

JACK IN THE WARREN



JIM LEMAY



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JACK IN THE WARREN



YEAR 672 NEW RECKONING

The deep door well mostly protected the little boy from the sleet. He knew he must lie absolutely still – movement might attract a wanderer looking for a haven like his – but he shivered uncontrollably every time a vagrant icy blast pelted him. He would surely die if ejected back into the rain.

Then the impossible happened. The splintered wooden door he huddled against opened, dumping him into brazen light and the most wonderful heat he had ever felt. Perhaps he had died and this was the heaven the Christers talked about. Rough hands immediately grasped him, shouted harshly at him and to each other. He heard only isolated phrases: “What is this ...” “... tryin t’ burgle ...” “... lidl thief ...” They handled him roughly. No, this wasn’t heaven but he was, more than likely, dead.

The hands roughly thrust him back into the rain and darkness. He bumped and slid down the rain-slick cobbles. He knew he should hurt but felt nothing. The heat and light must’ve been a dream, the rough handling, talk and return to

the rain, a nightmare. Just like the rest of life: mostly bad mixed with a little bit of good.

... and then he felt nothing.

More dreams: Of being carried, or was he floating? Swaddled tightly. Strange voices. Shadows leaping against a wall. Instead of the cold and wet it was now only cold but somehow he knew it was all right to shiver. After some interminable period he awakened coughing, very cold. One thing he knew for sure: he wasn't dead. His throat was too sore and he had a terrible headache. The world seemed to blink on and off in an uncomfortable way. He felt a blanket wrapped tightly about him. Where had it come from, a dry one at that?

He slept; coughing again awakened him. Now, he felt so hot he disentangled himself from the blanket and cast it off. Faint light illuminated a small square: dawn light coming through a window. He must be inside somewhere. How had that happened?

"Ah, yor awake." A woman's quiet voice. "Drink this." A hand behind his head gently lifted it so he could gulp a warm, bitter liquid from a cup. "It's salix mixed with tea. It'll ease the sore throat an help the fever." She gently lowered his head and tucked the blanket firmly around him. "Don keep kickin this off. Y' need t' stay warm." She continued to talk quietly but he was too tired to concentrate, or even care what she said.

He awoke much later. His head ached fiercely and he was cold again, shivering under several blankets though he lay near a blazing fireplace. Full day, albeit a gloomy, overcast one, shone through the little window. A pretty girl, a few years older than him and dark like the woman, appeared.

"Where's ... how ..." A fit of coughing interrupted him. After it ended he asked, "How'd I git here?"

"Ed Hanrahan found y' an lugged y' here," said the girl. She disappeared from his view and returned holding a cup. "Mum said for y' t' drink this when y' woke up." She raised his head,

not as gently as the woman had done, and placed a second pillow under it. She held the cup to his lips and he drank more of the bitter liquid. She held it at such an angle that it gushed into his throat. He turned away to avoid gagging and coughed again.

“Mum says y’ gotta drink it all. It’s got medicine in it.”

Used to doing things for himself, he took the cup from her in hands shaking so badly he almost spilled it.

“If y’ spill it, y’ lidl shit, I’ll make another cup an y’ll hafta drink it all.”

Her imperious tone stiffened his determination to drink the tea without her help. As soon as he finished he lay back as exhausted as if he had run across the entire Warren.

“I can’t keep callin y’ lidl shit. What’s yor name?” she demanded.

“Jack.”

“I’m Lilliyaana. My mum’s Amelya. Amelya Moritz. She’s workin so I’m stuck with y’.” He dozed fitfully, sometimes dreamed weird dreams that he barely remembered later. The headache gradually waned but not the cough or sore throat. The girl frequently changed the damp cloth she had put over his forehead as his fever dried it out. She sometimes spoke to him, but he found it hard to concentrate and didn’t try to answer her. Sometimes she brought him water or more tea.

Voices awakened him in the evening. He saw the woman and girl talking quietly. When he coughed they looked at him and the woman came over. He recognized her as the woman who trundled the little cooking cart across Gallows Square every morning. She felt his forehead with her palm and in the same quiet tone of the morning asked how he felt.

“All right.” He coughed again. No one had ever before asked how he felt.

She smiled a little. “I wouldn’t go that far but yor fever feels like it’s down a bit. Is the tea ready, Lilli?”

The girl said yes and brought a cup to the woman. After she helped him drink it she brought out a small vial, opened the lid and poured a viscous fluid into a spoon.

"I got this today for yor cough," she said as he took the spoon. "Drink it."

Later, when the woman tried to feed him some soup he took the bowl and spoon from her and fed himself. Help from others made him uncomfortable. After he finished the woman gave him more of the thick bitter liquid. Eating had exhausted him so much he fell asleep immediately. When coughing awakened him in the night the woman gave him more of the cough medicine.

The girl replacing the damp cloth on his forehead awakened him the next morning.

"Yor fever's down a lidl," said the girl. "How d' y' feel?"

"Better." He did. He no longer had chills though his throat was sore and he felt very weak. "Well, y'll soon be well nough t' git outta here so I can git my bed back. See, I usually sleep where yor sleepin. Mum don want me in the same room with y' cause I might git yor sickness so I'm stuck sleepin with her." She jerked her thumb toward the door beside the fireplace. "Course yor bein here ent all bad. I git t' miss my lessons with ol Bumsuck." She grinned. "His real name's Brunswik."

Brunswik ran the only school in the Warren. On days too hot to hold class inside, Jack had seen him seated on his stool in Gallows Square, his students squatting on the paving stones in a semicircle around him.

She stood up and turned to the fireplace. "Mum said y' need more tea an cough stuff."

He drank the tea eagerly and a glass of water. He had gotten used to the tea's bitterness and was very thirsty.

She talked as he drank it. "Bumsuck charges mum for teachin. I don see why I need im. Mum don read an she gits by jus fine."

Jack, too, had wondered why some people valued reading and writing when just staying alive took so much work.

The next day Amelya pronounced him well enough for Lilliyaana to return to school. When Lilliyaana returned she made tea for him and gave him cough syrup. When he once tried to stammer out his gratitude she interrupted him in her usual brusque manner.

"I ent doin this just for yor sake, y' lidl shit. I want my bed back."

The next day Jack felt even better though still weak. His fever was gone. The cough had diminished and with it the soreness of his throat. The bright daylight peering through the tiny window cheered him. For the first time since the onset of the illness he was hungry. Amelya gave him solid food that evening, pickled cabbage with a few shreds of salt pork in it and potatoes. The next evening he felt well enough to eat at the table with Amelya and Lilliyaana. Amelya made all three of them bow their heads before the meal while she said something called a prayer. They couldn't eat until she finished which annoyed him a little because of his hunger until he remembered that if not for her he wouldn't have survived the night of the storm. And, of course, he was used to being hungry.

"Where do y' live anyhow?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Nowhere."

"A orphan. I figgered so when I seen y' round Gallows Square. That's why yor clothes is such rags. I got sunthin for y'." She went into her other room and brought back something rolled under her arm. "See how this fits." She shook out the bundle.

A jacket, used but in good condition! His was too small and so full of holes he often had trouble finding the ones that led to the sleeves.

"Well," said Lilliyaana, "try it on, y' lidl shit."

"Watch yor mouth, lidl girl," Amelya said mechanically.

He reached for the jacket and slowly pulled it on. It was lined with wool. So warm. An uncomfortable emotion he had not felt for a long time threatened him.

"Amelya, I – I ..." His throat closed so that he couldn't speak.

"Yor welcome, Jack. I know it's a lidl big but y'll grow in t' it."

She showed him how to clean his teeth and made him bathe every other day. She told him to continue these things after he left.

"Y' want t' keep yor teeth healthy. Y' don wanta look like ol Naddick do y'?" Naddick was a crippled, toothless beggar who slept in Gallows Square. "Ent no girl 'd have y' then." When he said, rather sullenly, that he didn't care what any old girls thought of him she laughed and shook her head.

Part of him would have liked to stay in the warm comfort of the house forever but both Amelya and, less subtly, Lilliyaana, let him know that was not to be. Most of him though missed the streets and freedom from Amelya's regimens of physical and spiritual hygiene.

Because of the uncomfortable feeling connected to the jacket, saying good-by seemed awkward so one day while Amelya was at work and Lilliyaana at school, Jack left wearing his warm jacket.

He usually remembered always being an orphan. Occasionally, though, a vague feeling, too amorphous to call a memory, tugged at him: of someone (he was certain it was a her) holding him lovingly. When very young, while waiting for sleep, he had allowed the quasi-memory to become real enough to banish all fear, loneliness and other longings he couldn't name just long enough to fall asleep. Upon awakening, however, he was again alone and scared and as often as not, hungry. Sometimes a tightness clutched his throat and his eyes misted. Angry at what he considered a weakness Jack always cleared his throat and blinked away the moisture before it could turn to tears.

Gradually, with difficulty, he had forced the tender woman fantasy out of his mind. In time it became less than a memory of a feeling. When it threatened to reemerge he destroyed it with strenuous activity like running.

The uncomfortable emotion threatened to return as he left Amelya's house. If the tender woman had been real, he thought, she would have been someone like Amelya, though not her of course. Amelya would never have abandoned him.

Less than a block from Amelya's house he began to run. The few people about in the Warren looked curiously at the little boy racing up and down its streets and alleys.

SHADOW JACK CONTINUES...



S*hadow Jack* continues the story of the orphan boy Jack and how he becomes the mysterious Shadow. He deals with people both good and bad – though oftentimes the distinction is blurred – and rich and poor. To sample Jack's continuing tale, read on.

SAMYEL'S LENS



YEAR 655 NR

Samyel lay on one of the two benches facing each other across the pergola's table reading the Bible. The pergola was his favorite part of the garden. Its enclosure of vines, shrubbery and fruit trees alleviated the worst of the afternoon heat and satisfied his need for privacy. Indeed, for all practical purposes he was alone. His father was meeting with ruins miners at North Cove, his sister Mikela's nurse had taken her to a friend's house to spend the night and the other servants were busy with various duties within the house. His poor mother was in bed with one of her sick headaches.

With mild annoyance, he heard the back door of the tower open. He parted a gap in the vegetation to see Jaemz holding open the door. The only person he welcomed seeing that day, his friend Saul Berg, came through the doorway. Samyel stood up at the pergola entrance and waved to catch his friend's attention. Saul acknowledged him, thanked the butler in his solemn way and strode toward the pergola. Jaemz bowed slightly and went back into the house.

Saul sat across from Samyel, wiped sweat from his face with

a handkerchief and said, "It's cooler here than anywhere else, even our garden."

"It's because of all the trees." Oak trees lined the three walls that, along with the back of the house, surrounded the garden.

Saul nodded toward Samyel's book. "What're you reading? Oh, the Bible! When did *you* convert?" His tone was gently mocking. The fifteen-year-olds considered themselves cynical scholars who viewed religion with disdain, a daring philosophy in some parts of their largely Christian City.

"No, no," said Samyel impatiently. "I'm learning to read Beforeworld English you know. Must've been hard for kids to learn back then because they didn't spell words like they sounded. My name, for example, was probably pronounced a lot like it is now but they spelled it S-a-m-u-e-l."

"Christians and Jews still spell it that way because it's traditional," said Saul.

"Well, maybe they think so but it's not. Da knows a lot about old languages. He said names vary from one to the other. In Hebrew my name is Shmu'el and in Arabic it's Samoel, though I'm not sure I'm pronouncing them right. Anyhow, I started reading the Bible to learn Beforeworld English though it's in an older version. I've had to ask da some of the words; he knows Beforeworld fluently. And I got interested in some of the stories."

"What kind of stories? Are you learning anything from them?"

"Yes. That some of the Christians' so-called 'holy' people are really assholes."

"Like who? I've never read the book, even in modern English."

"Well, like the family I read about this morning. A cob named Lot and his family."

"What's so bad about them?"

"They lived in a city called Sodom. God tells Lot's uncle

Abraham, who had some kind of pull with God, that He has heard that people in Sodom, Gomorrah and a couple other places are so sinful he's going to destroy the cities. Since his nephew lives in Sodom Abraham asks God to spare the city if he can find 50 good people there. God agrees. Then, probably because Abe knows Lot himself isn't a paragon of morality, he negotiates the number down to ten. God says okay to that too."

"What did this Lot do that was so bad?"

"I'm about to give you an example. Anyhow, God sends a couple of angels to Sodom to see if its people are as wicked as he had heard."

"Wait a minute. Christians say God knows everything, right? Wouldn't he know if there were ten good people in this Sodom?"

"He must've been busy watching sparrows fall."

"What?"

"Never mind. So the angels get to the city and nobody but Lot invites them to stay in his house for the night. Lot prepares a feast for them but before they get to bed the men of the city come to Lot's house. All of them, from the young rowdies to the elderly, the rich and the poor. And guess what they want? Homosexual sex with the angels!"

"Good God!"

"Lot's not about to let that happen. He blocks the door and, listen to this: offers them his two unmarried daughters for the night!"

"What!?"

"Yes, but these cobs aren't interested in girls. They want the angels. Since they can't rape them though, they settle for Lot himself. Just in time one of the angels blinds them. They still try to break the door down so the angels convince Lot and his family to get out of town. After they're gone, fire and burning rock descend from the heavens to consume Sodom and the other cities and their evil citizens. The angels make one weird

requirement of Lot's family. After they leave they mustn't look back at the devastation. But Lot's wife can't stand not to. When she does she turns into a pillar of salt."

"It's a wonder God let Lot get away after he offered his daughters up for gang-rape."

"Wait'll you hear what the *daughters* did."

"Oh?"

"Yes. After a series of adventures they go up into the mountains, get their father drunk and have sex with him. Their reason? There aren't any other men around!"

"No! Well, if the people in those cities were even worse than Lot and his daughters they deserved to die. It's hard to believe though, that among all those too old to sin and those too young to have even thought of it, the angels couldn't find ten good people."

"You'd think."

"Where'd you get the book anyhow? There surely aren't many Bibles written in Beforeworld English. Most people can't read it."

"I got it from Aunt Agatha, my mother's older sister."

"She's a preacher or something isn't she?"

"She teaches preachers-to-be at All-Souls College. Beforeworld English, especially as used in the Bible, is her specialty. Uncle Herb's on its faculty too. She probably won't teach much longer though; she's losing her eyesight."

"I see. I bet she gave you the book to sway you to her and your mum's religion."

"Right. She's always hated that mum, a good Christian Neleferin woman, married a heathen Gaian Moer Clansman."

"Even though he's the son of Mister Jaan Jaekup Moer who kicked out the Kaarstins?"

"Even though. And secretly, I think Aunt Agatha liked the Kaarstins because they're strict evangelists and contributed so much to her and uncle Herb's school."

"Does your mum want you to be Christian too?"

"Probably but she doesn't push it. She isn't hardcore like Auntie even though she goes to church. Belonging to different religions doesn't seem important to mum and da."

They heard the tower door open and turned to see Samyel's father, Mister Carl Moer, standing in the doorway. He looked around the garden, saw the boys and smiled. "Sam, there you are. And Saul. Come here, boys. I have something to show you."

The boys rose and went to greet Samyel's father. They followed him into the square tower and up the stairs to the third and highest floor, the entirety of which comprised his study, stifling in the heat. A massive work table dominated the center of the room. Its usual clutter of papers, books and miscellany had been unceremoniously pushed aside to make room for what looked like rubbish. Samyel recognized it as an agglomeration of mysterious debris from the Beforeworld ruins. Among other business activities his father financed a company that mined the ruins of Sent Luus. In addition to his percentage of its profits he sometimes wheedled leftover items the miners considered trash. After looking through them for valuables they may have overlooked he gave the remainder to Samyel, knowing his son's curiosity about Beforeworld things.

Carl stood rubbing his hands together almost gloatingly over the cluster. Samyel realized he must have found something of value in it.

"I just brought this back from the miners' warehouse," Carl said. Then in an almost conspiratorial whisper, "I want to show you boys something exceedingly rare that I found in it, but I'll have to swear you to secrecy, at least for awhile." He looked at both of them with a smile he probably thought evoked a sense of mystery until they both nodded. "Good. Saul, it's timely that you're here. I intend to visit your father to find out its value." Saul's father was a jeweler. Carl picked up a small object wrapped in cloth. He dramatically whipped the cloth away to

reveal an oddly chiseled, blood-red stone. The afternoon light slanting through the windows glinted in its multitudinous facets. Carl turned it this way and that. At some angles it appeared translucent; at others a purplish hue winked from its depths.

"This, my boys," said Mister Carl Moer, "is a precious stone, one that never formed in our part of the world and can no longer be shaped in this wonderful fashion, a talent long forgotten. I found it in this muck on the table here, the miners' leftover refuse. If they'd known the value of this I never would've seen it."

"Well," asked Samyel, feeling peevish partially because of the heat, "what kind of precious stone is it?"

"A ruby," breathed Saul in an awestricken voice.

Carl looked at him in surprise. "You've seen one before?"

"Yes. Miz Hyuum has one. Da set it in gold for a necklace for her. She wears it only on very special occasions and then only in the Hyuum's own house."

Carl frowned at the ruby. "The banker Hyuum?"

"Yes," said Saul.

"Something wrong, da?" asked Samyel.

"No, of course not." Mister Carl Moer's expression brightened. "I'll see your father soon, Saul. I'll have him set the ruby in a gold necklace for my dear Merrillin. That's why you've got to keep it secret – so I can surprise her. Then we'll have a dinner party for the highest of the Notables. We may even invite the Hyuums."

Then Samyel understood his father's earlier frown. Even though Carl's older brother, Uncle Juulyen, and his wife Aunt Evlin had attended the Hyuums' lavish fests Samyel's father and mother had never been invited. As Moerrelm's "Advisor" to the Nelefer government, Mister Juulyen Moer's very word was law while Hyuum saw Mister Carl and Mistra Merrillin as merely younger Clan members.

"In the meantime, boys," Mister Carl waved his hand over the debris on the table, "do what you like with this crap."

"Thank you, sir," said Samyel.

Carl left the room abruptly. His sour mood, brought on by the banker's snub, drove him downstairs for a drink. Recognizing his need for alcohol at stressful times as a weakness, Carl kept none in his study.

Samyel dumped the lump of debris into the basket beside the table in which Carl had brought it home. Soon the boys sat across the pergola table from each other with it setting between them. They examined every piece they peeled or pried away, trying to determine its original use, though the tremendous heat that had melted them together seemed to thwart identification. Still, they liked to speculate.

"There isn't much glass in this batch," said Saul, "except for this greenish piece."

They hadn't expected to find metal; the miners would have kept even small bits of it to sell to smiths.

"I'm more interested in the stuff called 'plastic,'" said Samyel. "There's so many different kinds of it. We understand glass. People know how to make and use it, even though it's not as good as the Before People's. But how to make any kind of plastic is a complete mystery."

"Yes." Saul was trying to tear a flexible rectangular sheet of something with a tiny hole in its center. "It's all so different. That hard plastic you're holding looks like part of a machine. This sheet I have's bendable and as thin as paper but I can't tear or damage it in any way. Yet both of 'm must be different kinds of plastic."

"And they're almost seven hundred years old!"

"Beforeworld buildings and monuments have pretty much all collapsed into rubble yet stuff like this crap" he waved his flexible but indestructible sheet "seems to last forever."

"Wouldn't the Anti-Tek Table shit if we found some kind of Beforeworld tek that still worked?"

"Tek" included everything, including writings, produced by the "teknics," the ancient scientists and engineers. The use of or even possession of tek which had, after all, destroyed the Beforeworld was forbidden. Only the Anti-Tek Table decided what was and what was not tek. Anyone discovering such suspected materials had to immediately surrender them to the Table.

"No. They'd make *us* shit. And do worse to us than that."

After examining each object they threw it back into the basket for disposal, though Saul kept the flexible sheet. Finally only one item remained, the largest, saved for last because it looked the most interesting: a flat, layered matrix of plastic.

Samyel said, "It looks like spoiled soup that turned solid."

"The top layer is snot-colored."

"Yes. Snot soup."

"It looks like several kinds of plastic too different to mix melted together in layers."

Samyel worried an edge of the top layer free and started trying to peel it off. It clung tenaciously so Saul helped. It gave all at once, exposing a layer colored the sickly blue of mold.

Saul made a face. "Your soup doesn't look any more appetizing at this level, but it's definitely made of a different material. Its surface has a rougher texture."

"The next layer is paler and looks different yet."

The bluish stratum pulled free more easily to reveal a translucent and colorless one, nestled within a flat hemisphere with the purplish hue of a bruise.

"Now our soup fills a bowl," said Samyel.

"And we can see through it," said his friend. "I was right. It's definitely snot soup. See that booger right in the middle of it?"

Samyel looked more closely. Sure enough, near the center was a short object with bulging sides, darker than the plastic.

The translucent material was malleable. When they tried to pull it away from the purple layer it stretched but refused to come free. When released, it shuddered back to its former shape. A more determined pull freed it with a popping sound. Even separated from its "bowl" it retained its original form, the dark kernel unmoving within. They peeled the layers below the bowl apart without finding anything of interest except that the glob had all been plastic, at least insofar as the boys understood the strange material. They began throwing the plastic layers into the basket. When Samyel tossed away the soup/sponge-like glob Saul grabbed it in mid-throw.

"Wait, Sam. Look at the booger from the side."

Saul turned the material so Samyel could see it from that angle. It looked round and quite solid.

"This looks different, Sam, maybe not plastic at all."

"You're right. Let's get the thing out."

Removing it proved more difficult than they expected. Their knife blades dented the material without cutting it and it resumed its shape in the blades' absence. Samyel finally, in frustration, fiercely stabbed it. The knife ripped deeply. The object shot upward like a seed squirted from an overripe fruit. Saul dropped his knife and adroitly caught it as it fell. He held it so that they could both observe it. It was a round piece of glass ringed by solid black plastic, concave on both sides. The translucent material had protected it from the heat so well it looked newly formed and completely free of the wavery, bubbled flaws of modern glass.

Saul gasped, "Look at this, Sam!"

He was holding the glass over the hole in the center of the thin piece of plastic. Samyel looked through the glass. Startled, he pulled it away to look directly at the hole. Then he looked at Saul.

"It makes the hole look bigger!"

"Yes, and look at this." Saul raised and lowered the glass. It

blurred the hole at some distances and refocused at others to make it appear to be different sizes. The boys looked at each other.

"This is tek, Saul."

"Yes, and I know what it's called."

"Tell me."

"It's called a lens. My da told me he read about them in Beforeworld books about his trade. Jewelers used them for fine work. We'll have to keep this a very close secret, Sam, even from our parents."

"Yes. Think of the experiments we can do."

They had experimented in amateur fashion before: used discarded glass scraps from the glassblowers' yards to disperse light into spectrums of colors, made straight rods appear bent by thrusting them into pails of water.

Neither boy considered relinquishing the lens to the Anti-Tek Table.



THEY EXPERIMENTED with the lens in Samyel's garden because it was much larger and more private than Saul's. Only Vern the gardener, his young assistant Gordo and Mikela aged ten, sometimes with her friends, frequented it. None of them paid much attention to what the boys did. Only the weekly teas Samyel's mother held in the garden with other Notable ladies interrupted their sessions. They mostly studied small things with the lens: insects, leaves, seeds, bark, mold, fungi and tiny life forms that lived in the garden's pool.

The autumnal change to their lives interrupted their lens observations though they agreed Samyel should keep the lens because he had more room and privacy than Saul. They had finished their last high school form last spring, among the youngest students ever to do so. Technically Samyel had not

since he had to test out of one more mathematics form, though he could start the two-year City College course with Saul. He had to pass the test during the first semester to continue to the second. Samyel admitted to himself, without jealousy, Saul's greater intelligence, especially in math. Saul had not only finished the mathematics form a year early but was teaching himself trigonometry, a college course.

Samyel tested out of his last mathematical form one Friday afternoon in October shortly after he turned sixteen. Though college homework awaited him, studying for the test had worn out his capacity to concentrate on scholarly things. The lesser heat of autumn called him outside and he had the whole weekend to study. Besides, the sun reminded him of an experiment he wanted to do with the lens. He and Saul had noticed that the sun shining through it created heat. He wondered if it could concentrate enough sunlight at a single point to produce fire. The garden was vacant and likely to remain so for the rest of the afternoon. His father would be in his office at the Harbor for another couple of hours, his mother was having tea with Aunt Agatha in her rooms upstairs in the front of the house out of sight of the garden. Though Mikela's room overlooked the garden from the house's rear she was still at school. Even Vern and Gordo were away.

He took the lens from its hiding place behind some winter shirts folded on the top shelf of his wardrobe and a sheet of paper from schoolwork he had finished. Once in the garden he couldn't experiment in the shade of the pergola of course but, just to be careful, he kept it between himself and the house. He held the glass at different heights and angles above the paper. The sunlight beaming onto it warmed it as he and Saul had noted before. Finally a small circle on the paper turned brown and a thin ribbon of smoke arose from it but disappeared when he raised the glass a little. He maneuvered the lens until it concentrated the light into a small bright spot. A tiny flame

sprang up, formed a circle that raced away from its point of origin and died, leaving a brown-edged hole in the paper.

Samyel sat back on his heels and thought about it. Clearly, he needed enough fuel to last long enough to build a true fire. He wadded the partially burnt sheet into a loose ball. From under the trees, shrubs and flower beds he gathered twigs and bark and placed them around the paper wad. Again he focused the sunlight into an even smaller circle and started a fire much more quickly. The paper blazed with tiny flames that licked at the surrounding twigs and temporarily set a bit of the bark afire but as soon as the paper had been consumed the fire went out.

Undeterred by his failure so far, Samyel analyzed each step of the experiment. The paper made good fuel but only temporarily because it burnt up too quickly. Twigs and bark burnt well but they needed more sustained heat than the paper afforded to continue burning. While looking through the remaining charred bits of fuel he noticed that the part of the bark that had burned the longest was the inner rotted, dried portion. From under the trees, bushes and flower beds he gathered more of the crumbly material and a few leaves. He heaped some in a small mound with more near at hand and surrounded the pile with twigs, bark and more substantial fallen branches.

He took up the lens and, more confidently now, concentrated a small point of light into the dry, rotted material. Smoke spiraled up from it almost at once. He held his breath as it smoldered. When the first tiny flames appeared, while firmly holding the lens in place, he fed them more punk. And then the tiniest of twigs. At last the flame grew hearty enough to accept bits of bark, more twigs and finally some sizeable sticks.

Exultant, he watched the flame mature into a true fire. Triumphantly, he heaped more sticks and a couple of larger deadfall branches upon it. The fire leaped grandly.

"Move aside, Samyel."

Aunt Agatha!

He turned quickly but awkwardly because of his crouched position. Aunt Agatha stood in the pergola's opening. She held a bucket. Mikela stood beside her.

"What could've caused that fire?" demanded Aunt Agatha.

One hand holding its bail, the other its bottom, she swung the bucket back and then heaved it forward. Unfortunately, her aging strength and failing sight combined to get most of the water only far enough to drench Samyel. Seeing the fire unscathed she hobbled forward to stomp it out, only to find little fire and a great deal of smoke. Samyel had thrown the greenest of branches he had collected over the fire to smother it.

"Mikela," demanded Samyel, "what are you doing home?"

She bristled. "Home is where I *usually* come after school."

The slanting shadows told Samyel that time had passed more quickly than he realized.

"Your mother went to bed with one of her headaches," said Aunt Agatha. "After I gave her a palliative I heard Mikela come home and went to see her. We saw the smoke from her room." Aunt Agatha looked down. "Wait. What's this?" She reached down and picked up something her foot had trod upon.

It was the lens; Samyel must have dropped it as he scrambled away from the water.

Aunt Agatha turned it around, examined it from different angles. She gasped and her eyes widened when she discovered that the lens made objects appear larger. She looked sternly at Samyel, then at the smoldering pile beside him and again, through the lens, then quickly lowered it as if even looking through it might cause its evil to infect her.

"I don't know what this, this diabolical thing is, Samyel," she said stonily, "but I recognize tek when I see it. I suspect you somehow used its foul properties to start this fire. I will send

Smetlae” – her driver – “for your father as soon as I get home and we’ll get to the bottom of this right away. Don’t you dare try to leave.”

She turned and stomped toward the house. He slowly stood up.

Mikela came over to take his hand. “I’m really, truly sorry I got you in trouble, Sam. I didn’t intend to.”

He hugged her. “I know you didn’t, little girl.”

“You’ll get out of it though, Sam. I know you will.”

He thought of his appearance before the Anti-Tek Table, of expulsion from school, of the shame his mother and father faced. He hoped he was young enough to avoid jail. Of course he would never admit that he had obtained the lens, however inadvertently, from his father.

“Sure I’ll get out of it, sweetie.”

ALLEGRA IN NELLIE'S FAIR



YEAR 2159 OLD RECKONING

The wind savagely whipped Allegra's scarf, tried to wrench her knit cap off and splattered her with spray from the greasy waves. It seemed to anticipate her every action; no matter which way she turned it slapped her face with rain hard enough to bring tears to her eyes.

Exultantly, she thought, *Here I am at last.*

The colorless shacks of Ferry Town huddled in the mud behind her, already forgotten. Sheets of rain rendered the double-humped island far out on the lake almost invisible. Only a few faint pin-pricks of light on its slopes betrayed the town of Nellie's Fair's existence. At last the ferry boat danced phantom-like out of the gloom on frantic waters. She soon made out individual rowers and finally, finally, it closed on the pier. She started onto it. Thomas grasped her arm from behind.

"Patience, little sister." She heard amusement in his voice. "They won't look kindly on us getting in the way of their unloading."

Her gentle half-brother was right as always, and she, as always, had acted too impetuously.

The ferry men helped the few passengers clamber up onto

the pier, and handed boxes and bales up to awaiting longshoremen. Then she, Thomas and the four others of their party handed their baggage and parcels of trade goods down to the ferrymen. One of them reached up a hand to Allegra and bade her to step carefully down the narrow ladder into the boat. Two previous groups of their party had already taken the ferry to the island.

Waves gently slapped the sides of the boat as the ferrymen poled it through the shallows. The boat's wallowing increased in the deeper water. The ferrymen lay their poles along the inside of the gunwales and took up oars. Remembering the ferry's frenetic bobbing as it had approached the pier, with a shiver of panic, she thought: *I'll be sick when it gets that bad.*

Perhaps anticipating such a reaction, Thomas had placed Allegra in the center bench and sat between her and the right gunwale with Ms. Carlson on her left. At each rise of the boat to wave-crest she could see the island draw nearer. In her excitement, though the bucking increased alarmingly, she forgot to be sick. Angular dark shadows on shore became buildings. Light gleamed from a few windows. Torchlight delineated piers in a cove between the island's two hills. In the shallower water the bucking decreased until the boat hardly rocked at all. The ferrymen exchanged oars for poles and brought them deftly up to a pier. Dark warehouses brooded along the landward side of the street that bordered the cove. Protection from the wind by the hills and buildings made Allegra feel warmer than she had all day, despite the rain.

Thomas clambered up from the boat and reached down for Allegra's hand. Soon all six stood on the pier surrounded by their baggage and goods. All had come from Thomas and Allegra's tiny town of New Hope in what had been the State of Illinois. The others had been strangers to Allegra when they joined the caravan along the way, though Thomas knew them from previous trips. Those of their party who had already

reached the island waited with handcarts. They helped Thomas and Allegra's group load their trade goods and trundle them to a warehouse that the first group to reach the island had leased.

After they finished Edgar Underwood, the nearest New Hope had to a healer and dispenser of medicines, grumbled, "I'm ready for the hotel. These old bones need a real bed." A gap-toothed smile broke through his salt and pepper beard. "After a bite and a pint of course." He bought most medicines he couldn't prepare himself from itinerant merchants but some could only be purchased at Nellie's Fair so he grudgingly made this annual trip to the town's Harvest Market, its largest market of the year.

"I think a *couple* pints are in order," grinned his son Tobe, a couple of years older than Allegra. Unlike his father he looked forward to the trips and spent his free time partying. Allegra had once nursed a crush on Tobe, while recognizing the futility of a small plain girl's chance with the handsome youth. It came as no surprise when, last spring, he had married Ruthie Swope, one of New Hope's most beautiful and popular girls.

The rain persisted as chill, sullen drizzle. Carrying their personal bags, they walked uphill along a major street lined with businesses. Signs on the building fronts at intersections identified the street as O'Conner Boulevard, named after the town's founder, Nelson O'Conner. Thomas had told her O'Conner had also inadvertently given the town its name, after his nickname, Nellie, and his name for the market he established on the island, the "Fair." They saw few people about. Because of their shuttered windows the businesses looked closed in spite of the early hour. A little light peaked between the shutters though and briefly through open doors as customers entered or left. She asked Thomas why the businesses kept their windows shuttered.

"To keep out the rain and cold," he said. "Most of 'm don't have glass in 'm,"

“Really?” She was surprised. All the windows in their house and most others in New Hope were glazed.

“Yep. You see, there was a big fire here 'bout fifty years ago. Burnt most of the buildings down or damaged 'em so bad they had to be tore down. Not many windows survived. The only ones we have nowadays come from pre-Destruction buildings and there wasn't many of them left when they rebuilt the town.”

Their house had been built since the Destruction but its windows had indeed been taken from their previous crumbling house which had been built before that awful disaster.

The Destruction, to the people around New Hope, included the Disease that Mother Gaia had sent to punish mankind for its evil and the terrible time that followed. The Holy Mother had put up with many of mankind's sins, including the abandonment of her worship in favor of upstart religions like Christianity, Judaism and the rest. Gaia had always been and would always be. She had patiently awaited mankind's return to her for many long centuries. The sin she could not abide, however, was that of *techne* with its insatiable hunger for raw materials that rent her body, destroyed her living creatures by thousands of species per year and poisoned her air, land and waters. She hesitated for more than two hundred years after the beginning of what man called the Industrial Revolution. Then she sent the Destruction.

After thinking about the unglazed windows for a moment she said, “I never thought of it before, Thomas, but maybe it's wrong for us to use glass, even for windows. After all, the tech-nics made it!”

“No, it's okay to use technical things that already exist if they don't do no harm. It's the *making* of glass that'd be wrong. Even making harmless stuff would make us want more luxurious items. Before you know it we'd be back to defiling the Mother's body and all the rest. She started healing Herself right

after the Destruction but the injuries our sins caused 'll get worse for thousands of years before they start getting better. If we start doin' wrong again she might decide She hadn't gone far enough and get rid of us once and for all."

The Mother still sent the Disease back once in awhile as a reminder. Recurrences of it had taken Thomas' mother and then Allegra's. She shuddered and made the Sign over her heart.



ALLEGRA HADN'T EXPECTED Nellie's Fair to be so *big*, though of course it wasn't as big as the ruins of pre-Destruction towns like Quincy, near New Hope. She said as much to Thomas.

"Yeah, it's the biggest town I ever seen, maybe the biggest there is," he said. "Bout 3,000 people they say. 'Course at this time a year there's lots more here for the Harvest Market, folks like us."

Streets crossed O'Conner Boulevard at regular intervals. As full dark fell, people lit lamps on poles at the street corners. A little over half way up the hill they came to a large two story building on the northwest corner of the intersection. Surprisingly, most of its windows were intact.

"The hospital," said Thomas. "You're surprised at all its glass windows? During the fire, in Her infinite mercy, Gaia spared the hospital because of all the sick people in it and for people to go who'd been injured in the fire. The doctor who cared for them was a Blessed-of-the-Mother, what the Christians would call a saint." He made the Sign over his heart. Allegra did also.

"The doctor's name was DaSilva," said the elder Underwood. "A sacred name for forest. They're, you know, sacred to the Mother." They all made the Sign.

They turned east down the street by the hospital and through a district of one-story bungalows with tiny front yard

gardens and an occasional two-story apartment building. The drizzle ceased but the air remained chill. The street followed the contour of the hill to a bridge across a small brook in the bottom of a draw that separated the two hills. East of the bridge, hotels, restaurants, bars and shops catering to travelers lined the uphill side of the street. Downhill, from Thomas' description she recognized the ranks of solid little lean-tos with stout-looking locked double doors, as the marketplace.

They entered a hotel midway along the street identified by a sign above the porch as "The Welcome Inn." A desk clerk who obviously remembered them from previous years greeted them warmly. Each of their rooms was just large enough for a cot; an empty chest at its foot and a small table bearing a pitcher, basin and candle holder (but, as Thomas had warned her, no candle; the hotel sold them separately. The frugal Thomas had brought candles from home). Allegra unpacked and joined the rest of those from the caravan for a late supper in the dining room. They had arrived too late for the regular dinner so they shared a cold but ample meal and a stout, dark ale favored by father and son Underwood.

Before they left with the caravan, Thomas had warned her that the travelers from the Missouri side of the Mississippi River would be Christians. She had forced down a feeling of revulsion; Gaia forbade dislike of unbelievers. She was surprised to see Thomas on such friendly terms with them and how warmly they greeted her. Most people in Nellie's Fair were also Christian. She hoped they would be as friendly, considering Christians' reputation for dislike of other religions, especially Gaians.

Allegra finally lay snuggled in her cot in the dark. Despite weariness from the four-day wagon trip, she feared that excitement over her main reason for being here would keep her awake. She tossed and turned – for all of five minutes – before drifting off ...



POTTERY SOLD at the Harvest Market varied from the refined delicate sort used only on special occasions, or at any time by wealthy people, to utilitarian everyday pots, plates and bowls. Thomas Palmer, his wife Mary, their children and Allegra continued the family pottery-making tradition started by great-grandmother Muriel shortly after the Destruction. The Palmers were practical, frugal Gaians who lived comfortably with no more than the basic necessities. Since their unadorned, durable wares reflected their natures they sold well at the market. Thomas also brought products for the Nellie's Fair chapter of the Gaian Sisters of Charity to distribute to the needy. In the rare years he didn't sell all the pieces he brought for that purpose he added them to the Sisters' donation. Thus, not only did Nellie's Fair's Gaians and even Christians praise his generosity, he avoided transporting the fragile goods home.

Since law enforcement between settlements varied from informal to nonexistent, merchants and artisans usually travelled by caravan. Thomas had come to Nellie's Fair with this one for the entire eleven years he had sold at the Harvest Market. Allegra's entreaties to go along always encountered refusal for the same reasons: The trip was too dangerous because of brigands, accidents, unpredictable weather and other justifications that sounded made up. But now, having reached her majority at twenty she could do whatever she liked. She would go to Nellie's Fair, she said, with or without his approval. He grudgingly relented.

Of course Thomas knew her real reason for making the trip had nothing to do with the market. She wished to search for answers to a family mystery. Great-grandpa Frank Johnson, a scrounger gang boss, had been either a base scoundrel or a larger-than-life hero depending on who told the story. No one denied that he had deeply loved Great-grandma Muriel who

had originally been a member of Frank's gang. Great-grandpa thought other gang members had started paying her too much attention so, without telling the rest of the men where she was, he moved her to New Hope where she established a pottery business. He promised her he'd quit scrounging in a few years and stay home. He had a cache of gold ingots hidden somewhere. Because of their weight he brought only three or four at a time home after the end of several scrounging seasons. When he quit scrounging he would retrieve them all.

Then one year he didn't come home. And nobody ever heard from him again.

Thomas called her search a "fool's errand." The night before departure he told her, "Every generation that tells that story warps it a little. Nobody intends to but it happens. Now nobody knows what's true and what's not. Our cousins the Johnsons tell it different than we do."

She had replied, "The only way to find out what's true is go to where they knew him."

"That was almost eighty years ago. Who'll be left that remembers Frank Johnson?"

"Maybe nobody. But if I don't try I'll always wonder. Besides, I'll bet you can use some help at the market."

A sad smile spread across his long lugubrious face. "I knew some day I'd regret spoiling you so much." He hugged her.

"I love you, Thomas. I'll be good and do everything you tell me while we're there."

He drew back and held her at arm's length. "Whoa! Don't go making promises you know you won't keep."

And here she was at last in Nellie's Fair, the nearest Great-grandpa had to a home.



THE MORNING OPENED with no wind or precipitation. The sun

peered tentatively through a rent in the clouds. After an early breakfast at the hotel and a trip to the Market Master's kiosk to rent a stall, they wheeled several loads of pottery from the warehouse to the stall with rented handcarts. The sun drove away the last of the clouds as they finished stocking the stall at midmorning. Sweat darkened their armpits and backs and their feet were heavy with mud from the unpaved streets. Allegra tried not to scowl as she scraped the mud off her shoes and leggings. Rain made possible the renewal of life in the Mother-of-All's body so mud was not a nuisance but a consequence of that holy act. Allegra noticed her devout half-brother making an obeisance to the sun. Gaians didn't believe in prayer, which they considered an affectation of latter-day religions. They worshiped Gaia, the Sun and the other Powers by ritual. Thomas did so several times a day and meditated in the evenings. Sometimes days went by without her even thinking of the Holy Mother, the Sun or any of the other Powers.

As always the caravan had allowed a few extra days for the trip in case of exigencies and as usual it had reached Nellie's Fair before the market opened. That afternoon Thomas took Allegra along when he delivered the wares he had brought for the Sisters of Charity to their meeting hall. Like most Gaians, they lived in the western and poorer side of town. Their Teacher (Gaians had no leaders; everyone was equal in the eyes of the Holy Mother), Sister Annette, told Allegra that she had long wished to meet her. Thomas had praised her piety and talent at the potter's wheel on every visit. Because of her religious laxity compared to Thomas Allegra felt unworthy when Annette invited Thomas and her to share in the ritual of thanksgiving to the Mother-of-all. The Teacher followed the hallowed manner of preparing the herbal tea. The Holy Weed with which she infused it – holy because it had grown in a grove consecrated to the Mother-of-All – was in the form of a greenish-brown powder, much finer than the weed cultivated

in New Hope. When she passed the little cups around everyone made the proper acts of obeisance before drinking. At the first sip its efficacy, also superior to that of the New Hope product, pleasantly shocked her. After the third cup she realized that the Holy Weed had served the Mother-of-All's purpose: it made them all equal in her sight. By the time she and Thomas left she knew she had experienced a blessed fellowship over which Gaia had presided in her ineffable way.

At dinner in the hotel that evening she witnessed a strange pre-prandial custom. The food had been brought to the trestle tables in steaming bowls and platters but everyone sat patiently, some conversing, ignoring the food. Finally an old man arrived and stood at a place, she now realized, that had been left vacant for him. He lowered his head and folded his hands before him. Everyone except those from New Hope also looked down and clasped their hands together.

The old man began, "Our Father, we thank thee for this food ..." He droned on for some time. After he finished he sat down and everyone reached for the dishes.

She realized this was the strange Christian rite she had heard of but never witnessed called "prayer." To Allegra it seemed a parody of the Gaian ritual in which she had participated just a few hours before.



ALLEGRA HAD another day before the market opened. She wasn't sure where to start her search. She knew that the Nellie's Fair Harvest Market had begun shortly after the Destruction and Great-grandpa Frank and his gang had traded here almost every September as long as he lived. It made sense to start there. After breakfast she went down the aisles of stalls, questioning people as they stocked their stalls. To her surprise and frustration she found that even the older people knew and

cared little for the market's history or scrounger gangs from the past.

"Hey, 'Legra," a familiar voice said, "why the long face on such a fine mornin'?"

"Hey, Tobe. What're you doing here?"

"Lookin' for a good huntin' knife to buy tomorrow when the market opens. Hopefully made pre-Destruction." Others apparently on similar errands roamed among the stalls. "How 'bout you?"

"I'm looking for information about my great-grandfather. He ran a scrounger gang that used to trade here a long time ago."

"How long ago?"

"Oh, almost eighty years ago, I guess."

Tobe whistled. "I'd reckon there ain't many a his old pals left."

She glared at him. "I'm obviously not looking for his old 'pals,' but he was a pretty famous scrounger in his day, one of the richest. I'd think *somebody* would've heard of him."

Tobe grinned teasingly. "Don't look like his fortune stayed in the family long or they wouldn't've stayed in a dump like New Hope."

Allegra fumed. She wouldn't discuss her great-grandfather any further with Tobe.

Reading her mood, he put up a placating hand. "Whoa, little girl, I was just kiddin' you." He grew more serious. "The yokels you been talkin' to are just like us. They bring stuff here to sell, then go back home. They don't care 'bout scroungers. You need to go see some actual scroungers. If anybody's gonna remember anything about your grandpa it'll be them."

She thought for a moment. "You're right, Tobe, but I didn't know there *were* scroungers any more. Like in the old days, I mean, when there were more things to scrounge."

"It's a bigger business than ever now. The old ruins'll never run outta stuff."

"Ruins like Quincy?"

He scoffed. "Towns like Quincy are for folks like us to poke around in. Scroungers go for *big* cities. Like St. Louis." He pointed south where that city's vast ruins moldered. "Nobody with any sense goes there, just scroungers. Too dangerous. Chunks fall off of giant buildings. Sometimes buildings completely collapse without warning. And there's whole *fields* of broken glass to wade through. Last year some scroungers told 'bout one of their guys who got a bad cut that got infected. He died before they got him out. The only people that live there's *cannibals*."

She frowned, impatient with his puerile attempt to scare her. She had heard as many tales about the ruins and their barbaric inhabitants as he had.

"So, where do I find these scroungers, Tobe, or have they all become cannibal fodder?"

"Well, most of their stalls are down at the bottom of the hill close to First Street. They like to hang out in the bars there. That's the street along the lake that goes to North Cove."

"How will I know they're scroungers?"

"It's easy. They wear these broad, floppy-brimmed hats and ponchos and wear their hair and beards long. Their stalls are full of old-time stuff from the cities."

She looked down the hill. "Well, I'd best check with them. Thanks, Tobe."

"Good luck, 'Legra."

The sun crossed the mid-morning point as she went down the hill. The stalls nearest to First Street were locked, except for the fourth stall from the end. There, people transferred goods from a cart to the shelves. They wore broad brimmed hats, men and women alike, and wore their hair long just as Tobe had described, but no ponchos; it was too warm for outer

garments. She watched them from a distance for a time; their loud voices, profanity and laughter intimidated her. One of the women noticed her and smiled. She smiled back but decided she didn't have enough courage to approach them yet and fled up the hill.

The story continues in *Shadow Jack*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim 'Thunder Lizard' LeMay is originally from Missouri, the land of Mark Twain, Yogi Berra, Walter Cronkite, Edwin Hubble, Robert A. Heinlein and many other worthies but he has lived in many other places. He has engaged in many of his characters vocations and avocations – homebrewer, bartender, waiter, land surveyor, civil engineer, land developer – and in some they have not: author, copywriter, commercial artist and others best forgotten. Jim now calls the Denver metropolitan area home. You can contact him at jimlemaybooks@gmail.com or check out his blog at lemayshadowworld.com.

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