not”, said Charlie.

“I wouldn't even think of it” I added.

“Good, now back when I was in the MP's we would assign guards and then send for help. I tell you what, the two of you stay here and I will go back to the clubhouse and get some help. And please don't

contaminate the scene okay? For just once please listen to me, just this once, Okay?"

We nodded our heads and watched him go to the clubhouse.

"Do you have any idea who this might be?", I asked.

"No can't say that I can put a name to the face."

"Yes I can see how you might have trouble doing that. I am not sure I recognize the clothes that well either."

"No not really telling, except he wasn't the best dresser in the world was he."

"Ah I thought you might have noticed the holey jeans and obvious dirty shirt and tattered coat. Plus the fingers look like they haven't seen soap for a day or two at least. I now we don't have many homeless here in Holmton, but I can't say that I know any of them by sight or name."

There was a commotion coming up the fairway as Arnold was returning with a posse of course officials, club officers and assorted other rubberneckers. It seems that this is the most exciting thing that has happened here in, well ever since the club opened in the early 1900's. Sure we do get the occasional murder in town, but Holmton MN has only around 25,000 people and most know each other one way or another as families have been here for generations, without much new blood tainting the pool over the years. So everyone wanted to get in on the excitement, it is the story they can boar their grandkids with for years and years. Plus there is always a bit of importance added to onlookers of anything like this, as if they actually had anything to do with it.

You know like how many people were at the first Super Bowl? 66,000? But I am sure there are around 1 million who claim to have been there. Same thing with the JFK and RFK assassinations. So it tends to be human nature, not just limited to small Midwestern towns.

I guess it just emphasizes the loneliness, emptiness and general despair of living in the daily lives of ordinary people in the 21st Century.

"There over by that tree", bellowed Arnold as he led the congregation to where we were standing.

"Hey there, You Men did anyone touch anything?"

Charlie and I just looked at each other as if to ask did he mean us? If he did why didn't he just ask us by name? I guess he was just reverting back to his old Sergeant Major days and being all officious and everything.

"No Arnold we didn't touch anything nor did our 'new friend' run away, nor did the commies come and take over the world while you were gone. I mean it's only been 5 minutes you know."

"Hrumph, well you know I didn't want Scruffy McGee over there cheating and taking his shot without a full official ruling."

"Take my shot? Why you fascist smarmy twit, as far as I'm concerned our little outing is over and I am through with golf."

"I have to agree with Charlie, I am not sure I am cut out for this game. I don't remember finding dead bodies as one of the goals, and I am sure we'll be too busy anyways."

"Well you two lazy quitters, just one little dead body and you are willing to give up a beautiful day of golf?"

"Yep", we responded.

"Ahem", It was the club security guard. "I think I ought to take a look at the body now."

"Oh yes, sorry", said Arnold. "It's right down there".

He pointed to the torso, still holding up Charlie's ball as if to say, "take it please so I can get some rest." The security guard hunched and hawed as he scanned the body and surrounding area.

The security guard was Josh Fielding, a 50ish ex-cop, ex-MP who actually served under Arnold, so they were both in their element here (again being a smallish town we tend to know just about everyone) as they pointed to different rushes and grass areas that looked bent and beaten down.

Josh was forced to leave the Police Force as he preferred Donuts and Beer to answering the radio while on duty. Arnold was able to get him a job here as it didn't really amount to much more than occasionally chasing waifs from the course and checking for fee cheaters who try to sneak on the course without being a member or a guest of a member.

"Yep", said Josh standing up and looking around officially, "He's dead all right. Probably killed somewhere else and dumped here over night. You could tell by the lack of blood."

"I can't agree more", piped in Arnold no less officially, "Better call Scott and have him take a look and make his report. Is he at the station? Do you have any idea who this might be?"

"I'm not sure I think I saw him head off to Jed's place, you know there was a problem with someone hassling his pigs last night, maybe he could stop by here later. You know I don't recognize the clothes, it could be anyone. I mean it's not as if these scruffy types make an impression you know?"

"Hey I resemble that remark", cried Charlie.

"Sorry, didn't mean anything personal. So in the meantime let's tape this off and keep people away."

With that Josh reached into his bag and pulled out a roll of yellow police tape, he always keeps some handy and one can get it cheap over the internet, and taped off the area. He parked a golf cart in front of the area and put a warning to stay away, though you know people were going to look anyway, again wanting to be part of the incident. Arnold suggested that the three of us rotate as "guards", since we found the body, just until Sheriff Scott arrives. Everyone (except Charlie and myself) agrees that would be a great idea, and they would send us out some sandwiches and beverages during the time.

"What about my ball?", asked Charlie.

"That's evidence", barked Josh, "Leave it there, you'll get it back after the trial and all."

“What trial?”

“Well, after the perpetrator is caught I am sure there will be a trial and your golf ball might be the most important piece of evidence to convict the murderer.”

“Now you're just pulling my leg, but I won't need it as I don't plan on ever playing golf again. Too violent of a game don't you think?”

“Well no..”

“Just as I thought, you never think and that's your problem you twit. If you did you'd still be on the force.”

Josh turned red and started to go after Charlie, but Arnold stopped him before he could do any damage.

“Josh, don't let him get to you, he's just a worthless imp and he loves winding up his betters. He does it all the time to me”, said Arnold restraining his former soldier.

“Sorry Sergeant Major, it's just that slugs like him get me angry.”

“Oh don't I know that, don't I know.”

Yes Josh always called Arnold by his old rank as a sign of respect and thanks for getting him this job. Also they have explained that “SLUG” really means “**S**low **L**earning **U**nder **G**uidance”. It again is a term from the old military days.

About 2 hours later Scott Peterson, our beloved Sheriff (since the country club is outside of town limits it falls under the sheriff's jurisdiction to investigate) arrived and came to look at the scene.

“Hey Mark”, he waved at me as he came up, being that it was my turn at playing guard, “What's up?”

“Well Scott it appears we have a bit of a mystery here. Charlie hit his first shot here into the woods and, and well this guy over here won't give it back.”

“What? Here I was looking into something important over at Jed Hargrove's place. It appears someone has beheaded 4 of his pigs and drained the blood and took off with the heads for a dispute over a stolen golf ball?”

“Well Scott, I don't think you would exactly call it stolen, I mean it's still here, and I'm sure the guy wouldn't, complain if we took it back, but maybe you should look over here and see why he couldn't complain if he wanted too.”

I pointed into the woods and at the torso in the ditch. Scott just got wide eyed and let out a gasp.

“Sorry mark, should have realized that when the SM called me it wouldn't be trivial.”

Yes Scott was also an ex-MP and did serve under Arnold (btw the local Army Reserve Unit is MP, that's why they are all related that way) and he still has respect, though he uses the initials of the rank. Arnold is a twit in civilian life, but as a soldier he was very competent and his soldiers have tons of

respect even in retirement.

“Well let me see, I assume that no one touched anything?”

“Yes that is a safe assumption as we have been watching over the body since we found it.”

“Good, Good. Let me see what I can see.”

First thing he did was bring out his digital camera, small town police have to double up on their duties, having a dedicated photographer is not one of the perks, and took a few pictures. He then started examining the body, turning it around, searching the pockets.

At his point Arnold showed up with Josh and a few of the club officials.

“Well sheriff any clues or information yet?”

“Oh hey Sm, no nothing yet. It does appear that the fingers have been dipped in acid to destroy the prints, and the pockets are all empty.”

“Oh dear not much help is it?”

“Well, no, but I have a bad feeling I know who this might be and it is not a good thing.”

With that Scott took off one of the shoes from the torso and opened a concealed compartment in the heel. He took out an ID card, \$500 in cash and a badge. It was an FBI badge and ID card.

“Oh dear”, cried Scott, “It's Agent Adams from the FBI. Washington is not going to be happy about this.”

We all just sat here stunned. An FBI Agent in Holmston MN? Why didn't any of the busybodies know? What was he doing here? Who found out? What about the pig's blood? Most important, will Charlie ever get his ball back?

<END OF PART ONE>

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