

THE  
APOCALYPTIC  
PIED PIPER

OR

EINSTEIN'S  
FOURTH

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STORY BITS IN PROPER ORDER:

THE APOCALYPTIC PIED PIPER or EINSTEIN'S FOURTH

THE CRY FOR HELP

VENEFICUS ADVENIT

THE MUSIC BEGINS or RECHERCHE DE TEMPTS PERDUE

CREATIO EX NIHILO:

Pinkie's Petals, Odorama Boy, Origami Girl, Defcon, The Vengeful Vomit, The Nourishing Storm, Astral Boy, And All The Rest

THE BROKEN PROMISE

THE CAVE

THE LUMINARY LIZARDS

LA VENGEANCE DES ENFENTS

Exitium gignit initium gignit exitium

THE SHADOW GAME

*"In certain Anatolian communities, to this day, string players and performers on pipes and percussion live in apartheid or ritual enmity. The blown reed, immediate neighbour to the wind, the pipes of Pan, seems to mark the precarious transgression from nature to culture. In their range, we can hear the whistling of birds, the yelp of the fox. They can belong to the solitary, the illiterate and those who cohabit, in an almost animal state, with their flocks.*

*The shrill of the pipe, mimed by our piccolo, the tremolo of the flute, can suggest or echo a whiteness as of madness. In fatal contrast, Apollo's lyre is the instrument of reasoned harmony, of Pythagorean-mathematical relations and intervals. It is crafted out of slain animals - the shell of the tortoise, the gut of the cat. The lyre induces music towards speech, towards the textuality of the lyric, of epic recitation.*

*The pipes of Marsyas are the 'woodnotes wild' of ways of life a shade less than and prior to man; the Apollonian lyre is that of a thoroughly humanised, divinely inspired species. Between them ensues a homicidal rivalry."*

*--George Steiner, Errata*

## THE APOCALYPTIC PIPER

... *Or* ...

### EINSTEIN'S FOURTH

It was over. Finally, at last, the Last Great War of Hurlled Things was over. (It had once been called, “The Next Great War of Hurlled Things,” when it started, but somewhere in the middle of it, folks got so exhausted of blood and death that they could find only one vaguely chipper conclusion in the midst of the still raging multi-theatre battles: *surely, after this war, there would be no more wars.* At least they had learned that much. At least ... and so the word changed from “Next” to “Last”. Now, they were fighting “The Last Great War of Hurlled Things”. And that was how history would remember it.

But The War had taken its toll.

What had caused The War? What had provoked this massive global incineration-confrontation, this Last Great War of Hurlled Things? That trivial point, of course, nobody could remember. Nobody, not even the wisest-of-the-wise could come close to recalling the reason.

And as for why Who was Who's Enemy, and why So and So were Allies ... well, to coin an old maxim of war (and of politics, and of corporate maneuverings, and most certainly of all ladies' clubs), *“The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”*

That is about all the explanation you are going to get, because that is about all the explanation there is.

As for any details which might prove any more elucidating than that--as to why the world was now all-but-destroyed ... well, dear reader, all those enumerations and rationalizations were as dim a memory to the Survivors of The War, as were the lazy vestigia of ice cream carts and mowed lawns and drive-in movies.

Suffice it to say that the Enemy was not Asian nor Latino, not Black nor Indian (and here I generously, without giving grace to individualities, I am meaning neither East Indians nor Native American Indians were the problem), nor was the Enemy White, or Eskimo, or Jew or Muslim or Christian. Or even Space Aliens.

Nor was it Satan.

I think you know who the Ultimate Enemy was, in The Last Great War of Hurlled Things. I think we all knew who the Final Enemy was going to be, even before The Last Great War started.

***But that The War had exacted a profound change in the world, of that there could be no question.***

Perhaps the most noticeable change was that all the governments were gone. The Enemy had blown up every building of administration, every congregation of leaders, every repository of papers ... every single vestige of government had the Enemy destroyed, strategizing that in this way, the enemy (that is to say, the Enemy's enemy) would be easier to vanquish. After all, who could fight a war without a government telling them How and Where and Why? So, in retaliation for the Enemy obliterating their government, the people leftover, the people without a government, rose up and destroyed the Enemy's government, and the Enemy's Allies destroyed the governments of the Enemy's enemy's allies, and so forth and so on, until there were no governments left in the world.

But governments were not the only institutions that had been

obliterated. Powers That Be had made sure that all the libraries were destroyed, because clearly, it was all of these books filled with ideas that gave people the idea to wage war. And big businesses were destroyed, because they always seemed to secretly celebrate the idea of war, so good for corporate economies did war always turn out to be. And churches were destroyed, because god and his might and his big holy moly agenda seemed to be always mentioned in the waging of wars, so perhaps without churches, there would not be so much Holy Warring.

And the peculiar thing was, sometimes it was not the Enemy who destroyed the libraries and the businesses and the churches, but the very people who had patronized the libraries and managed the businesses and attended the churches, so anxious were they all to make non-existent any institution which had contributed to the Idea of War.

And more had been destroyed--some by design, some from outrage, and others for the sheer joy of decimating that which humankind had wrought: monuments and shopping malls, post offices everywhere and tourist destinations near & far, circuses and zoos, museums and movie theatres, hotels and restaurants and car washes and subways and grocery stores and farmer's markets and Divisions of Motor Vehicles and Departments of Internal Revenues.

(Actually, I guess you could say that not all of the effects of The Last Great War had been bad. Nobody has had the courage to say that in the history books, but I have the courage to say it, and I am saying it here. Yes, it is fair to say that nobody missed the duumvirates and beadledoms, the stratocracies and gynocracies and pantisocracies, the feodalities and adhocracies and suzerainties, the dictatorships and seneschalships, the caliphates and magistrates, the interregnums and imperiums. Not one person thought back wistfully with fond remembrances of the rules and

regulations, the codes and the canons, the rubrics and edicts, the sanhedrins and conventicles and amphictyonic councils, the taxes and the traffic, the licenses and the permits, the bureaucracy and the bullshit.)

## THE CRY FOR HELP

*“Life is like a flute, it may have many holes and emptiness, but if you work on it carefully, it can play magical melodies.”*

*-Anonymous*

But of one sad point, there was no making argument. You could not deny the worst effects of The War: it had all but destroyed the children. Alright, yes, technically, the children still breathed and walked and talked, but they seemed to the Grown-Ups like ghosts. They were zombies. They woke from their deep sleeps seemingly refreshed, but their sleeps were dreamless. They walked with direction, but without caprice. They spoke with manners, but no whimsy. They played with energy, but no rapture. They laughed, sometimes, but only after the Grown-Ups did first, as though they needed to be signaled when something was funny. They prayed, but without the slightest clue to whom they were directing their obiescent and rote supplications.

Perhaps worst of all, though, the children seemed incapable of imagining anything. When the parents read to their children, the children's expressions were entirely blank, as though the children had no idea what their parents were talking about. As though the words created no pictures, no sounds, no smells, no tastes, no textures in the children's memories. And just as the children seemed to have no memories of The Past ... before The Last Great War of Hurlled Things ... so they seemed to have no interest in, or understanding of, The Future. Never did a child talk about what



they planned to do the next day, never did they mention what they wanted as a gift for an impending birthday, nor did wee she or diminutive he let loose the secret passion of what he would do when he grew up, what she might accomplish when she was a Grown-Up. It was as though the children had all stopped believing that they would survive long enough to grow up at all, or that a world would exist to be an adult in, if they did last that long on this planet.

Yes. There was no question. The Last Great War had turned the children into the Walking Dead.

And so ... with no other plan in the parents' minds ... with no other solution that they could collectively conjure ... they all knelt and prayed. True, there were no more churches to pray in, but they had heard, they had remembered from some shadowy past, that way back in the year 1820, a very pedestalled man name Matthew had said something very important about god and prayer: ***“For wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them ...”***

Who was this Matthew, (a gentleman whom different folks could remember vaguely as having some kind of spiritual grandeur), that was a good poser, and what had happened in the year 1820 which was so special that this Matthew fellow should be allowed some insight into god, they did not know, but still, it seemed like a good idea. The only idea left.

So all the people in the little Hamlet prayed. They put all their differences aside, fell to their knees, and had a good, long, soulful prayer for the children.

And then they waited.

And waited.

And waited.

And then. . .

Came The Piper.

## VENEFICUS ADVENTIT

*"And if there come the singers and the dancers and the flute players--buy of their gifts also. For they too are gatherers of fruit and frankincense, and that which they bring, though fashioned of dreams, is raiment and food for your soul."*

*--Kahlil Gibran, in "The Prophet"*

Came The Piper!

Oh, what a sight he was! He looked exactly like a Harlequin, from days of old, with tight leggings and a blousy shirt to match, and both decorated with fabulous flashy diamond shapes, all the colors of the rainbow. And marvelous upon marvelous--a matching coat of many colors! (With long sleeves and the coat hem dancing almost to the bottom of his leather boots!) The boots themselves were quite astonishing as well--they came high up over his knees, almost like the boots of a Musketeer, but they were not dullish black or brown, rather the boots were also made of rainbow colored triangles of leather. And the leather in those boots, oh, nobody had seen leather like that since before The War. The leather was as buttery and smooth as a baby's bottom. The coat was satin, and the leggings and blouson were of the finest silk.

## Comes The Piper!

As he pranced into the little Hamlet, all of the folks came out to gawk at him. The very first sight of him made them smile and clap. They were in explicably happy for the first time in ages.

Perhaps much of their giddiness came from the intensity of the colors of his clothing, for as you no doubt know, one of the worst side effects of The Last Great War was that it caused all the colors of the world to go so drab that it seemed now as though everything you saw was a scene from a film noir movie.

But not The Piper! Oh, what a riot of colors his clothing was, with its many diamond patches and spangly bits! The Blue was intensely Blue, but it was not the somber blue of the military flags that had been draped over so many millions of young soldiers' coffins throughout the many long battlescreeds of The War; rather it was the Blue of the ocean, all aqua and teal and midnight and royal, such as the ocean had been before the weapons and waste of The Last Great War had turned the earth's oceans the color of cancer.

And the Yellow on The Piper's garb, oh what a lovely Yellow it was, lemony in some patches, golden in others, but what a luscious Yellow. It was not the yellow of cowardice, such as seemed to be everywhere during The War, but it was the color Yellow of the sun on a perfect summer day, before the bombs had turned the sky to a permanent puke color.

Oh, and The Piper's Red! The Red was so very Red, but not the bloody red that all the Hamletfolk had grown so used to--no, this was the Red of valentines and strawberries and corvette convertibles--all things that folks had long grown sadly used to not having, in the time after The Last Great War. One woman looked at the Red in The Piper's coat of many colors, and she was

reminded of the lipstick she had chosen for her wedding so many years ago, and of the first kiss she had received as a young wife from her handsome husband. But The War had taken him, as it had taken so many others ... It seemed as though there was no end to the torrent of sad memories that flowed through the Survivors.

But I digress--Purple--did I mention The Piper Purple? It was such an intense Purple, but this was not the purple of rage, as had puffed up the faces of so many self important government men and military types, no no no, this was the same color Purple as could be seen in the purple glass pieces that made up the Saints' robes in the stained glass windows of the Hamlet church, before the Enemy had bombed it to smithereens.

And Green! As The War had destroyed so much of the earth's glorious dressings, naturally green was not a color one saw much of these days. But The Piper's Green was a magnificent thing. It was not the green of envy, a mucous color of sickly green that one saw all too much of these days, nor was it the green of covetcash, that evil nowbanned paper with the headshots of dead presidents, that had fueled so much Fight ... no, this Green, oh! this Green was the Green of emeralds, of evergreens, of the thriving verdant fields that once had rolled over the sweet dirty earth, giving wildflowers a plain for blooming, deer a home for grazing, lovers a haven for trysting, and poets a place to compose. Such a Green! Such a Green as made me, myself, weep to see.

But the Orange--ah, if the Green brought tears, something about the Orange in The Piper's Harlequin garb made people laugh and grin; the color itself exuded a warmth. This was not the orange of the sickly veterans who marched home, half dead from being sprayed with the Enemy's deadly gasses, poor surviving soldiers who harbored deep in their cells a cancer which would finally do to them what the bombs and bullets could not: consign them to a coffin long before their rightful time. No, this was not that kind of orange at all, this was a warm and inviting Orange, a

healthful and happy Orange. It was the Orange of citrus balls hanging heavy on the trees, so ripe they might drop off and konk you on the head if you stopped to stare up at them from under their pregnant branches. It was the Orange of sunsets watched by lovers as they clutched one another, it was the Orange of coy kept in ponds before they were eaten during the Starving Part of The Last Great War, it was the Orange of home fires burning in the hearth, such as women had always kept stoked and strong, so that their husbands and sons and lovers, returning home from The War, might see in the distance and know that a joyful reunion awaited them.

But perhaps my favorite (for I remember well, The Piper's first appearance in our Hamlet that day) were the Pink diamonds in his leggings and blouson and coat of many colors and boots even. It was the Pink of a flushed cheek, a cheek flushed with joy and anticipation and running and elation--such as we had seen in the faces of our children before The War, and yet so taken for granted. . .that was the color of Pink it was. And we, as a folk together, needed to find out how to make that particular color of Pink return to the faces of our children.

Comes The Piper!

THE MUSIC BEGINS

... *Or* ...

*Recherche de Temps Perdue*

*"Of all the wind instruments, the flute can do the most things the most easily. A fine performer on a flute can dash up a scale and down again so quickly that our ears cannot separate the notes.*

*A flutist can skip and jump from note to note so lightly that the music reminds us of the quickness of a rabbit or of a gazelle. He can swoop and turn and trill the notes until we think that we are hearing a bird. Musicians say that a flute can do anything!"*

*--Jean Craig, in "The Woodwinds."*

And then, just when we thought we could not marvel any more at the electric colors of The Piper's clothes, he pulled out his Pipe and began to play! It would seem to be a simple thing, would it not, the tune played by a humble wanderer's flute? But there was nothing simple or humble about this music; indeed, it was more enchanted than any sound I have ever heard before or since. ***For it had about it the ability to make the listener feel transported back to a blissful memory, a memory that one moment before had seemed forgotten for all time.***

But that was before we amnesiacs heard The Piper's magical playing.

Plays The Piper!

And not only did the listener remember a happy moment in the past, but ***the lucky listener actually felt transported there, as though they were reliving the moment in all its splendid glory, all over again***--oh but wait, I repeat myself in my giddiness. I repeat myself in my giddiness.

But there was even more to The Piper's magic music--because for each person who listened, the ***magic was different.***

One sweet young thing heard The Piper's playing and was

immediately swept back to memories of her first kiss in the moonlight, while her sweetheart was walking her home from the Fourth of July Pie Eating Contest. In the distance, you could hear (or The Piper's playing made her *think* you could hear) the Hamlet band playing in the Hamlet green, in the gazebo, and they were playing a John Philip Sousa Medley ... "Stars and Stripes Forever", "Semper Fideles", "In Flander's Field", and the like. But as the sun set, the band had moved on from marches and began playing Sousa's romantic songs such as "My Sweet Sweetheart," and "Fairest of the Fair," and "Annabel Lee". And it was while they were playing "Reverie" that this young lady's fellow, her date, still lost in a mist of pie and fireworks, leaned in towards her, belched a little before kissing her, and so his belchy kisses tasted like strawberries and blackberries and peaches and lemon meringue all swirled up together, and she thought it was surely the sweetest thing she had ever tasted.

She would never have another kiss quite so delightful in her entire life ... and all this entire osculatory remembrance brought on by one little flourish on The Piper's flute.

And to a paunchy, wizened, withered sweetcoot, made old early by The War, he was sure, absolutely sure, that the tune The Piper was playing was "Take me Out To The Ball Game," because suddenly he was flooded with distant memories of how he had once, long ago, been a professional ball player, and suddenly he was reliving it again, his finest, shining hour, when he had hit the ball right out of the park, and he had gotten a home run, and it was such a big deal that his picture was in the paper all over the country, all over the world for people who followed that kind of thing ... but that was long ago, before The Last Great War, when people still cared about things like home runs.

Yet another woman did not hear band music wafting from a

gazebo when The Piper played, rather she remembered the music of her own youth playing, on her honeymoon, in fact, and she remembered--or rather *she could actually hear* Eydie Gorme singing "Blame it on the Bossanova," as she and her new husband fell into blissful lovemaking for the first time. And as she listened to Eydie croon, the young bride celebrated the triumph of convincing her naive husband that she was still a virgin, by using a concoction of egg white, fleabane, and alum, a clever mixture she had read about in the novel "Fanny Hill." Yes, there is power in reading, dear children.

And for yet another man, it sounded to him like calliope music, like the music of a carousel at the summer fair, and he remembered taking a pretty young thing to the fair, and spending all of the money on her that he had saved up from working all summer at the munitions factory. And when he hit the barbell it went all the way to the top, and he won her the prize of a large stuffed pink beaver with funny buck teeth, and he took his gal by her tiny waist and lifted her up onto one of the carousel horses when she wanted a ride, and he bought her pink cotton candy and watched it melt upon her sweet red tongue, and he imagined ... he fantasized ...

And he could not have known in that fleeting moment that his fantasies would soon come true, very soon, later by the lake, their gorgeous lust lit only by the glow of a hundred fireflies, nor could he know that it was both the first and last time that he would ever make love to a woman, for he would be drafted a week later, and this particular private's privates would be blown into smithereens by the Enemy.

But at least he had that one time to cherish, to remember, and he was sure, absolutely sure that everybody all around him must also be hearing the sweet, heady sound of this calliope music, and his mind and his heart drifted back in time. . .



And an aging Flower Child, who had not been treated well by all the cruelty of The Last Great War (she looked one hundred years old if she was a day, although she was only forty something--it must have been all the rapes by an Enemy almost as ruthless and inhuman as the side her people were on), but where was I?, ah yes, to her, the music sounded like the full out orchestral rendition of "Knights in White Satin," and she remembered the prom, when she was slow dancing with a dreamy hippie who sported long hair and smelled of freshly grown hemp. For the full seven minutes of the song, she stayed in a haze, and as The Piper played and the Hamlet crowd all listened, it seemed to the bittersweet Flower Child as though everybody all around her was slow dancing as well, along with her. She could have sworn that they were all hearing the same music that she was. . .

And for another face in the crowd, for a middle aged sort of man--or had The War just made him look middle aged?--The Piper's music took him back, back to a glorious youth, more specifically to a glorious quarry, where he and his best buddies used to swim away the summer days. They would dive from the highest precipice, deep down into the ice blue water, then back up, breaking through the surface to a world so perfect, so sunny, so full of promise that they thought surely it had all been created expressly for them. "Lollipop" and "Splish Splash" and "Mack the Knife" and "Love Potion Number 9" and "Great Balls of Fire", as well as everything by Elvis and Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee and Buddy Holly and The Big Bopper, all these songs seemed to be playing all the time on the portable radio that always sat next to their towels and shoes and clothes (they swam buck naked, of course), and they knew with a supreme certainty that nowhere on earth was anybody more content than they were in that moment.

As they lay baking on their towels, bare-assed, talking about

the grand future which lay in front of them, they could not imagine life getting any better. And not surprisingly, it did not. All but one of them were killed, during The Last Great War, but in a freak accident, unrelated to The War, when a small plane they were flying in (to a retrospective rock concert featuring Buddy Holly and The Big Bopper cover bands, no less) went down in a small field not too far from the Hamlet.

But nobody could take away the memory of those spectacular youthful days, nor the sound of that immortal music, which had continued to play in the old man's head, until long after The Day The Music Died, and The Day His Friends Died. And all of this, all of this grand music, from the frippery of flute playing on behalf of the Piebald Piper.

And for another younger woman, she flashed back immediately to her greatest hour. It was the day she gave birth to her children, quintuplets, and she had asked, please, that in the delivery room, to help her through labor, they might play that lovely piece by Ralph Vaughan Williams, "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis," and so these lush, soothing strings ushered five lives into the world, and took the edge off the pain of giving birth, although that sweet, spiraling music did not take the pain off the Pre-War-Family-Birthing Requirements (part of a desperate Global Attempt to prevent The Last Great War), that she give up all five children except for one, the other four being opted out for Mandatory Redistribution.

And for yet another man, the Hamlet's preacher, his memory was of a different kind than all these other bittersweet and slightly carnal incarnations. He remembered one of the most difficult tasks that the universe had ever thrown at him. He was called to give the eulogy of the most hated man in all the Hamlet and beyond. It was his charge, his job, it went with his position in the church, and

almost from the moment he got up to speak, (inexplicably, hundreds had attended the old fart's funeral, but later the preacher realized that it was only with the intention to boo and hiss--and indeed the preacher had been right spot on) ... but where was I? Ah Yes. As soon as the preacher began his eulogy of the hated man, someone hit him smack straight on with an overripe tomato! So lame was the preacher's speaking style, and so reviled the dead man, that the bitter crowd was willing to "kill the messenger", if you will. They had been celebrating the dead man's passing, and they were bitter that the mobbish jubilation had to be interrupted with this public memorial so ordered in the dead man's will.

But the preacher was rather an old man himself, you see, and had grown up alongside the hated man. Neighbors they were, and over the many long years and decades of living in and around and through each other's lives, the preacher had come to understand *why* the old man was now, at the end of his life, so bitter, sad, mean, and cruel.

And so, offering up a silent prayer that god might give him the strength and eloquence to do right by this poor man ... this tragic character who had, in secret silence, in modest privacy, in terrified solitude, suffered more slings and arrows of outrageous fortune than most people do in ten lifetimes (and we all do have many lifetimes, you know, I found that out),--anyway, I ramble.

The preacher began the eulogy again. A do-over. He had the sense to "cue music," and his nephew, who had been instructed in the will to DJ the funeral, did a brilliantly executed mash-up of Verdi's "*Requiem*" and Mozart's "*Requiem*" and the "*Pie Jesu*" from Faure's "*Requiem*," and then the preacher regaled the Hamletfolk with the story of this man's life, and all its twists and turns: loss, death, dashed hopes, betrayals in business, Fate's cruel jabs at his health, with its cancers and burning arthritis, a heart wrenching tale about a puppy, an agonizing story about a kidnapped daughter, a wife gone mad from the former, that same

wife shooting herself to stop the pain, the finding of the daughter's body--you don't even want to know. Then, an anecdote about the poor suffering man turning to religion, but only then to be robbed-off by oily men-of-the-cloth who promised Heaven for a price ... and on and on the sad story of the man's life spilled forth.

By the end of the eulogy, the audience was rapt, the way one watches a tragic movie with an even more tragic end. They were weeping and sobbing, and some of them were thinking that a man who had suffered so much, yet survived it all, ought to be made Mayor of the Hamlet, until they realized that he was dead. And then they thought they should erect a statue of him, because this man had actually built the Hamlet from dirt, along with its fountains and waterwheels, its gazebo and gardens.

The preacher knew he had done right by the poor old soul, who was now dead and out of his misery, and it was a memory of this merciful triumph. . .yes, it was that amazing trifecta of "Requiems" that the preacher heard coming from that sad, solitary flute on which The Piper played . . .

And on and on the fantasies went, for all the folks in the Hamlet.

Finally, the music ended. The Piper's perfect timing suggested to me that The Piper knew each listener was just in the most magnificent throws of memory, their Recherche de Temps Perdu, but of course you know that--anyway, suddenly, there was silence.

No more breath blew through the magical flute.

Halts The Piper.

The Hamletfolk all stood in a mystical haze. Nobody knew how much time passed as they stood in their personal mists of

intimate time, and later, when everybody talked about it, there was vast argument: some said it was thirty seconds, some claimed that hours had passed. One man claimed to have experienced a birthday and New Year's while in the fog, and claimed to have gone grey in the hair because of it, and by gum he had!

But there was one thing they all agreed upon as they came out of their sweet stupors: The Piper had Magic. And they knew, somehow they just knew, that The Piper could heal their children. The Piper was the one to bring them back to life. The Piper was the Miracle for which they had prayed so profoundly.

“Oh Piper, can you work this same magic on our children, for they are numb and sad, not like children really at all. And we cannot imagine what the future holds for them, or for the world?”

And after being asked this, The Piper paused for a long time. So long, in fact, that the Hamletfolk began to get nervous: *What was he thinking? What consideration was his mind weighing in the ponderous stillness of the dusk? Would he refuse them?*

Finally, The Piper opened his mouth to speak, and the entire body of people turned their ears close to him.

“Yes, I can heal your children of their sadness. Yes, I can restore their imaginations, their joy. But it will cost you. It will cost you a lump of gold for every child--for you see, my lovely family has been kidnapped by the Enemy's agents, they are holding my lovely wife and beautiful children, and only with gold can I ransom them. I miss them so, my heart is breaking!”

Well, when the Hamletfolk learned that this was all The Piper wanted, that it was only money which stood between them and having their children restored, restored to the darling dancing creatures they had been before The War, well of course they

agreed.

Of course they agreed.

They Promised The Piper. And the Promise was a solemn one. A blood oath. And as they swore, they prayed that this was the last blood that would be shed upon the Earth.

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## CREATIO EX NIHILO

*“Regarding a sign in a store window reading: ‘FLUTE FOR SALE. EASILY CONCEALED.’ Why, although this seems at first sight so strange, does it also seem so appropriate? It is because the flute is terrible, mysterious and primitive ... the marvelous thin pipings of the flute are a link with older things - with a fearful ecstasy of melody in the first dawn ... Of all musicians, flautists are most obviously the ones who know something we don't know ... The goat eyed, the devious flute player moves softly among us, none can see the flute he carries. He walks past unsuspecting doormen, into public assemblies, into restaurants and parties - into churches, even. He nods and smiles, he talks to other people, to us. He does not reveal that he is a flute-player. For there have been rumours - a pubful of people in Croydon discovered in a trance from which they have never emerged, a bus that simply disappeared across fields, a whispered story of platelayers found sobbing in a tunnel, of thin high music disappearing into a cave, of men discovered with a look in their eyes, like that of Mole in ‘The Wind in the Willows’, after he saw Pan...”*

*--Paul Jennings, "Flautists Flaunt Afflatus"*

## PINKIE'S PETALS

The Piper already knew, knew with certainty, which power what power why power he would impart first, and he also knew to whom he would impart it. Her name, her nickname, was Pinkie, because she wore a pink dress every single day of her life: both before TLGWOHT, (The Last Great War of Hurlled Things), during it, and after it. Nobody knew how she managed it, poor thing, because she had no parents, and got by on her wits, sleeping in the church, what was left of the bombed out church that is, and foraging scraps of food from folks after she had done little chores and errands for them. But every day she showed up in a pink dress: some seemed to be dresses that had been of other colors once, but which she had dyed with wild berries, or red ink purloined from the death notices section of the Western Union War Telegraph Alliance.

Everyone cared for poor little Pinkie. The tragic thing about Pinkie was that unlike those who had lost so very much in The Last Great War, Poor Little Pinkie had lost *everything* in The Last Great War: she had lost her home and her parents, her siblings and her pets, even her diary and her fish tank and her bicycle and her little garden, which she had been growing for a 4-H project, and which she wished to harvest and take to the State Fair, hopefully to win a blue ribbon. But this was just before The Last Great War of Hurlled Things, and when the bombs started dropping, I can assure you that things like 4-H and State Fairs and blue ribbons for little girls in pink dresses were the last thing on everybody's mind.

So you see now, because her story was so sad, The Piper decided to begin with her:

The children had been milling about the Hamlet green, with no adults around to be seen, for that is as The Piper had requested,

and poor Little Pinkie was standing near a rusty water fountain, which offered no water, but which offered the hope of water with its elaborate statue-of-Neptune base. The Piper saw her gazing at it mournfully as she clutched a little red paper poppy: this was a signature of Pinkie's, in addition to her signature rose colored clothes. She could just barely remember the times before The War, and she missed the flowers from those bygone days almost as much as she missed the people. So she always carried about a sad little paper flower, that she would fashion out of whatever scraps of colored paper she might find in the trash, or blown into some doorway by the Post War Winds.

Pinkie missed the neat rows of flowers, arranged in the French tradition, that grew in the front yard of the rich man who ran the local army, with his name in proud gold letters above his mailbox, Colonel N.A. Palm. Back before the war, she would visit the flowers almost every day, pressing her face against the white picket fence, admiring the strict rows of tulips and daffodils and irises and lilies, all lined up behind the fence, like little platoons ready to march.

But just as much, she missed the crazy meanderings of the English garden down the street, the one that belonged to Mad Meg, the retired teacher, who had taught nearly every child in the Hamlet, and who had now retired into her own little world of gardening and cats and reading and treacle and tea. Meg may have been Mad as a Hatter, but her garden was impeccable--in an insane sort of way.

But Pinkie missed the wildflowers most of all. She missed the wildflowers that grew up in and around the Hamlet green, in spite of the Hamlet's landscaper, who tried to keep it all strictly resigned to purposely planted blooms. She missed the wildflowers that bravely grew up between cracks in the sidewalk, and in the dark alleys where life was determined to flourish, even where you would never think it could. But mostly, she missed the



wildflowers in the fields surrounding the Hamlet, the fields where she used to run and romp and laze and nap and dream and dance. . .and always, always Pinkie used to end her visits to the fields by picking armloads of wildflowers that she would give to her mother, and her neighbors, and her friends, but always saving one special bloom for the vase by her bedside table.

But then The War had come, and took with it all the flowers.

Now, when she wasn't having nightmares about The War, she was having sweet dreams about those fields of wildflowers: Bluebells and Buttercups and Butterfly Weed, Larkspur and Lilac and Lily of the Valley, Daisies and Dogwood, Honeysuckle and Hyacinth, Violets and Verbena ... Forget-Me-Nots and Touch-Me-Nots ... Morning Glories and Evening Primrose ... Johnnie Jump-Ups and Sweet Williams and Black-Eyed Susans.

Once, Pinkie could recite the name of every wildflower known in the entire world, in alphabetical order. Her father had been a horticulturalist and a floriculturalist, and had been considered by Authorities to be quite mad and troublesome for his crazy antics, always trying to warn the people about the horrific effects that the Impending War would have on Mother Earth. But nobody had listened.

Mostly, though, Pinkie's father had wanted very much for his daughter to know the legacy of the wildflowers which had once covered the earth, but which he knew would be gone forever, once The War was over. And so they made it their secret plan for her to memorize them all, each and every one of them, so that she might tell people about them, and perhaps they could figure out some way to bring them back to life. She would work on her list in the quiet evenings with her father, on the front porch, using a very large book with very grand pictures of each wildflower.

But all of that had been blown away by one of the Great

Blinding LazerBombs: the porch, the book, the father, and incidentally, all of the flowers of the world.

But miraculously, Pinkie had survived.

And so The Piper picked her. He leaned down beside her and said, “Little Pinkie, the world has been too long without flowers, don’t you agree?”

And of course, before you could even say “snapdragon” Pinkie was nodding so vigorously that her pigtails whipped her right in the face. The Piper smiled gently and pulled out a beautiful velvet bag, a bag of many colors, to match his coat of many colors.

“Pinkie, I want you to open this.”

And with that, she pulled the silken ribbon that loosed the tie, and she peered inside at its contents.

“Teeny tiny beads?” she said, and poured a few into her hand. “Why, they’re beautiful!” she effused.

“Yes, I agree, Pinkie. They are called Indian seed beads, but they aren’t seeds, really. They are teeny tiny pieces of round smoothed glass, and I have gathered them from all over the world.”

“What shall I do with them? Make jewelry, like the old ladies at the Survival Clubs?”

“No,” laughed the Piper, “That would be a sad waste of these magic beads. For these beads, Little Pinkie, have been blessed by wise men and oracles and shamans all over the world, and they have the power to bring flowers back to the world--but only by the right soul.”

“What kind of soul is that?” asked Pinkie, her eyes widening.

“A soul that is as pure and beautiful as a flower, silly,” he said, giving her pigtail a gentle tug, “And you know how rare those are. Now why don’t you give it a try?”

At first Pinkie looked at him doubtfully, not sure if this could possibly be true. But he had such a twinkle in his eye, The Piper,

such a sincere smirk, if there is such a thing, that she knew he could not be lying. That would be a cruel thing to do to a child, to promise such magic, and then to have it all be all a Giant Fib. . .could it really be true. . .?

And with that, she took the little beads in her hands, and tossed them, and they rolled into the crack between the flagstones on the street--and suddenly there popped up the sassiest bunch of petunias in lavender and purple and pink and coral, and the purest white! Pinkie giggled in delight, and there were ooohs and aaaahs from the children behind her. She reached into the bag, grabbed more beads, and threw them all about her, and suddenly she was surrounded by a swirl of Pansies and Daisies and Snapdragons and Lilies of the Valley--all of her favorites. There was applause all about, from the children, and from the adults behind them. (Yes, the Grown-Ups' curiosity had finally gotten the better of them.)

Within days, she had her grand plan.

You see, what you must know about Pinkie is that part of the way she survived was by trying to be so very organized, even though she was an orphan and had no home, (because all of the Grown-Ups in the Hamlet had already taken in as many stray children as they could), but even as she moved from alleyway to bombed out church to gutted car to garden shed, she kept all of her personal precious totables very organized: her comb, her brush, her seven hair ribbons, her broken tooth brush, a sliver of soap she used for everything including her teeth. . .she organized her meager changes of clothes so very carefully in this way, she organized her few pencils and pieces of paper and books in this way. . .in fact, she would even organize the things in her temporary shelters this way: rubble, bricks, shards of glass, rusty nuts and bolts and screws, little pieces of twisted metal, even leaves from the trees.

She organized blown up bits of weapons and used hand grenades and spent bullets and bullet casings. She organized broken bits of smashed toys. She organized odd bits of paper, so sometimes she could reconstruct a whole letter or a TLGWOHT pamphlet, or even a book. She organized parts of dolls, and from this, sometimes she could fashion an entire doll, and then she would trade it to some family who had a little girl who needed a doll, in exchange for a hot dinner and a place to sleep in a garage or dog's house. Why, Pinkie even organized body parts that she found blown to smithereens, here and there, all about the Hamlet and beyond. She would pretend that they were her family, until the stench got too bad, and then she gave them a very polite little burial, with thanks to God for taking them into his Heaven.

So it should be no surprise that when she was given these magical beads, along with this grandiose power, she first made a grid of the Hamlet and a list of the folks who lived there, and then she meticulously put all of the last names in alphabetical order, and then she crosshatched that with her memory of all the flowers that her dear departed father had taught her, and then she sorted all of the beads by color, (there were literally hundreds of different colors!), and she put them in her little bead box. And with this plan, she set about to re-flower the Hamlet, and perhaps even the lands beyond.

She had a spectacular next day, running up and down the streets, strewing very specific beads into very particular front lawns: Daffodils for the Davenport's, Hollyhocks for the Henderson's, Jonquils for the Johnson's, Lavender for the Lambert's, Lilacs for the Lockhart's, Peonies for the Pendleton's, Phlox for the Philip's, Roses at the Rosenthal's, Snapdragons for the Snyder's, Tulips for the Tyler's, Zinnias for the Zimmerman's, and so forth, and also bequeathing Jack-in-the-Pulpit to the Pastor, Forget-Me-Nots for the Old Alzheimer's Home, and Carnations for

the car dealership, which was not really a car dealership at all, anymore, although it had been before The War. (What it was now was a hodgepodge collection of [mostly black market and stolen] mopeds, bicycles, tricycles, skateboards, roller skates, cabriolets, jitneys, golf carts, wheelbarrows, brancards, toboggans, canoes, dinghies, hand cars, dirigibles, flivvers, prairie schooners, parachutes, rickshaws, and broken down tanks that you could buy for a song, although finding fuel for it was a ghastly ordeal.)

But then Pinkie's plan began to fall apart. She herself came all to pieces when trying to figure who should get Rhododendron, Delphinium, Xeranthemum, Amaryllis, Zephyranth--she was clueless. Nasturtiums and Pussy Willows and Titi Flowers and Cockleshells gave her quite a splitting headache.

And *that* was when she realized that flowers were not nearly such an orderly affair as everything else that she tried so hard to control in her little life. (You see, Pinkie had clung to the belief that if she could just organize her life, hard enough, completely enough, it might begin to bear some resemblance to her life as it was, before The Last Great War.)

But organizing things was not the great secret, was not the hidden key to bringing life back to the world, now that The Last Great War of Hurling Things was over. Pinkie had to relearn the secretly random ways of the world with flowers. Soon, she began to have fun with her new magic, strewing all kinds of flowers absolutely everywhere. Soon, everybody's front yard, and back yard, and even their porches and terrariums and window pots and arbors and gazebos and coy ponds were strewn with a rainbow of every kind of flower you can imagine.

Instead of thinking of the alphabet and numbered lists and grids, now when she wielded her Flower Power, Pinkie would think about rainbows, and brand new boxes of crayons, and paint parties, and parades, and prisms, and opalescent soap bubbles, and *that* is how she fine-tuned her craft. And that is why, You

Survivors of The Last Great War, the world looks as pretty as it is starting to, even on this fine morning.

## ODORAMA BOY

The Piper knew that all of the children's five senses had been very damaged by The Last Great War Of Hurling Things--partly because their developing senses had been overloaded, the poor darlings, what with deafening bombs and unspeakable sights and the stench of death, and the taste of smoky air filled with the ashy remains of incinerated human beings--and partly because when a child witnesses things so horrific, that child just naturally begins to shut down.

Easier to find a way in your wee brain just not to see it. Just not to see it, taste it, hear it, smell it, touch it. Register it.

And so The Piper decided that as a part of his healing magic, he would make certain to give the children mystical powers in which they might lead the way for the parents in the heightening of all of their senses. A return to the sensory joys of life. The rebirth of the ability to feel things again. A return to the pathos and gusto which is a very part of our daily breath.

There was a little boy in the Hamlet who could smell nothing. Absolutely nothing at all.

There was a time, before The Last Great War, when he could sniff and enjoy anything as easily as you or I might sniff a rose, or a roast, or clean laundry drying on the line, or the smell of the sky before it storms, or the perfume on a lady's neck, or the sweat on a man's back, or--well, you get the general idea.

But this little boy, whose name was Cameron, he had lost the power of smell. He lost it the day that a Stink Bomb went off right

in front of him, in the field where he was playing. Stink Bombs started off by exploding with the most hideous stench imaginable, and then ended by completely eliminating your ability to smell anything at all.

They were invented during The Last Great War, and were used by city-states who were too poor to have real, flesh-tearing, slaughterous bombs--but these humble entities wanted so much to participate in The War, because everybody else was, all the big bullying countries, and the small ones felt like they were not quite a part of world events. Left out of the frightening fracas, if you will.

Nothing makes you feel quite as insignificant as when all the other body-politics are off being at war, making world history, and there you are, left out of the action, sitting around making cuckoo clocks and high quality chocolate bars, while everybody else is writing operas and composing symphonies and sculpting statues and painting murals, all about their uppity deadly global conflicts.

So the Stink Bomb, as well as the Nude Bomb and the Balding Bomb and the Internet Connection Destroyer Bomb and the Beverage Decarbonator Bomb and the Low Self-Esteem Bomb and the Flatulence Bomb and the IBS Bomb (not to be confused with the ICBM Bomb, which stands for Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, because the IBS is just a non-lethal but very uncomfortable and embarrassing Irritable Bowel Syndrome causing Bomb), and the Ennui Bomb were all developed by war machine factories so that micro-countries could purchase reasonably priced weaponry whose effect, upon deployment, was to humiliate or bore or otherwise disgruntle the enemy, while not having quite the impact of, say, for example, thermonuclear war.

Anyway, poor old Cameron had the tremendous misfortune to be sitting in a field of jasmine and gardenias and honeysuckle and magnolia--a field that had been planted long ago, during peace

time, just to be especially aromatic (and it was right next to a butterfly garden, how lovely)--and he was reading a little book about being a forest ranger, and he was having a wonderful little picnic all by himself of bacon, fresh bread, baked garlic, and apple pie, when The Stink Bomb went off a few feet away.

It looked ridiculous and pathetic and anti-climactic, like some dud fireworks one might buy from an old roadside stand to celebrate some sad 4<sup>th</sup> of what used to be. But it did its job: it wiped out poor Cameron's sense of smell, entirely. He knew this because suddenly, his lunch lost all aroma: no smell of garlic or cinnamon, fruit or baguette. Nor could he smell the flowers as he passed through the field on his way home, nor could he smell his mother's perfume, or the smoke from the fireplace, or the memory of his dead brother (recent war death) on his bed sheets.

And that is why The Piper decided to give little Cameron the power of imposing smells.

"I dub you 'Odorama Boy,' " said The Piper, and with that, he handed the boy a large atomizer. And in case you did not know, an atomizer is a bottle, a sort of elegant bottle, with a squeeze attachment, usually an ornate ball, and it turns liquid into the finest, most delicate spray, its aim being to make things smell more lovely, but in a most subtle fashion.

But this was no ordinary atomizer. It was made of the finest crystal, with jewels ornamenting its crown, and the atomizer ball was made of woven silken threads.

Cameron--Odorama Boy--stared at it quizzically.

"What the heck is that?" he asked, taking it as The Piper offered it.

"This is a magic atomizer, and it gives you--and only you--the power to give any organic creature any smell you want. Any smell that you imagine you would like to impart to it."

"Any smell I want?" said Cameron, giggling. "But what is



organic? What does that mean?"

"It means that it has to be a living thing. Whatever you spray with the atomizer, it must be a living thing, that is the only way that its magic chemistry can work. And you can make an 'organic' smell like roses or fresh baked pastry or the seashore or puppy's breath--which is the sweetest smell in the whole world to my way of thinking--but it has to be a living creature upon which you bestow it--you know, a person or an animal, or a plant or a fish or a bird, you get the idea."

"Neato!" effused Odorama Boy--

--but before he could continue, The Piper looked him right in the eyes and said gravely, "But one thing: now, The Piper does not give orders, it is not his style. But myself, The Piper, strongly suggests that you use this power of Odorama only for the beautification of the world. There is already enough ugliness in it."

The boy nodded understandingly, and that is all they said of it. He ran off to play with his new magical toy.

So for the next few days or weeks (we don't know, it has been hard to mark the passing of time in the aftermath of The Last Great War of Hurlled Things, night and day being not at all the way they used to be), Odorama Boy went around imparting smells, playing with his new powers and having the grandest time.

To Bertha-Eugenia, the Hamlet wallflower (who was named for both of her zaftig grandmothers, as she was quite zaftig herself, even as an infant), Odorama Boy made her smell like an entire flower festival, like the good old Rose Bowl Parade, such was the sweet aroma that Odorama Boy bestowed upon her. And so beguiling did she smell that as she walked down the street, or skipped or danced (which she did more now, as she felt so feminine), she would smell like roses one moment, then lavender as she whirled around, and lilacs as she dipped down, and then lily of the valley and sometimes even gardenia if she conducted a full

pirouette. So pretty did she smell that suddenly, she was not the Hamlet wallflower anymore, indeed, all the boys followed her down the street, and they all wanted to take her out on a fancy Friday night.

And for the old drunk in the alley off the Hamlet square, who had lost all of his family in The Last Great War and had never been the same since, the one who always smelled of cheap booze, and who had puke on his jacket, and pee on his trousers, and undies that had not been changed in who knew how long. . .the old drunk who always managed to get himself a bottle of moonshine from somewhere, and who every night of his life always had a sad little party with himself and his memories, singing and laughing, and talking to ghosts. . .oh, what a tragic character he was, but there were millions of them dotting the new Hamlets that had sprung up all over the world. . .

Since Cameron did not have the power to fix the old man's life, he at least made the man smell like a proper party, complete with baked ham and roast turkey and beef stew and vanilla tapioca and apple pie and chocolate caramel soufflé, and mulled wine and spiked eggnog and hot toddies. And the alcohol smell in the spiked drinks was the smell of quality brandy and rum and whiskey, and sure enough, it made the poor old man a little happier. And he drank a little less, as he always felt full now, because the smell of dinner, of a full-out feast, was always rising up from his skin, and he was the type not to drink so much when he was full. And then, Cameron made the old man's clothes smell like laundry soap and baby powder and expensive Yerpean after shave, the kind you couldn't even get your hands on today, not since The Last Great War.

Then, for his wizened, hacking, stenchly neighbor, who had a cigarette in his mouth all the time, and who reeked of ashtray and

smokestink and cancer (not that you could get anything as precious as cigarettes these days--but KINDCHEM, the only company to survive The War, had stepped right in with a special soaking treatment for ordinary grass that made it have all the same taste and smell and chemical effect of old fashioned tobacco) ... anyway, for this old smokestack of a human being, because Odorama Boy could not stop the old coot from smoking (it was just too riddled throughout the man's body and soul for even the magic atomizer), Cameron instead made him smell like the good kind of smoke:

If O. Boy could not erase the smoke smell entirely...then POOF, one session of Imagineering from Odorama Boy, and the old man smelled of home fires and friendly hearths, of chimneys pouring out inviting white puffs of warmth to the traveler who was cold and needing the toastiness of a cozy cottage, or of some jolly pub. The old man smelled like the first day of Fall, when the smell of burning autumn leaves fills the dusky sky, and even the smoky breaths you take smell a touch like impending Halloween and Thanksgiving, of the bounty of candy and turkey, children dressed up for treats and families gathered around feast tables. . *that* is the kind of smoke the old man smelled like now, and amazingly, folks did not shun him so much, as he now smelled to them, on some subconscious level, like so much hospitality. And so the old man was not alone so much, and so he was not so lonely, and so he even smoked less.

But perhaps his best gift was the gift he gave to Margarite, the old blind woman. She had been a painter, before witnessing the Blinding Blast which started The Last Great War Of Hurlled Things, and which left so many legions of innocent folks blind. And alas, now Margarite had no option but to sit in her chair and remember those days of her greatness. And if she wanted to look at her paintings, sadly, she could only do it in her mind's eye.

But Odorama Boy had figured out a way to fix this. With one great whoosh of his imagination, suddenly--no, he did not give her sight again, because as The Pied Piper had explained, that was beyond Human Power--but it was Odorama Boy's bright idea to give colors a smell, so that suddenly Margarite's world was filled with color again.

When she smelled cherries and strawberries, or when she was filled with a vision in her brain of dozens of roses, of the gorgeous scarlet bouquets that her late husband had gathered for her from their garden every night when he came home--then she knew that she was near the color bright red, even if there was no rose nor berry around.

And when she smelled the briny breeze of the ocean blow across her face, she knew that she was holding a blueberry, not a cranberry, or holding her sapphire ring, not her ruby ring. Or she would know that the person she was talking to had blue eyes, just as her dear departed husband had had the most beautiful blue eyes.

And when she smelled pumpkin pie, she was "seeing orange." And when she walked in the autumn woods, she smelled a whole Thanksgiving dinner (turkey and yams and sweet taters with browned marshmallows and cranberry sauce and toasted buns and pecan apple pie), with its Fall colors of orange and yellow and red, umber and ocher and golden. And she thought of what Van Gogh, lost in his paints, had called the shade we call gold: "*A color for courting God.*"

And when she smelled the comforting smell of grass freshly cut, (surely the signature aroma of all peaceful neighborhoods before The Last Great War), she knew she was around the color green, and so she saw the color green. And when she smelled the sassy zest of lemon, she knew she was around yellow, and when she smelled the purple of wine, she knew she had found wild blackberries, and on and on it went--

--And the next thing she knew, old Margarite could tell what

color her paints were just by putting her nose to them and taking a whiff!

And the reason she could smell the paints--The Piper thought that O. Boy was quite the little genius for figuring this out--is that Margarite painted with real oil paints, horded from before and through The War, and these paints were made from, yes organic matter! The wings of certain exotic butterflies and moths made for equally exotic shades of blue and green. Crushed beetles of different varieties made for the most beguiling shades of red. The urine of cows fed on mango leaves created--well, use your imagination.

So Margarite began painting again, and her paintings became more famous than ever, because these were magnificent paintings rendered by a blind woman. Such were the good deeds of little Odorama Boy, to the Hamlet and to the world.

(And that is why, by the way, if you go out into the world, after this Last Dreadful War of Hurled Things, and you smell bubble gum or bubble bath, or lemon meringue pie or marzipan, or fresh rain or hyacinth, or Shalimar or puppy's breath, you will feel just that much luckier to have survived The War, for you will know that Odorama Boy has crossed your path, oh just moments ago!)

## ORIGAMI GIRL

“And what has The Last Great War Of Hurled Things left you with a mighty fear of, little child?”

The Pied Piper was asking this of a little Asian girl, with silky ebony hair, almond eyes, and a face like a porcelain doll--but looking like the saddest porcelain doll ever in the world.

“Paper!” said Kamiko, for that was her name. “I am afraid of

paper, so very afraid!”

And The Piper, even though he had heard a great many odd things in his strange life, thought this was funny. What an amusing fear, he thought, and a chuckle escaped his lips before he could stop it. And when he saw how much his tittering hurt the little girl, he immediately felt awful for laughing, and he knew that he must give her a particularly wonderful magical talent.

“Why paper, child?” he said, and all his sincere concern had returned to him.

“Well, because my parents kept that Great Library, you know, quite the largest one in the world almost, and when The Blinding Light went off, the one that. . .that. . .that killed my parents, my whole family really. . .and I remember that The Blinding Light also killed so many other people who were in the Great Library. I was on my way to the Library that day, just walking through the Library gardens, you know the one I mean, the garden with all the invisible little people in it. . .and then the Bomb went off, and it started, The Storm of Paper. I had always loved paper, before The War, because paper, to me, meant books and stories and ideas and writing. . .and fantasies and fairy tales and possibilities. . .”

The Piper kneeled down in front of little Kamiko now, intrigued. She continued her story, trembling all over.

“But with the blasting of The Great Bomb, all the books suddenly turned into little pieces of paper, and the paper was charred brown-black, and had bits of blood and guts and brain on them. . .many of them fell on me, and got that human mish mash all over my new dress. I ran home, crying the whole way. But of course, my parents were not there, they were dead. The house was rubble. It rained paper for days, like some evil snow from down below, where the bad things live. And that is why I am afraid of paper.”

A tear glistened in The Piper’s eye, and in that moment, he

knew exactly what he would do.

“I will fix it so that you need never fear paper again, Kamiko! In fact, it shall be a part of your new and amazing power!”

“Really!” said the little girl, her eyes widening. “I should love that! I should love that indeed!”

And with that, The Piper reached into his magic pack, and pulled out a piece a paper.

But this was no ordinary paper, this was the most beautiful paper that Kamiko had ever seen. It seemed to glisten and change colors when the sunlight hit it, and it even seemed to have dimensions, not just two, not just three, but more than she could count. And then, right before her eyes, with a few clever folds, The Piper turned the paper into the most beautiful paper swan. Yet strangely, Kamiko seemed disappointed when The Piper handed it to her.

“Thank you, Mr. Piper, you are very kind. But this does not make me feel powerful or magical. This is pretty, but it is just plain old origami, the ancient art of paper folding. My aunt made me little origami creatures all the time.”

“Oh, but Kamiko, this is no *ordinary* origami. Now run go put the swan in the water.”

Kamiko looked at him sideways, a little doubtful, but she obeyed. She ran to the little creek by the Hamlet waterwheel, and put the paper swan in a ripple of blue. And then, she stared in wide-eyed amazement as the white paper bird slowly turned from paper into an actual living, breathing bird. Indeed, it had grown from the size of a piece of folded paper into a magnificent white swan! The swan flapped its wings, as though it was trying to get used to the feel of real water in its real feathers.

“My goodness gracious,” the little girl effused, ecstatic! Other folks from the Hamlet had gathered around, and were also gasping and applauding, for it had been such a long time since they had seen a creature so beautiful.

For perhaps you have blocked out this information regarding the horrible Last Great War of Hurlled Things. . .or perhaps, perhaps, you have not experienced The War for yourself yet. The fact is this: almost all of the animals vanished to Someplace Unknown after The War began. Animals, both beloved by families, and wild in the woods, disappeared almost overnight. Sea creatures could not be seen in the waters, nor fished for from a boat. It seemed hardly anything swimming was left in the ponds and oceans. And birds, all the pretty birds were gone too. The darling songbirds no longer graced the skies, nor cluttered the trees, and they had taken their sweet singing with them. The only birds that were left behind were the carrion birds, who would pick at the countless stacked dead bodies, left here and there on the roads and in the fields.

But--*a swan*? The Hamletfolk were still staring at it.

But not Kamiko. Kamiko was staring in anxious anticipation at the Pied Piper's magical stack of delicate paper, all the colors of the rainbow, some of these pieces in wild and whimsical prints and patterns.

"Can we do that again?" she asked The Piper, almost shyly, but with her excitement burbling to the top.

"We most certainly can," said The Piper. And then he pulled out the most lovely emerald green pattern, and with a few quick folds, it became a paper frog. And, as before, he set in on the ground, threw a little water from the pond on it, and slowly it changed from paper to the most lovely squeaky slimy thing, with a bulging throat and funny eyes, popping out and blinking at them, and making comical frog sounds that made all the people in the crowd chuckle and clap. Kamiko laughed as she had not laughed since before The War. And with that, the frog hopped off into the creek to join the swan. Oh but did I not tell you? The frog was



made out of a funny plaid paper, so that would make it the first green plaid frog in existence!

And because Kamiko was smiling so hugely, The Piper did it again--with a mouse, and a lizard, and just for fun, a duck.

“And any of these papers can make any animal I wish, just from the proper folding of it?” asked Kamiko, beaming at the creatures cavorting in the water.

“Yes, that is the magic of it,” said The Piper, solemnly handing her the stack of magical paper. “But remember, little Kamiko, in order to make it work, you must use all of your imagination, and you cannot do that watching video games, or television, or fiddling with ipods. Off you go now.”

And so Kamiko skipped off, and in the days that followed, what a busy girl she was! She went to the fields and forests, and there she made paper deer and raccoon, owls and doves, bears and foxes, rabbits and tortoises.

Then she peddled her bike to the ocean, which took her the better part of a day, but she didn't mind, and she folded angelfish and seahorses, crabs and lobster, shrimp and jellyfish, pelicans and seagulls, sharks and whales and dolphins, and more kinds of fish than you can imagine, all from the particularness and details and delicacy of the folds--and from the careful choosing of the color and texture of paper, naturally. And now the origami magic had populated the ocean and beaches again!

While she was at the ocean, she met some scientists in a boat on their way to the North and South Pole, to study what The Last Great War Of Hurlled Things had done to those places, and Kamiko gave them some origami polar bears and penguins, sea lions and fat funny walruses, with instructions that the scientists should give them all new happy homes.

And on her way back, she came across a circus, which was going to release all of its animals back into the jungle, because

nobody went to the circus any more, what with preoccupations of The War and all. So Kamiko gave them origami lions and tigers, and monkeys and elephants and giraffes and crocodiles and parrots and dik diks, with instructions about how they should repopulate the jungles of the earth.

She even made them a paper airplane to fly there in, with instructions about how to make *that* grow!

Then she went to the dilapidated, bombed-out farm where she now lived, and folded a whole field of cows and pigs and sheep and chicken and horses and roosters, and a couple of rats to keep the cats on their toes, and a Scottie Dog and a Dachshund, just as she had loved and kept before the war.

And then, for her final journey, it was a bit of a sad one (but a path she knew she must travel), she went to the garden in front of the Great Library, the library where her family had been killed. Once she was there, Kamiko gently made her weepy way to the humble shrine she had fashioned for her dead family, and with her magical power, she put coy in the pond, and cranes marching about, and peacocks strutting about, and even a panda or two, lolling about in bamboo trees, so that the ghosts of her ancestors might rest in opulent beauty. And then, without even knowing that it was within her power, she blew a gentle, foggy, enchanted, ever-lingering mist into the shrine, to soften the entire scene, so that it made everything look like a beautiful dream.

Kamiko walked on, then suddenly stopped. She stood in the garden, which was trying so very hard to come back to life, and who do you think she met there?

She met Little Pinkie, who was repopulating the Library Garden with every manner of flowers, and already it was breathtakingly beautiful! So while Pinkie did that, Kamiko used her magical origami to add to the garden snails and mice and

spiders, and ladybugs and inchworms and butterflies and bumblebees and dragonflies. Acres of beauty were thrumming and buzzing and blooming and quite bursting with life!

The Library Garden was even grander than it had been before The Last Great War!

And then, as the sun was setting, little Kamiko made a whole stack of stars. Not just white ones or gold ones, but stars of every color, for the new Heavens after The War, for God to live in when he came back from wherever he was, and Kamiko flung them high, high, high, into the sky, and by the time they got to where they were going, the sun had set, and the sky was black, but it was lit by a hundred times a hundred times a hundred stars, sparkling like Jewels in the Crown of the King of Heaven.

## DEFCON

There could be no question about it, little Amadeus was the Hamlet prodigy. His mother and father had both studied music, but he had a natural skill, no, more of a genius, that even both of his parents envied--so, of course, he was named after Mozart. He was born at the beginning of The Last Great War, and at the tender age of six months, he was standing proud and singing operatic arias that his father played on what was left of their stereo system. He could sing in Italian, French, German, Tagalog, it made no never mind to him. He picked it up as easily, as casually, as any other toddler might pick up a turd from the front lawn.

As soon as his clumsy baby digits could handle a flute, he trilled forth with Debussy's "*Syrinx: A Flute De Pan.*" And before his father had to hock the family's acoustic guitar to pay for food, Amadeus, not more than two years old, was belting out "*Perfidia*" on the flamenco guitar, in an impeccable Castilian accent.

And on and on it went like that. Now, as you surely remember from The Last Great War, so widespread was famine and suffering that almost everybody who had a musical instrument sold it or hocked it, so that soon only the Very Rich owned them, and as the Very Rich were always too busy tending to their War Wealth to learn how to play an instrument, the instruments just sat there on shelves, under glass, on display. Which I think is frightfully sad.

But there were a few ridiculous instruments that nobody wanted, or that had no apparent value, or that folks found stuck away in attics and basements, without the slightest clue of how to play them, so these oddments, through word of mouth, made their way to Amadeus, who was a genius at making these odd, undesirable, freakish treasures create the most beautiful sounds. By the time Amadeus was eight, he had in his collection a Sackbutt, a Diddley Bow, three Harmonicas, an Accordion, a Heckelphone, a Ukelele, a Crotalum, a Didgeridoo, a Theremin, a Drum Buddy, a Banjo, a Hurdy Gurdy, Bagpipes, and a Wah Wah Peddle. (But guitars being almost impossible to find, he had to use it with his Hurdy Gurdy or his Hardanger Fiddle.) I am sure it goes without saying that he also owned a Gee Haw Whammy Diddle, and of course, several kazoos with a variety of tonalities and ranges.

People came from near and far to hear him play, and then it came: the offer from the foremost musical teacher in the entire world, Robert Shafer. Robert Shafer had heard this amazing child, and agreed to take the boy under his wing.

There was only one problem. The journey to Robert Shafer required that little Amadeus travel half way across the world, where he would live with Robert Shafer, and study and learn and rehearse day and night. Amadeus needed money for the trip, and his father did not have it. So here the intrigue begins: unbeknownst to his parents, little Amadeus arranged to get the

money for himself.

One of the Strategists in The Last Great War needed a spy, a spy to go into a nearby base where The Enemy had been able to make inroads. Getting onto the base and into the buildings required all kinds of sub rosa shenanigans, but most importantly, they involved a small child, one that could crawl into tiny openings in chain link fences, and into air vents, and pipes and ducts, and all that kind of thing. If he could bring back information about The Enemy's next move and future battle plans, Amadeus would be given a great deal of money. Enough to make his journey to go study music.

What follows next in the story involves a great deal of espionage and cloak 'n dagger, and thrilling spy what-not; suffice it to say that Amadeus went on to sneak his way into the camp and into the Headquarter Building every night for several days in a row, with great success.

Until the night he was caught. It would seem that The Enemy *knew* he was listening the entire time, and had been feeding him misinformation. Finally tired of the game, they ripped off the grate to the air duct, found the little boy where he was eavesdropping, and dragged him out by--oh no--the ears!

“That’s enough of that, you little miscreant!”

“We’re going to teach you a lesson you’ll never forget!”

“You want hot juicy information--here it is!”

And with that, they rammed hot peppers into the poor kid’s ears, as deep and hard as they could. It was as though the little boy could feel the burning all the way into the center of his brain.

He screamed and screamed. But The Enemy just laughed.

“Let that be a warning to your unscrupulous military, who tries to outsmart us, you little fartsnapper!”

And then they let him go. He ran all the way home.

And he could never hear another thing after that. Not so

much as a cricket chirping.

The Hamlet doctor could find nothing actually wrong with the little boy's ears, but Amadeus lived in silence from that night on, never able to hear music, or a baby's laugh, or the soft sound of rain or the timpani of thunder, or the tweeting of the birds or the whoosh of ocean waves. This musical prodigy could hear nothing. And he never played another instrument again.

And as if life wasn't cruel enough, as The War amped up, the Hamlet Bully gave him his new nickname, and it was a nickname that was to stick. The Hamlet Bully called the little boy "Defcon".

So that was why The Piper gave little Amadeus the gift of The Music of the Spheres. The Piper kneeled down next to the boy and said,

"...No, alas, I do not have the power to give you back your hearing. I do not have that kind of magic. But I can let you listen to something wonderful, something wonderful that a mere mortal cannot hear with their merely mortal ears. Only the very special can hear it. I am speaking of The Music of the Spheres."

"Music of the Spheres?" asked Defcon quizzically.

"Yes. It is a music beyond the human realm. It is magical. It is mystical. It is the same reason that you, though deaf, can hear me now, and always. It is the music of the Universe, of the Angels, of God himself, and only the pure of heart can hear it. Can you hear it?"

And then, the little boy leaned forward ... and listened very carefully ... and he nodded. He beamed and nodded to The Piper.

Now what he heard, I cannot tell you, for I am not pure of heart, but I do know from the look on the boy's face that indeed he heard something. And beyond just being able to hear it, in that moment, with a flourish of his pipe, the Piper gave Amadeus a magical baton and *the power to bestow it*. All the child had to do

was make some grand conducting gesture up at the skies, or the clouds, or the heavens, or whatever presented itself when he arched his neck and peered high above his head--and the Music of the Spheres would resound with a celestial verve.

Whatever the boy wanted the world, the sky, the air all around to play, that was what was heard by all within earshot.

If a grieving soul was going to the Hamlet cemetery, to visit some beloved departed one that they had lost in The Last Great War, Defcon would see to it that something serene and sad and special, usually Chopin's "*Nocturne in C Sharp Minor*," or "*Posthumme in C Sharp*" would waft down from the very heavens themselves. And perhaps it would begin to rain, so that the bereaved would at least know that they were not alone in their sadness. It seemed as though the angels themselves were weeping for the departed, and that is how Defcon wanted it to appear ... and who is to say, perhaps that is how it really was? It had rained a great deal since The Last Great War, and perhaps that is precisely what it was. Perhaps the angels were weeping.

And lovers--for yes, there was new love bursting forth, in this time after The Last Great War--lovers would splash through public fountains, which volunteers had taken such pride and care to rebuild, and as the lovers splashed and splashed about, they would hear Ravel's "*J'eux d'eau!*"

If a fisherman was having a particularly good day, and found one of the few fish left in the stream, so that his family might have fresh trout for dinner, the skies would begin to pour forth with "*Lied Die Ferelle*," and voices, distinct voices, would burble up from the water: "*Dieu fluvial riant de l'eau qui le chatouille!*"

But Defcon also had a sense of humor about his new magic. Feral cats yowling away in the dark Hamlet night always prompted

the very night itself to start playing, out of the blackness, Rossini's "*Duetto Buffo Di Due Gatti*." Although sometimes Defcon would also arrange to play it when two of the Hamlet ladies stopped on the street to gossip.

Or if a woman was gazing at herself in a mirror for a Narcissistically long time, she heard the unmistakable sounds of "*Ich werde mich noch selbst anbeten*", and although she would swat at the inexplicable, sourceless sound like it was an annoying gnat, the swatting only made the music louder.

A man listening to his shrew of a mother-in-law nattering and raging on always heard, in invisible accompaniment, the Queen of the Night aria from Mozart's "*Magic Flute*."

If Defcon wanted to mock a concert that the newly formed Hamlet band was hosting in the Hamlet square gazebo, (for they were the most terrible and pompous musicians, left over from marching in The War Band, marching along side those who were getting shot at and so forth, inspiring them to die for The War and shed blood for the feuding heads of state), then Defcon would close his eyes, listen to the universe for its invisible notes, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Movement of Beethoven's "*Pastoral Symphony*" would begin to play. But it seemed to amuse the audience.

All in all, the Hamlet folk loved that there was music again in their lives, even if it was invisible music, even if they could not find the source for it, for it had been so long since there had been any real music.

Almost every morning, come the dawn, just to get folks rousing, Defcon would have the heavens play Edvard Grieg's "*Morning*," or the "*Pastorale*" section from Giacomo Rossini's "*William Tell Overture*," or--if for some reason, Defcon thought he really needed to get people roused up and out of bed--he had the skies blow out, (at "10" on the Celestial Speakers no less),



*“Sunrise”* from Strauss’s *“Thus Spake Zarathustra.”*

Rainy days were soothed with the mystical invisible piano lamentations of Chopin’s *“Prelude # 15 Raindrops,”* and lovers caught in thunderstorms were sure to hear an angel’s voice singing Vivaldi’s *“Rain”* as they got drenched, and then, later, the sky was filled with Erik Satie’s *“Apres La Pluie.”*

Go for a picnic in the fields on the Hamlet’s edge, and you were sure to hear *“L’Apres midi d’un Faune.”*

Once again, the humble Hamlet was beginning to feel like a little slice of paradise.

But it was not all classical music, either. The New Hippies preaching peace and eating mushrooms from the Radiated would be serenaded with *“Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds,”* and whenever someone climbed up to the top of the Hamlet bell tower to read off a list of the Dead, nobody could find a knob to shut off *“A Day in the Life.”*

And for the youth ... ah, youth ... the hope of the future, those few young souls who were brave enough to leave that sad Hamlet and strike out for places unknown, like some 22<sup>nd</sup> century Road Warriors ... As they met in secret places, basements and alleys and even tree houses, and planned their escape from that confining and narrow Hamlet, with its residual detritus of bigotry and war hate and a growing sense of isolationism, of anti-everything, Defcon would cause the Universe to gradually unleash the strains--with ever-increasing volume--of *“We Gotta Get Outta This Place”* and *“Piano Man”* and *“Somewhere”* and *“Fast Car”* and *“Thunder Road”* and *“Born to be Wild”*.

And for those who actually had the courage to follow through with their dream of a Great Escape, as they road their choppers out of town, fast and far away from the little Hamlet, they heard, blasting from the neon skies above their bikes, the very best of

Ozzy: “*Road to Nowhere*” and “*Shot in the Dark*” and “*Bark at the Moon*” and “*Mama I’m Coming Home*”--and oh, did I forget to mention O.O.’s cover of “*Born to Run*”?

And of course, of course, the thundering wondering skies played that loudest of all, the heading, heralding glory of it all spewing forth from what could only be described as the Bang and Olufsen Beosound 24ct gold Diamond Edition Sound System.

Such was the eclectic yet oddly appropriate musical serenading of Defcon, the little deaf boy charged with bringing music back into the world after The Last Great War of Hurlled Things.

## THE VENGEFUL VOMIT

When it was time to move on to the next child, The Piper did not choose who was to be next, but rather, the gaggle of children clustered all around chose for him. Without speaking a word to each other (*it was as though they knew who needed magic, and needed it **now***) they moved aside, creating a path, and revealing who was standing on the very back edge of the group of children. The Piper moved through the path that the children had made, and what he saw--it stopped him in his tracks.

He tried not to show his alarm at how the little girl looked, for he did not want to hurt her feelings. But he reacted before he could stop himself. **His** mouth dropped open in shock because. . .**she** didn’t have one! The little girl had no mouth. It was her friends who explained the whole story to him. They all babbled the story at once, and this is the distillation of it, as one voice:

“She had a mouth before The Last Great War, you see, and she was quite a normal little girl. But then the Blinding Light

happened, and the world wide fighting that came with it, and all the Grown-Ups got tense and angry and afraid and mean, and, well, you see, they said so very many cruel things to each other, and even to the children, so much so that this little girl became frightened of becoming like that. Cruel with the words. Ugly in the mouth. You see, Angelica--for that is her name--Angelica is the nicest little girl you could ever want to know, but her parents--they died in The War, you know--they were so hateful to her. Anyway, Angelica became more and more afraid that she would become as cruel as the Grown-Ups, and she said that she could even feel that meanness growing up inside of her, and the ugliness of speaking outside of her, all around, it got worse, and, well. . .gradually, her mouth started to fade away. Then one day she woke up, and she had no mouth. It was just gone.”

Now, you should know that during the entire time Angelica was hearing her friends speak for her, she was nodding vigorously, as if to say to The Piper, “*Yes, that is my story,*” for The Piper was the first Grown-Up she felt she could trust since before The Last Great War. Sometimes she would scribble words on little pieces of colored paper that she carried with her, and hand them to The Piper, words like “*Cruel*” and “*the Grown-Ups*” and “*terrified*”, as though to punctuate the thoughts of the friends speaking for her.

But The Piper’s response was just to beam from ear to ear. (In doing so, he hoped it did not seem to little Angelica that he was flaunting his smile at her. The fact that he *had* a mouth, that is.) For you see, now that he knew what was wrong with the little girl, he knew he could fix it.

“Oh, do I have a gift for you, little Angelica!” he announced, “That is to say, not a gift like a present, but more of a talent. A sort of trick that you can pull on the Grown-Ups, and anybody else who upsets you and says nasty things. I will play a little flourish

on my pipe, and with that, you will be able to make *anything you want* come out of the Mouths of the Meanies, just by concentrating on it, and pointing at them. Now, of course, you must do that by concentrating as hard as you can, and that means no damaging your imagination or filling it up with the wrong things, like screens or machines, or other devices with excessive buttons, or other technologies that work to destroy the dreamings of little children.”

And with those words, The Piper whipped out his pipe, played a quick flourish on it--and Voila!

The Piper could have sworn he heard little Angelica giggling, even though she had no mouth, so excited was her face at the thought of this new talent.

And it took her no time at all to try it out, for just as they were standing there in the moment, the sweet stillness of the perfect afternoon was cut by the mean scream of the Hamlet Bully. He was twelve, and he was fat as a prize pig, and he loved to pick on the littler children who made the mistake of crossing his path. This time, it was Claude, the little boy who now lived out his life entirely in a wheelchair, because of--you know what I am about to say--a profound tragedy that happened to him during The Last Great War. But he does not like anyone to talk about it.

So then back to our present story: Claude was just minding his own business, humming a little tune and quietly wheeling down the lane, on his way to the second-hand store, to see if the friendly proprietor, who always took pity on the crippled boy, had any used candy to sell him.

And that is when the Hamlet Bully let it rip:

***“Hey Wheelchair Boy, how ‘bout you gimme a ride? You got a license to drive that, gimpie? You got tags? Is that vehicle legal? What happened to your legs, did your ugly old dog chew them off? Why I bet if I chased you down the street, you would pee your--”*** and then the Bully glanced to one side and saw

Angelica glaring at him. He turned on her: ***“Hey, Angelica, what are you looking at, you mouthless freak baby--”***

And then, before he could say another ugly word, Angelica stared at him with her penetrating green eyes, and pointed her finger--and soap bubbles started coming out of the Bully's mouth! At first all of the children, and some Grown-Ups who were passing by on the street, just stared in wonderment. But then, the sight of this riot of iridescent bubbles coming out of the Bully's mouth, first dozens of them, then hundreds, made everybody cackle. They laughed and bellowed, all the while the Bully was staring down at his mouth, cross-eyed from trying to look at what was coming out of it, and he made funny hacking sounds as he tried to get all of the bubbles out of his mouth, so that he might be able to cuss out the kids again, even crueller this time.

But to no avail. As long as his mouth was open, the soap bubbles kept coming out, and everybody just laughed harder and harder, until the Hamlet Bully had no choice but to run crying down an alley to his house, where he planned to stick aluminum foil in the taffy his mother was making for the Survival Ladies' Bake Sale, just so he could watch the look on people's faces when they chomped down on it.

Everybody applauded Angelica. She took a charming little curtsy. And The Piper could not help but notice that although Angelica still had no mouth ... he *did* see the return of one dimple.

*And* it was only a few short minutes later, down at the other end of the Hamlet square, when the Swamp Rugby team's Head Cheerleader was walking home, and the haughty Head Cheerleader saw a girl who everybody knew to be The Loneliest Girl in the Hamlet sitting alone on a park bench, staring at a trail of ants, feeding them little bits of popped corn in between handfuls she fed herself. The Head Cheerleader called to the Homely Girl ***“Hey, Fatty, hey, Miss Eating Machine, you're so fat, you got more***

*chins than a Chinese phone book. And your so dumb, if I gave you a penny for your thoughts, you'd owe me change. And you're so ugly, you could back a dog off a meat truck--"* but before she could finish her rant, one glare and a point from Angelica, and gumdrops started flying out of her mouth. Now, it was everyone's turn to make fun of the cheerleader!

The next day, all of the children were following Angelica around, hardly able to wait and see what foul mouthed person Angelica would playfully punish next--that's when she saw Spiney Bitters, the mean teen who had never gotten over having his motorcycle taken from him by soldiers in The Last Great War because they said they needed it for their army, so Spiney Bitters was mean to the world right back. When Angelica saw Spiney, he was kicking a little puppy down the street, because it had eaten a hotdog that had dropped to the ground out of Spiney's hands before Spiney could catch it.

***"FUCKEDUPPUP!"*** He yelled, giving the puppy a good hard kick and laughing as it hurled into a lamppost and cried out plaintively. ***"I'LL GIVE YOU SOMETHIN' TO CRY ABOUT!"***

Just as he was about to curse it again and kick it again, that was the precise moment when Angelica glared at him with intensely ice blue eyes (they had a magical way of changing color), and she pointed right at Spiney's cakehole. In the blink of an eye, animal crackers started spewing out of Spiney's mouth.

And not just ordinary animal crackers, but the special kind with pink and white icing. And not just ordinary kinds of animals either, not just the usual bears and giraffes and lions and tigers, but wombats and wildebeests and wolverines, tamarins and tariers and tapirs, spider monkeys and proboscis monkeys, prairie dogs and platypuses. And dik-diks. Because Angelica had read about them once in a National Geographic, and they always made her feel like the very opposite of the Mean Words.

That stopped Spiney in his tracks, you'd better believe it. But he was the only sensible one of the Grown-Ups so far, (or at least he was practically a Grown-Up): being a little peckish at the time the incident happened, he sat down, took the animal crackers, and, as a punishing Grown-Up might say, "you think about what you did."

And so Spiney did. He thought about what he did, and he ate the animal crackers with the white and pink sugar icing.

In the meantime, Angelica took the puppy home and made it her own, and nursed it back to happiness, which, the puppy being a puppy, took about five minutes.

And then, just the next day, there was Old Lady Klumpp, who hated everybody, even white people, and she had been mean for as long as anybody could remember. All she did, every day, all day long, was sit in her house, usually on the toilet, and do jigsaw puzzles on her portable breakfast-in-bed table, all day long, year after year, only stopping to lumber to the Hamlet stationer's to buy more puzzles, and even then, she cussed people out on the streets, and crabbed at the store clerks.

It wasn't as though anything bad had happened to Old Lady Klumpp, to make her so angry; it was a well known fact in the Hamlet that she had always been mean, even as a kid, many decades ago, when she herself was something of a female Hamlet bully.

*And* she would get particularly mean when kids would cut across the back of her yard, which they did only way in the very back edge of the large acre, and only right near the line of trees where the woods started, where they were always careful not to trample anything.

But Old Lady Klumpp hated the sight of those children. She would call the kids hateful names, but this time, this particular

time, she planned to sic her dog on them too.

***“Goddam kids! You fartsnappers! What the hell you ugly little turds doing, trespassing on my land! Every time I’m in the goddam toilet trying to pinch a loaf, you little loose stools all come dirtying up my land. Bunch of dingleberries. Useless butt nuggets. That’s what you are, you’re nothing but a bunch of Barker’s eggs!!!”***

Well, you know what is coming next, I bet. In fact, you’re probably wondering why the old crone was able to go on for so long. Well, that’s because Angelica had stopped when she heard a bird sound so angry at another bird it could only be cussing, so she stared and quickly pointed and made ticks and worms vomit out of its beak--but she quickly caught up with her friends in time to hear the tail end of Old Lady Klumpp’s rant:

***“I guess all together, you kids will never amount to nothing more than a big squat of runny diarrhea--”***

And just like that, with a point and a glare from Angelica’s hazel eyes, the torrent of ugly poo words stopped, and ***jig saw puzzle pieces began flying out of old lady Klumpp’s mouth!*** They spewed forth as though they were being sprayed from a hose. Soon puzzle pieces were littering up the old biddy’s lawn, and finally she had to slam shut her window, although it did not quite shut out the sound of the children who were laughing hysterically at the mean old lady.

Of course, you may be wondering why Angelica did not make something worse come out of the old lady’s mouth, more befitting of her vile rant, but Angelica was as sweet as any child you could ever meet, so she liked to replace the ugliness with something funny or nice or pretty.



But the children's sojourn through the backwoods of the Hamlet, of the forest that butted up against folks's backyards, it was not over. They all wanted desperately to catch Buzz Aun in the act of doing what he loved doing most for sport: shooting the beautiful songbirds, who had only just started to make their way back to the towns and villages and hamlets, from wherever they had gone to hide all during the Long Sad Horrible War of Hurlled Things.

***“Sumbitch songbird!”*** he yelled, and the children ran over to his backyard just in time to hear shots ring out and witness a beautiful chirping robin as she fell dead to the ground.

***“That’ll shut you up, you little warblehead. Keeping me up all day with your goddam tweeting!”***

But this carnage was just beginning, because the gunfire had raised a ruckus with the other birds in the trees. Buzz Aun had gotten out his binoculars, and he was an ace shot. In a few minutes, he had taken out a thrush, a skylark, a mockingbird, a cardinal, and a nightingale.

It was just then that Angelica finally caught up with the rest of the children, for she had been helping Old Lady Klumpp wedge open the paint-shut bathroom window, because, by the time Angelica left, the bathroom was filling up and Old Lady Klumpp was up to her chin in spewed jigsaw puzzle pieces. (She still had not stopped cussing out the children. Some people never learn.)

But Angelica switched gears, and in no time she had turned her steely little chocolate brown eyes on Buzz Aun, stared at him with her laser like finger, and ha ha! Feathers! Feathers of every color, shape, and size began shooting out of old Buzz's mouth, like he had just swallowed a whole flock o' somethin'.

So that's how the days were, for little Angelica.

The Piper was not the only one to notice that ever so gradually, Angelica's mouth was emerging, from a dark cavern of nowhere, back onto her face. But it wasn't quite there yet. . .

Angelica spent the next whatever time just as she had spent the first few days of her magical power--doing more good and pulling more pranks than I can even list here. Some became legendary among the kids. There was, for example, another sour old harpy Crone who lived in the Hamlet, a wizened woman who was not that old, maybe only thirty or forty, but her meanness and ugly words had made her wrinkle up her face so much in odious expressions, that now she was as deeply and permanently wrinkled as if she was a hundred and fifty years old.

So when she started bellowing ugly thoughts to some other gossips about ***--These danged Sandniggers who just moved into our Hamlet, they're worse than regular Niggers! Ain't it bad enough we got Kikes and Wops moving in!*** --Well, what do you think happened next? Angelica just happened to be walking by, and she heard, of course, all of the Crone's cruel rant: ***"I swear, ever since the border fences got blasted over, we got everything from Beaners to Zipperheads to Roofuckers wanderin' into our Hamlet. It used to be so nice and white."***

And with those words, Angelica concentrated, lazered her periwinkle eyes, and pointed--and what do you know, suddenly lovely rose petals started liling out of the lady's mouth, almost like a small ocean wave, but with crests of pink and red and white and mauve and peach. Rose petals every color you can imagine!

And just as the Bully and the Head Cheerleader had done, the Crone looked cross-eyed down at her mouth, and like the Bully and the Head Cheerleader and all the rest, she could do nothing to stop it. And, yes, like all of the mean Grown-Ups in the Hamlet, she too had to finally give up, but she could not run home. She was only capable of hobbling slowly with her cane, while the

children laughed and pointed.

I myself vividly remember the tail end of little Angelica's magic, and I dare say, I think that the last two incidents were her finest. It was just after school, when Angelica was walking home, noticing that everybody's windows were open, it being such a nice day and all, and--

***“YOU FUCKING CUNT--”***

That was Lester Cain, the richest man in all the Hamlet. And he said it at the same moment that he cold cocked his wife across the jaw, sending her smack into the wall.

But he would never utter that word again, nor any other string of ugly words for that matter, because in that moment, and in every moment that he tried to after that, for the rest of his life, Lester Cain could not talk, he could not speak a sentence, but rather when he opened his lips, beautiful, jewel-colored butterflies would flutter out of Lester Cain's mouth. And so that pretty much wraps up the story of Angelica's healing by The Piper.

But we have saved my personal favorite for last.

The WOLF news station was on, and Angelica was in the house where she lived for now, staring at it and trying to understand why the news was so important to the Grown-Ups. (WOLF was short for World Order Liberation Federation.) It was pretty much the New World Order; the “Global Government,” was how the Grown-Ups referred to it, and the New World Order was so important that they had their very own news station. It was only a fledgling, upstart government, but it was the only one anybody had right now, so folks had high hopes for it, as many people were starting to miss government programs like welfare and the post office and the department of street paving.

News had changed A GREAT DEAL, since The Last Great War: everybody was so angry all the time, and SO anxious to

blame other countries and cultures and religions and such. And also all the defunct governments which had previously had laws against saying mean things, (and the FCCs that monitored such things), anyway they had all been blown up, right to smithereens, so people said pretty much anything they wanted to, right on the evening news. Oh, yes they did. Because after The Last Great War, **complete and utter Freedom of Speech** was the one thing that everybody could agree upon, as it was one surefire way of venting forth the simmering, seething rage that boiled within everybody. . .

A woman on the WOLF station--a pretty blonde woman in a sexy red suit--was staring into the camera, with the word EDITORIAL printed in electronic letters on the screen below. She smiled as she spoke: *“And another thing that pisses me off about these goddam Ragheads, these Camel Jockeys, besides the way that they smell of course, is they don’t even believe in--”*

And with that, the words stopped. Because Angelica had pointed, and her lavender eyes were searing the woman’s soul:

Confetti, crazy confetti every color of the rainbow started shooting out of the news anchor’s mouth. It spewed from her throat, right through her lips, out into the ugly world, and filled all those who saw it with carefree joy and celebration and an inexplicable desire to start marching in parade formation. The newsy lady grabbed at her throat but it just kept projecting into the studio; it seemed to the 3D TV as though the confetti might jettison right out into the room where Angelica stood.

And in that moment, Angelica got her mouth back, quite completely. Her voice worked again. And that mouth was smiling. Smiling Big.

## THE NOURISHING STORM

And then there was Wee Willie. Now, Wee Willie had been a spindly child to begin with, born prematurely and so skinny, he had to run around in the shower to get wet. So skinny that when he stuck out his tongue, he looked like a zipper. So skinny that his pants had but one back pocket. Let me tell you, Wee Willie was surely the runt of the litter, and when The War came, with all of its shortages of food and so forth, poor Wee Willie got even skinnier.

So in the case of Willie, The Pied Piper kept it simple and strong: The Piper gave Willie the amazing gift of being able to make food fall from the sky. Now, The Piper was no fool, and he did not want to give the children absolutely unlimited powers, so he explained it to Wee Willie. (The Piper knelt down and placed his hands on Willie's shoulders, secretly heartbroken about how emaciated the boy was.) Then he put forth the conditions:

“Now Wee Willie, you cannot make the sky rain food just because you feel like it, or just because you are peckish. The sky must be ready to rain anyway, understand? And then, *that's* when your new powers can work their magic on the sky! So when you see the clouds darken overhead, and you hear the thunder begin to rumble, and you see the first flash of lightning, that's when you know it's time. First you look at the sky and concentrate as hard as you can on what food you wish it to rain--only one food at a time can fall from the sky, mind you--and then, raise your hands above you, and tinkle your fingers on your skull, like raindrops. And like magic, the food of your choice will fall from the heavens!”

Sure enough, Wee Willie did not have to wait too long, not at all. That very afternoon, the storm clouds gathered, and so Willie ran out to a great field, followed by the other children, and many hungry Hamletfolk.

And then, the first disaster hit! It was a small disaster, and

one that would be quickly remedied, but it was a disaster nonetheless. You see, Willie had remembered his favorite food from before The War. It was spaghetti in a can. Yes, people from other parts of the world laughed at people from this part of the world for eating spaghetti from a can, when most people know you just cook the spaghetti, heap on tomato sauce, and eat it; there is nothing to do with a can about the whole process.

But Wee Willie could remember how his mother (who had, like so many other mums, died in The War), would work long into the night, for back then it was just the two of them, Willie's father having died in The Last Great War during the very first week of it. Anyway--because Willie's mother was too tired to cook when she came home from double shifts of cooking at the local diner, she always brought him cans of spaghetti, because that was Willie's favorite. It was no ordinary spaghetti, the spaghettilettes were in all kinds of shapes, like animals and letters of the alphabet and even dinosaurs, and the spaghetti had an almost sweet taste to it.

Willie loved it so, and he had not had any of it since before The War, so when he saw the storm clouds gathering, and thought about what he would like to eat, and how he would like to stuff himself, just eat till he burst. . .well, of course he chose the spaghetti-in-a-can.

Wee Willie stood in the field and stared up. Folks from the Hamlet were dotting the field, also watching the sky. The Piper watched from a distance, a grin on his face. As soon as Willie felt the first drop of rain, he stared up at the sky and pointed. And then--it happened. Cans began dropping out of the sky!

And they were bonking the Hamletfolk on the head! A few people had umbrellas, but an umbrella is no match for a tiny tin projectile missile of pasta falling from the upper stratosphere. Folks everywhere were falling to the ground, clutching their pates and crying out, begging Wee Willie to stop the storm of canned food.

So of course Willie did. And here, in the immediate aftermath of what happened, with the spaghettilettes bombardment, you could certainly tell a lot about the Hamletfolk: some people helped those who were rolling around on the ground in pain, because the weight of the falling cans had hit them just in the right place to cause a serious headache or concussion. But others merely grabbed up the cans on the ground, whipped out can openers, and began to feast, because everybody had been starving ever since The Last Great War.

Poor Willie! He thought he had learned his lesson, and tried to do better the next time. He wished for apples during the next rainstorm, knowing them to be very healthy and sure to keep the doctor away, as well as being tasty and coveted since The War, and such a very beautiful fruit. But by the time those gorgeous red Macintoshes got some velocity, plummeting down from the sky, they were almost as hurtful as the cans.

Willie had also heard that lobster was the most lovely delicacy you could ever be lucky enough to taste. He had never tasted it himself, but he knew well that its flavor and decadent texture was the stuff of legend. So one rainy Sunday, he willed lobsters to fall from the sky. The hard red shells and tails caused many bumps and bruises, and as this was the third unfortunate incident, everybody was really starting to dread the rain and the shower of hurtful food which Wee Willie's magic caused to come along with the rain.

After a few more missteps involving tomatoes, rack of lamb and prickly pears (poor Willie, in addition to being thin as a watchband, he was not too terribly bright), Willie finally got it right, with a few suggestions from the other helpful and hungry children.

Soon, the thunderstorms brought showers of strawberries, blackberries, peas, egg dumplings, sardines, angel food cake, thin shaved deli meet, shrimp (a vast improvement over the lobster),

butter (to melt for the shrimp), breakfast cereal, raisins, caramel corn, chocolate chips, ice cream, and coconut shavings *without* the shell.

The ice cream was the most popular, though, and Willie ordered for ice cream to fall from the sky almost every other rain shower. Fortunately for the hungry people, it rained a lot on the little Hamlet, and the local baker made up hundreds of cones a week, so that when the sky started to rain ice cream, folks would grab a cone, run around crazily, and aim it at the sky, until a lovely, luscious dip of butter brickle or rocky road or strawberry ripple plopped right into the cone. Kind of like Jai-Lai, except for the rewards for playing were so much sweeter.

## ASTRAL BOY

Perhaps I failed to mention it. One of the things about folks before The Last Great War--or you might already know this--is that lots of people were quite fat. Sugar was plentiful, and folks had taken to drinking high fructose corn syrup straight, over chipped ice. Food companies had found a much cheaper way to make candy, which was in high demand, as folks were so depressed. The food companies began injecting huge amounts of sugar right into the fruit and vegetable crops; that and a little hybrid engineering, and soon candy sprang right out of the ground: corn became candy corn, cotton became cotton candy, brussel sprouts became bubble gum, grapes became jawbreakers, lima beans became jelly beans. green beans became gummi worms, and apples grew their own caramel coatings, right while it was still on the branch.

One of the great delights of children was to raid these large corporate farms for handfuls of candy, and may I say that before The Last Great War, with these vegetreets and frandies so



abundant, the sharecroppers who worked these corporate farms did not mind. They did not mind at all. It amused them, in fact, to see children raiding some part of an acre that was part of a farm that was hundreds and hundreds of acres, so plentiful was the harvest before The War.

But it was only a matter of time before The Enemy figured out how to use this to its advantage. You see, it occurred to some Very Important Minds working in Think Tanks for the Enemy that the best way to hurt *their* enemy's army was to decimate their numbers before they could even enlist--that is to say, wound the enemy soldier before he even was a soldier--while he was still a child. So the Enemy, in its infinite genius, had found those parts of farms closest to roads and public access and neighboring towns and homesteads, and they would liberally plant these acres with land mines, so that when children snuck playfully onto the corporate farms in search of a little free frandy and vegetreets, they got their little legs and arms blown off instead, for their trouble.

It was a brilliant success, as far as the Enemy was concerned, No so much for children like little Claude, who had lost part of his feet and all of the use of his legs after stepping on a landmine just as he was about to grab a handful of peanuts, the kind with the caramel and chocolate grown right into the oversized, hybridized shell.

And that is how Claude came to spend his life in a wheelchair. It wasn't much of a wheelchair, either. He'd had a nice one, before The War, before his physician parents had been killed in one of the First Great Blasts, but the Army had commandeered his fancy electric wheelchair, saying they needed it to carry a bunch of ferret grenades along with them, along side the actual soldiers, into Battle. So now Claude had to make due with an old, rusty, rickety wheelchair that was decades old. One wheel

pulled a little to the left, and making the wheels turn manually had given him terrible blisters, but in spite of it all, Claude was an amazingly cheerful child, and so that is why The Piper's heart went out to him.

And so the Piper gave him the Gift of Flight.

“Can I really fly?” the little boy asked incredulously.

“Well. . .” started the Piper, “. . .Not exactly. I am the magic Piper, not God. God put you in that wheelchair, I suspect, so that you might learn compassion for others who suffer. I cannot take your body out of that chair. Your body cannot fly. But *your soul* can fly. It is called ‘Astral Projection.’ All you need to do is focus and say a little prayer, and concentrate as hard as you can, and imagine yourself being lifted out of the wheelchair and flying--But remember, if your imagination is to be strong enough to do this, you must not cloud your imagination with video games and television and ipods and so forth. Those devices all imagine for you, and weaken your imagination muscle. . .However do all these things I say, and do not do these things that I forbid, and you will find yourself shooting up into the sky, with a fine pair of 6<sup>th</sup> dimension wings on your back, and when you look down at your body in the chair, it will be a fleshy valise, nothing more, like your father's briefcase, sitting idly until he puts the valuable bits of his life back into it. When you are done flying, you will ease back into your body as easily as if it were your yellow rain slicker.”

So Claude tried it. He almost could not believe it, but what The Piper had said was so! First he hovered over his house for a moment, then, ever so gently, started winging his way over the block, past all his friends' houses, and then on, over fields and forests, past peaceful inviting ponds, past mighty waterfalls, and as he flew lower he could see all the creature of the woodlands both

frolicking and fighting, resting and restless, as wild creatures are want to be.

Then, emboldened, he flew over to the next Hamlet, and he discovered to his surprise that it was more of a city, really. And as his Astral Self peered into the roofs of homes, oh the things he saw! (Many homes had had their roofs bombed out during The War, and it was possible for Claude, in his unique position, hovering above it all as a bird might, to see in through the slats of wood and gaps in tarpaper that passed for roofs of houses thesedays.) Also, he found that his Astral Self could dip down and peer in windows unseen, for his Astral Self was invisible to all humans.

It was on these journeys that he saw such things as grew him up oh-so-quickly and took away his innocence, but The Piper had decided it was best that such should be the case, for so many children had lost their innocence in The War anyway, and it might as well be in this manner--where he could control his own flight, and his own destiny--that Claude lost his. He saw scores upon scores of solitary individuals, and it was then that he saw what a child rarely (never?) sees: what a Grown-Up does when he is alone with himself. With herself.

In more numbers than he would have guessed, Claude saw people lost in prayer. Secret, sad, solitary, but still hopeful prayer to a god in whom they, amazingly, still believed. Sort of.

He saw all kinds and forms of onanism, and wished he could have taken notes, but it did not occur to him to bring with him a pencil and paper on his Astral Flight.

Mostly what he saw, though, to his surprise, were people lost in memories, trying to bring back to life, through tears and tea and treacle, a life that was lost forever to The War, a life that was gone with the wind, as these sad souls stared morosely and sobbed profusely over their scrapbooks of the war dead.

Some engaged in strange rituals, as though if they clung to those rituals, some semblance of normalcy might come back to their shattered lives: they alphabetized their things, their demolished possessions and diminished collections. They alphabetized spices and files and books, and tools on pegboards and bobbleheads on whatnot shelves. Some showered extensively, scrubbing and scrubbing until their skin was raw, as though they could wash the memories of The War away, for there was bountiful water after The War, in the gorged water tables of the Hamlet, although rumor had it that the water was radioactive, and would cause your skin to flay off in a matter of years.

And then there were the private, secret little groups of people that Astral Boy had the opportunity to observe from his bird's eye view. There were groups of women, secretly sharing recipes about how to make bread out of sawdust and cookies out of mud and vegetables casseroles out of grass and dandelion and leaf bits, and stuffed songbird thanksgiving delight, and meatloaves out of disappeared dog and cats and rats corn fed from the new fledgling fields of crops--as long as their families felt full, and nobody knew these ghastly secrets, who was the wiser?

And still other groups of women, their natural pre-war vanity gradually returning, met in still other secret groups learning to create make-up out of sand, animal fat, silt, berry juice, scraped coal powder, even crushed metallic bits. One rubble-strewn home's shardpiles was another person's silvery shimmery eye shadow secret ingredient, if crushed finely enough.

And there were children--children clinging to Grown-Ups, as Grown-ups patiently re-taught their shell-shocked children how to read, draw, paint, tell stories, tell jokes, laugh, make cookies, make birdhouses--and then there were some secret things that went on between some Grown-Ups and some children, the little flying Astral Boy did not even understand these things, and he was

somehow secretly glad that he did not understand.

It was all very strange, these Astral Flying Journeys that Claude took, journeys made possible thanks to the kind magic of The Piper. And when Claude was done with his journeying, and his Second Self flew his way back home, he felt as peaceful and tired as if he had just hiked the Appalachian Trail for a week. And, what is more, what The Piper had said was true: when his Astral Soul slipped back into his body, it felt as natural as slipping on a cozy woolen mitten. His parents never suspected a thing--for The Piper had said that all of these magical powers of the children were to be kept a secret from the Grown-Ups.

#### AND ALL THE REST. . .

And these children--Pinky, Cameron, Kamiko, Amadeus, Angelica, Wee Willy, and Claude were not the only children whom The Piper helped to heal. (!) In truth, there were many other kids who were given amazing powers as well--there were the children who could suddenly camouflage themselves against absolutely any background, be it organic or human-made, and hence these mischievous tots could enjoy all the privileges of the adults not knowing that they, the wee ones, were there. Hiding. Spying. And oh, the adult secret things those children witnessed!

And then there were also children who were shape-shifters. And believe me, that is another fairytell altogether, in and of itself.

And then there were children who could understand all of the languages of the world, and also there were children who could accurately finish people's sentences for them (even those of politicians and news pundits, which was enraging to the aforementioned, but ultimately a dull little power, since people were already always finishing other people's sentences for them all the time, such was the general rudeness of a world where nobody

listened).

There were those who had simple little powers, like making things change color or flavor or throwing sounds, much like a ventriloquist might throw his voice so that you did not know where a sound was coming from.

And there was one little boy who had a magnificent gift: he could see into the future. Granted, he could only see into the future by about forty-five minutes (such were the limited powers of The Piper to impart magic), but it was a damned impressive gift nonetheless, and it might have actually been used to do the world some good, had it not been for the fact that a desperate mob on the Hamlet green accidentally ripped the little boy to pieces in an attempt to get the day's winning lottery numbers out of him. The Piper was angry, and had certainly learned his lesson: no more prognosticatory powers for the little children of the Hamlet!

And then there was the little girl who was given the power to make things change their textures and firmnesses. . .

This power she (she, being named Bendy Brenda), used to impart great comfort and relief from the cruel hardships brought about by The War. Countless millions were homeless as a result of The Devastating Last Great War, and even in the little Hamlet and its outskirts there were hundreds of them. They slept on the sidewalks and in alleys, in doorways and in what was left of bombed out houses, but always, always, on something hard and soggy and terribly uncomfortable: blacktop or cement or tile floors or wooden planks, or any other similar thing that made young people walk like they were one-hundred-and-ten-years-old after a night of sleeping like that. And as for people who were old, or a hundred and ten or whatever, it made them walk as though they were ancient trolls, some thousand year old Hahbits limping through the world in their wizened pain.

So for these people, our little girl who had the power to

change things from soft-to-hard or hard-to-soft, (the resilience of a thing, you might say), she made all of the homeless people's cruel makeshift bedding change to soft cloudy things, so that they might believe for the first time in years that they were sleeping on eiderdown quilts. Planks felt like goose down, hard cold tile felt like quilt batting, asphalt and blacktop felt like the softest setting on an adjustable mattress.

And she did the same thing with the bread. Hard bread suddenly became hot and warm and squishy and doughy; it slithered down the throats of the starving like it had been soaked in butter, although nobody had actually seen a stick of butter since before The War.

And as for making soft things hard ... she turned her attention to the ramshackle huts that passed for housing, for so many poor folks, who had lost their real beautiful homes in The War. Nowadays it was not unusual to see entire neighborhoods made of sandbag homes or tar paper shacks, or stacks of newspapers, or large pieces and piles of cardboard. Soggy and unsteady, near deathtraps in a storm--so with one wave of her hand, Bendy Brenda made all these things hard so that the sandbags turned to brick, and not even a hurricane could topple these little homes, small and humble though they were.

And suffice it to say that there were *a lot of things, quite nearly an epidemic of things*, that had gone quite soft, due to the stress of The War and all, and with her magic wand, our little girl made them quite hard again. Suddenly, it was like everybody had a magic wand!

And that made everybody *quite* happy.

\*\*\*\*\*

And so now you can begin to see all of the ways that The Piper made the lives of the children rich and whole and joyful again, and how he re-awakened all the five and six senses of the little people in the Hamlet. . .And how the children, in turn, gave the Grown-Ups renewed hope.

But then again, having *faith* in that hope would rather suggest that one can *trust* the Grown-Ups. You will hear all about that in Part Three of our legend. . .

### THE BROKEN PROMISE

*"When Hari puts the flute to his lips  
the still are moved and the moving stilled;  
Winds die, the river Yamuna stops;  
Crows fall silent and the deer fall senseless;  
bird and beast are stunned by his splendour;  
A cow, unmoving,  
dangles a grassblade from her teeth;  
Even the wise can no longer  
hold firm their own minds."*

*--Surdas*

The Pied Piper was so proud of what he had done for the children of the Hamlet, but he was so angry at the parents who would not pay. He knew they had gold.

Like so many others, before during and after The Last Great War, they had hoarded it--stashing nuggets of it in steel safes and tree trunks and underground holes. Poking little bits of jewelry gold into different kinds of secret human holes (that cannot be



nicely named here), and so it remained safely beyond reach and beyond finding when the Enemy came charging through, burning and pillaging and looking for that yellow rock which was really the only currency which had any value any more--that, and fuel oil and sugar and salt and fellatio.

Always, the people in the Hamlet would offer little bits of gold, or long strands of fake gold, to appease the Enemy, but the real gold was hidden away. Hamletfolk would even paint their teeth with white paint, painting over the gold fillings, so when the nisty Enemy would pry opens folk's mouths with their big stink mean Enemy pawhands, no tell-tale gold fillings could be seen. . else, out came the Enemy rustypliers, and the painful bloody removing of the gold teeth.

But that Terrible War was over now.

And now, after The Piper had fulfilled his promise to change the children, to restore the children's joy and hope and imagination, a communal imagination so very damaged from The Last Great War ... still, no gold was forthcoming to pay The Piper.

Not one little whisper of a gold chain, not one pea sized nugget was produced for The Piper, even though he knew the folks had it. And they had promised. Promised The Piper so that he might ransom his dear family. His beloved wife and children.

Seethes the Piper.

One day, The Piper was sitting by the pond at the outskirts of the Hamlet, pondering all of this. He loved sitting here, amidst all this treely beauty. These were the first new saplings since The Last Great War, and watching them grow up in the fields towards the sunlight always made The Piper happy. But not today. He was

trying to think what to do about his problem.

It was just then that he heard a sound in the clearing. At first he thought it was a Newbird. (A Newbird was what they named the few first birds brave enough to return from their hiding places, after being frightened away by the long Last Great War of hurled smokely bombs and other smokely lazer things.) Yes, thought The Piper, this surely must be one of the Newbirds, so pretty was the song. The Piper turned to search for it in the Nature, to see what color its bright, hopeful new Newbird feathers might be.

But then as he scanned the forest and field, he realized that it was not a bird, but a child calling for him, and that explained the prettiness of the voice. It was Annabel, one of the Hamlet children, with a package for him.

You see, when The Last Great War began, and everybody was suddenly angry, the first thing they destroyed was the Post Offices, being as how the Post Offices were the messengers of awful news, and blowing up all those buildings made everybody suddenly feel better--but only for a few moments. So The War continued, but without Post Offices, and now that The War was over, there was no place to send and receive missives and parcels, except by shanks mare and gossip and word of mouth, and folks from here and there generally being helpful.

(They were working on re-inventing the Post-Office, but nobody seemed very enthused. Nobody volunteered to help in this project, whereas there had always been people willing to come together and rebuild pastry shops and candy kiosks and stores where they selt the naughty bits. But no Post Office.)

So it did not surprise The Piper that when a package came for him, a little girl with golden yellow hair in a mossy colored dress came running through a field of sunshiney daffodils and growthy green grassiness to deliver it. She trotted away again, in too much of a hurry chasing fawns to stay with The Piper, and he smiled at her disappearing form as he opened the brown paper, and tore at

the string.

Imagine his alarm when he stared at the contents of the package: It was his wife's head.

He screamed, quite naturally, and in his reflexive revulsion, he hurled the box with the head as far away as he could. (Actually, the head had been nestled in a very lovely wicker weave basket, such as you would be happy to receive if it came containing a fruit assortment, or some aromatic toiletries, and you would say, "*Oh, this basket is so lovely I will keep it, even after I have used up the cucumber bath salts, and I will use the basket for some other purpose!*") But lovely though the basket was, it is safe to say that nobody recycles a basket, (regardless of how delicate or sturdy the weave), when it has contained a human head.

A few seconds after the hurling of the basket, the hysterical Pied Piper ran to it, and grabbed his wife's head, and clutched it to his bosom, sobbing like a child. He loved his wife so very much, and the sight of her like this--being reduced to a severed head, can you imagine anything more dreadful--well! It led to the worst night of his life, with him pounding at the earth and screaming at the heavens and generally having a sleepless few hours.

For a while, he clutched the head to himself, then he imagined it still on her lovely torso. And then, as the head began looking a bit bedraggled and lifeless--much as one might expect from a severed head--he sat for a while in the moonlight and lovingly applied make-up to it, so that it (she) looked much as she had, fresh faced and seventeen, the first time he saw her. He had make-up with him because he himself wore face paint, so he carried it on his person at all times, because although there was nothing effeminate about him, it was part of his Pied Piper colorful costume--his long lashes and pale skin and apple cheeks and reddened lips and colorful eye lids.

And then, after a while, he began to accept the fact of her

death, and his mind turned to his children. Throughout the long hours until dawn, he mulled over the neatly written cursive note which attended the head:

***“We made it clear: if you did not pay us the gold ransom that you, as our Enemy, must rightfully pay, we would kill your wife. In seven days, we will begin cutting off the heads of your children. Only one thing we can’t decide--should we go from oldest to youngest, or youngest to oldest? Any thoughts on this?”***

Well, it became clear, with the gorgeous goddish sunrise, cruel in its beauty, (given the loss that the good Piper had just suffered), that something needed to be done about this matter of the ransom.

This matter of the gold. This matter of The Piper being paid for his services. And so, before the morning was too old, before the menfolk in the Hamlet could go off to work, The Piper went to confront them.

***“Good people,”*** announced The Piper, from the top of the bell tower which he had climbed, and which was used by assorted Hamletfolk for making public announcements, ***“Thrice have I asked you for the gold. And thrice you have refused. I have done as you asked. I kept my promise. I did that deed for which you hired me, when first I came through your charming Hamlet. Now, it is time to pay me. Seriously, folks. Or else. I know you have the gold. I need it to rescue my family! Have you no compassion for my children? I who have revived the laughter and imagination and souls of your war weary sons and daughters, I implore you to keep your promise and pay! You have until noon today!”***

And with that, the rage still burning in his heart for the soul of his poor dead wife, he began ringing the bells in the bell tower. It was deafening and endless, and at least it did bring various

Hamletfolk out of their homes over the course of the morning, and they moseyed over to the bell tower, and climbed up, and explained with an alarming casualness about why they couldn't give The Piper their gold in payment for the services he had rendered.

Gold, after all, was the only real form of dependable currency left, after The Last Great War, and they all claimed to need what gold they had: one father had promised his children to rebuild the backyard swimming pool, which they remembered from before the war and missed splashing around in on hot summer days. Another woman had heard of a spa she wished to escape to for a month, as long seasons of eating nothing but potatoes during The Last Great War had caused her to gain a few pounds, and lose her toned, pre-war body of which she had been so proud, and the entire matter depressed her terribly. A long trip to the spa would help, but that would cost gold.

And on and on the excuses went, until the Pied Piper realized that in spite of their promises, the Hamletfolk were going to break their word.

He had no other choice. There was but one thing left to do. He had no other choice, if he was going to force the Hamletfolk's hands and save his own children.

He must kidnap the children of the little Hamlet. The little mean, greedy, self-absorbed, materialistic Hamlet.

## THE CAVE

*"IT IS ONLY A TOOL. A TOOL FORGED FROM THE MATTER OF THE EARTH. FROM SILVER. FROM GOLD. FROM REED. FROM WOOD.*

*FASHIONED BY HISTORY. CRAFTED BY MASTERS.  
IT IS A TOOL THAT SHAPES MOOD AND CULTURE.  
IT ENRAPTURES. SOMETIMES DISTRACTS.  
EXHILARATES AND SOOTHES. SINGS AND WEEPS.  
NOW TAKE UP THE TOOL AND SCULPT MUSIC  
FROM THE AIR."*

*--unnamed Maramatsu employee, on the World Wide Web*

Kidnapping the children was not difficult to do. No, it was as easy as lifting his flute to his lips and playing a tune--but this was no ordinary tune. Not that the tunes The Piper had played for lo these many days before had been plain in the least, but if those tunes were enchanting, this tune was the music of a wizard extraordinaire! This tune was more than music, it had colors and flavors and scents and textures and pictures all whirled up in the notes that spiraled around towards the listener, like the sweet aroma wafting off of a cherry pie cooling in some cozy cottage window.

I forgot to mention that The Piper decided to kidnap the children in the dead of night, so as not to arouse the suspicions of the Grown-Ups. This, too, was easy to do--to play a tune that would awaken all of the children, and none of the adults. All The Piper had to do was pipe a song full of truth and beauty, love and compassion, hope and innocence--and immediately all the children sat bolt upright in bed, yet all the Grown-Ups snored on, oblivious to the song with its joy and infinite possibilities. Deaf to the tune. Then all the children, who already trusted The Piper, came dashing out of their houses and immediately started following him down General Bomb Boulevard in the center of all the houses, and out towards the woods surrounding the little Hamlet.

(BTW: General Bomb Boulevard was hardly a Boulevard at all, but a little dirt road, and it had once been named Cherry Street, because of the opulent proliferation of cherry trees on both sides of the street. But then a great Battle in TLGWOHT had been fought there, and the victorious hawksoldier with all the stars on his shoulders and chest ordered that Cherry Street should be named after himself and this great battle and the fearsome weapon that had wonned it, so that all would always remember this great day in the history of The War. So “General Bomb Boulevard” it was.)

Even though it was dark out, and they were now deep in the forest, the children were not afraid. The children knew these woods well, for it was here that they had hidden from both The Last Great War and their parents, for short respites. And it was also these very woods which were flourishing the most from the magic that The Piper had oh so recently bestowed onto the children.

In no time at all, everybody arrived at The Cave. And the children were startled and delighted to discover that they did not know of The Cave, for its entrance was cleverly hidden behind years of growth and moss and rocky outjags. They poured into The Cave with mass burbling excitement, and even though The Cave was dark inside, they knew no fear. The Piper would not lead them into danger, surely.

And so The Piper did not, for The Piper loved the children, as he loved all children, and he was only doing this because he must, to get his own children back. Besides, given the world wide carnage which had taken place during All of the Last Great Wars of Hurlled Things, were not the children as safe in here as out in the world? This is how The Piper rationalized it, and so he was correct in his thinking.

Next, as the children were excitedly hurrying down the

subterranean passage that led to even greater adventures, The Piper did something that made him sad, and just a bit guilty, but he knew he had no choice but to do it: he turned away from the children, walked a few feet back towards the entrance, and blew a sad, strange tune from his flute, like nothing they had heard before.

And thankfully, they did not hear this one. For this tune, soft though it was, sounded like oh so many bad things: like the first rumblings of war, and the death rattle of peace. Like the birth of evil and the drowning of hope. Like the passing of years, and the decay of beauty. Like the fading of laughter, and the dimming of love. And with that strange soundsong, little rocks at first, just pebbles really, and then larger hunks, and then big boulders, began to fall from the opening of The Cave, until there was no opening left, really.

And then, this sad work done, The Piper turned back to the children, who were excitedly exploring their new world.

This was no ordinary cave. In most caves, there are wondrous formations called stalactites and stalagmites that grow up from the cave floor and hang down from the cave ceilings, *and not a single person has stared at these razor sharp cave icicles dangling above them and NOT thought, “What a grand murder weapon! If I could but shove my archest of enemies beneath this Grand Guignol formation, and somehow cause the stalactite to plummet down at that exact moment, what a grand and grisly death I might witness!”*

But these stalactites and stalagmites were nothing like that. These were, like everything else in The Cave, most magnificently colored! The entire Cave was poured out before them in the most amazing neon rainbow shades, and when the children stared in “ahhh” at the stalactites hanging from the ceiling of The Cave, they all thought, in the same moment, of the delicious rock candy that had been sold at county fairs before The War: luscious sticks of



crystallized sugar in the most temptacious of colors, and if you were to look at these enchanted stalactites, you would know that surely these, too, must be delicious for the sucking.

Origami Girl was the bravest and first to try. She stuck out her long, languid, little pink tongue, wrapped it around the shaft of the stalactite, and then her throat let out the most delighted little sound, something in between a moan and a giggle and a gasp.

**“Strawberry!”** Kamiko announced, after she had enjoyed her first big slurp.

Now that she had broken the ice, so to speak, the other children all dove in, licking at different stalactites, and you could hear wee innocent voices, between licks and sucks, blurting out flavors like “Blueberry!” and “Peach!” and “Banana!” and “Kiwi!” and “Lemonade!” and “Tamarind!” and “Pina Colada!”! It was wonderful, oh it was so wonderful! Lo, that I myself could go back to those delightful days in that enchanted Cave!

In all, the following flavors were catalogued: strawberry, blueberry, blackberry, raspberry, loganberry, huckleberry, gooseberry, elderberry, bilberry, chokecherry, Marion berry, and dingleberry. That was it for the berry list, but there was also orange, banana, apple, peach, grape, lychee, watermelon, coconut, pear, guava, kiwi, pawpaw, and jujubee. The children kept an exhaustive list, thorough albeit wobbly, penned as it was in the uncertain cursive of an eight year old smack in the throws of a sugar high. The ugliest stalactites, interestingly enough, afforded the most delicious of the flavors: chocolate (both dark and milk, depending on the color of the growth), as well as caramel, butterscotch, chocolate-mint, peanut butter-chocolate, toffee, and latté. This was exciting, as no child could even remember tasting a latté since before The Last Great War.

It was only after they had sucked for so long that they thought all their cheeks would be permanently drawn in, into some

kind of funny fish face, that the first scream came:

“AAAAAAAUGHHHHHHHH!

This was from Pinkie. She pointed up and kept screaming, and soon all of the children were screaming with her.

BATS! Yes, bats, the bane and fear of every spelunker. But The Piper just chuckled through the screaming, picked up his pipe, and played a little tune which told the children to not be afraid ... *just watch ... watch the bats ... watch the bats very carefully ...* and so the children did ... and soon they were giggling and rolling about in laughter at what they saw:

These bats were not bats at all, but merely tiny harmless field mice in black leather overcoats! The mice would stand high atop lofty rocks in The Cave, adjust their teensy tinsy goggles, and spread their spindly arms out wide, with their little black leather coats then forming a fine set of “wings.”

And then they would leap from the rock and fly over to another rock, just as though they were dark and dangerous bats of the night--but then, when they got over to the other rock, they were so flushfaced and overwhelmed by their amazing flying adventure that they would quickly remove their black leather coats and hang them up on tiny coat racks, and then go about their business, these little blind mice quite nearly unable to see at all from living in constant darkness, and so polite and nervous were these wee mice, even though sometimes pretending to be scary bats, that when they walked about, without coats but with canes, they would bump into each other and nearly fall all over each other in a flurry of apologies. Then they would each go on their way until they had found their secret hoard of cheese and their mattress made of old furballs, and they would be so overwrought from all these grand adventures that they would fall into a deep, snoring sleep.

Onest the mice were going to sleep for the night (or actually, it was for the dawn, as even pretend bats are nocturnal), but it didn't matter in The Cave, where it was always the same

semi-darkness, and nobody could ever quite tell what time of day or night it was--

But where was I? I have quite forgotten. Ah yes!

But just as the little mice calmed down and went to sleep, emitting the cutest, sweetest, barely audible little mouse snores, a new sight and sound began to capture the children's attention.

The sound--was it music?

No, not quite, it was the sound of some little creatures clearing their voices and practicing scales and harmonizing and doing mouth exercises and *preparing* to sing. . .

The children looked all around and saw that the music was coming from. . .the ponds! For you see, this vast room of The Cave, more like the inside of a cathedral, really, was filled with little pondlets, and the pondlets were filled with all kinds of whimsical, other-worldly looking fish, who moved about in little schools. ("Schools" is probably not the most accurate descriptor, by the way, as you will hear in a moment, but be patient.)

But they were not the colors of normal fish, such as you would see out in the world. The fish had lost their natural protective camouflage coloring, but having grown bored with just being albino white for so many generations, they had evolved new fun skin patterns that they never would have dared evolve in the wild, because it would have been too dangerous; they surely would have been spotted as prey by eagles, owls, or fisher folk. But here, in the carefree dim stillness of the magic Cave, they developed whimsical patterns on their skin.

But it gets better still: bored with the eerie silent stillness of The Cave, these fish had developed into little barbershop quartets, each group in a different pondlet, and each voice had its own distinctive pattern on its body. Not surprisingly, all of the soprano fish were brightly colored polka dots and stripes, while the altos

were festive, eye-catching assortments of checks and plaids. The baritones, on the other hand, were bold and in your face houndstooth designs, and, lastly, (and I think this requires no elaborate explanation), the tenors were all variations of tie-dye. Yes, you heard me, little fish with rainbow colored tie-dye designs all over their bodies--and dots and plaids and checks and houndstooth.

The children all applauded when they saw the fish, and the fish were so happy to have an audience that they immediately popped out of the water, their tails whooshing furiously just below the surface to keep them afloat, and then they broke into some old favorites like “By the Light of the Silvery Moon” and “Mr. Sandman” and “Lida Rose” and “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree” and “Good Night Ladies” and “In the Good Old Summertime” and “It’s Only a Paper Moon” and “Oh You Beautiful Doll” and “I Found a Million Dollar Baby” and “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” and “On the Sunny Side of the Street” and “Bye Bye Blackbird” and “Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair” and “Stairway to Heaven” and “In a Gadda Da Vida.”

It was quite the concert.

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## THE LUMINARY LIZARDS

Finally, after the mice had all gone to sleep and the fish had finished crooning, and the children were coming down from the sugar high of the sweetsweet stalactites, a pleasant sleepiness slowly crept over all the wee ones.

But they were not so sleepy that they did not notice some

very curious new visitors: lizards, lizards of all colors and shapes and sizes had crept noiselessly from some hidden place, out to the edge of jutting rocks in The Cave. And the children were already wise enough, and trusting enough of The Piper's bringing them to this enchanted place, that they understood with certainty *these lizards were harmless*. The lizards blinked their large, amazing eyes, and their throats swelled and shrank back with each breath.

Then, the strangest thing happened--as though this entire fable business is not strange enough already--the lizards all turned their attention to The Piper, as though perhaps *he* was going to be the one to explain some things to the children. The Piper leaned back comfortably, and smiled at the children who were staring at him quizzically.

"Ah yes. The Lizards. Or, the Luminary Lizards," said The Piper. "Don't worry, children. Like all creatures in this enchanted Cave, these little critters will not hurt you."

"Quite harmless," repeated one lizard, idling on The Piper's knee, and the children all squealed when they realized that the lizard could talk.

"You see," said The Piper, "And I know you will not be frightened by the story that I am about to tell you, for you little children have, sadly, already seen so many corpses during The Last Great War of Hurlled Things, that death hardly frightens you all any more--oh, and is that not a greater tragedy than death itself!?"

"More frightening than death itself?" echoed a little lavender lizard. The Piper smiled as it crawled up and perched itself on his shoulder.

"The Lizards." smiled The Piper. "Or, the 'Luminary Lizards', as they are known by us lucky, magical few. Well here's the gist of it: Every late afternoon, in the very late afternoon, in the very very very late afternoon, just before dusk--the lizards can tell, because the light coming in through that hole in the top of The Cave, it changes so beautifully, so subtly, so ethereally, as the day

gives itself up for the dark . . .and the lizards see, and the lizards know. . .and the lizards all come out from their little resting places and hiding places, and position themselves on the edge of the jutting rocks, *much as the last people who were ever here were seated* . . . and every evening, the lizards re-create the last conversation that the folks ever had . . . out of respect, you know, so that their memories won't be forgotten. The lizards did not know the people in their lives outside of the caves, so this is the only way that the lizards can keep the memory of these poor people alive."

And then it started. The glow. Now that the sun had set enough outside The Cave, the light trickling into The Cave was almost nothing, but the saddest little purple haze . . .and that is when the lizards started to glow. It was as though they were lit from within! And each lizard, be it wee as a pepper or large as a watermelon, had its own strangely colored glow. Now I can tell you this much, for I remember it vividly--they were all pastelish sorts of colors. But they were not pastels *quite as you know them*. Truthfully they were colors, shades, such as I have never seen before or since on this earth. They were enchanted.

The children all oohed and aaaahed, of course, but were suddenly silent as one first tiny lizard began to speak:

"When do we get to leave here, mother?" it queried of a beautiful larger lizard poised next to it.

"As soon as it stops raining, dear. And then we will go home, and the bombs will have stopped, and everything will be fine. Everything will be back to normal again, you'll see."

There was a pause of pretty silence.

"What are they talking about?" asked little Angelica of The

Piper, who was sitting right next to her.

“Well, you see dear,” explained The Piper to her, and to the rest of the children who were leaning in close, “This is the last conversation that the Luminous Lizards remember. You see, once, during The Last Great War, some folks from the Hamlet came running here, to The Cave, for shelter. A few people knew about The Cave then. Anyway, it was during one of the many great bombardments, and frightened folks would come running inside The Cave for protection. The only problem was getting out of The Cave. There was no entrance such as where you children entered. You see, that had been closed down by an avalanche of rocks after a bombing. You could only enter by that high opening you see up there, in the ceiling of The Cave.

The children all gazed upward. A beautiful shaft of light shown through, but it was clearly a very small opening.

“But getting out was not nearly so easy as getting in,” explained The Piper sadly. “One had to climb up, rather than scumble down. And if it rained and stormed while folks were hiding out in here from the bombs, the slippery moss that grew on the rocks made it quite impossible to get out.”

“So the people were trapped?” asked little Kamiko.

“Well, I am afraid so” said The Piper. “But it was only their bodies that were trapped.”

“What does that mean?” asked Pinkie, trembling a little.

But the Piper did not answer her question. He merely nodded over at the little boy in the wheelchair. “I am sure that Claude can explain.”

“What The Piper is trying to say,” said Claude, with profound calm, “Is that when the people died, their souls shot up to the sky. Much as the fireworks we used to watch ... but instead of them flourishing out, then slowly falling back to the ground, these fireworks, *these souls*, go up and up until they arrive in Heaven, where they are greeted with a world so beautiful that it is beyond

both description and imagining.”

The children all hushed their babbling, stilled by the wholly holy words of the boy in the wheelchair, and by the changing light that filtered through the hole in the top of The Cave, but mostly by the soft growing glow of the Luminary Lizards.

“Look! Look!” whispered The Piper, and sure enough, when the children gazed more carefully at the lizards, they were amazed to see that the ghosts of people were hovering just above and around the Luminary Lizards--not so much ghosts, really, it was more as though these visions were the imprints that the deceased souls’ spirits had left behind ’lo those many moons ago, so that the children could see what the different people looked like when the lizards spoke, recreating the last conversation of the trapped Hamletfolk.

The first to speak was a greenish lizard, all olive and limey, with bits of forest green and gold here and there. It was almost as though the gold touches on his shoulders were little military epaulets:

“All my life I have been a soldier. I have been in every war my people have declared, or have had declared upon them, fighting for what I believe. And look where it has gotten me! I shall not die with my boots on, vanquishing an enemy, but hiding like some wounded animal in a cave.”

Sitting across from him was a shaggy, muscular young woman, what once was called a ‘Flower Child,’ and her eyes were both sad and kind in the same heartbeat:

“Strange that is then, because it would seem then that our lives have cancelled each other out. I have worked my entire life for the cause of peace. I have marched and protested, thrown my lot in with sit ins and stand ins and wait ins, civil disobedience and



rallies, and I have done my time in jail, all for the cause of peace. And look where it has gotten me. Dying in a war.”

Now a third man spoke, a very regal man, who looked healthy and well-fed at the same moment that his visage managed to look terrified and ashamed:

“As for me, I am the richest person for a thousand thousand miles around. I have spent my entire life amassing a great fortune. Look where it has gotten me. All my wealth cannot get me out of this cave. . .”

Then, a plump, slurring man spoke, wise in his words but a fool in his demeanor: “All my life, I have been a writer. At night I wrote great adventurous stories, mostly about noble battles and holy wars. By day I wrote lavish and fawning obituaries. I’ll bet you that I know more quotations about death than anybody on this planet. . . *‘Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee. . .’* John Donne.”

“What’s an orbiteary? I never heard of that,” asked one of the little girls who was clinging to her mother and her sisters.

“It is announcement in the newspaper telling everybody that somebody has died,” said the writer, his voice absent of almost all tone but a touch of the wry: *‘I have never killed a man, but I have read many obituaries with great pleasure.’* Clarence Darrow. *‘I didn’t attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it.’* Mark Twain. Ha ha!” laughed the wrinkled writer bitterly. He was not old, but smoking too much had made him so. From somewhere, he had pulled out a cigarette and began smoking and sucking away.

Suddenly, they all realized that there was one person in The Cave who had not spoken. It was a creature so old and wizened

that you could not tell whether it was a male or a female. Everybody leaned in to stare at the mysterious person, and when the old soul spoke, you still could not tell was it man or woman. The soul sighed with a bittersweet smile before beginning to speak:

“All my life, I have been an artist. I have worked at my art every day of my life, since I scrawled crayon drawings as a child, and now I am ready to die in peace.”

The writer chuckled wryly, but there was envy in his laugh. “*‘Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It’s the transition that’s troublesome.’ Isaac Asimov,*” he opined in such a sad and hopeless way, it was as though his own words had abandoned him in this dark hour, and all he could do was quote souls wiser and more eloquent than him.

Suddenly the mother snapped as she held her children closer:

“Oh, I wish you would all stop talking about dying! You’re frightening my children.”

“Are we going to die, mother?”

“I don’t want to die.”

“I’m afraid to die,” the children all cried at once in a panicky chorus. The mother cooed and shushed them, hugging them gently.

“Oh hush now, nobody is going to die. We just have to wait until the rain stops and the steep cave walls dry out. Then we can climb out the way we climbed in.”

“What did you mean, you are at peace?” asked the soldier to the old artist, still not sure if it be man or woman. But somehow, it did not seem to matter any more. It was a soul at peace, was all the others knew, and they wanted to know more.

“I mean, quite simply, it is my time,” said the artist, “There is a better world beyond this life, and my work in this life is done.”

“What do you mean, your work in this life is done?” queried

the Flower Child.

The artist responded with the slightest hint of a smile:

“Because the Great Storeroom is done.”

“The Great Storeroom?” asked the richman, his eyes lighting up at the thought of buried treasure. “What is that, tell me, tell me!”

The artist obliged, although all could sense that the richman might do something selfish with the answer, if he but had a chance.

“The Great Storeroom is a vast underground building, almost as large as this entire Hamlet, and in it, artists and writers and musicians, and creative souls of every kind, have secretly gathered the creative gems of humankind--paintings and sculpture, music and books, recordings and films in two and three and four and seven dimensions--and we have hidden them in the Great Storeroom, so that when civilization begins again, they will have this great, greatest art of humankind to guide them. . .it is, we think, the best of this civilization. . . And it gives us a chance that humankind will be better the next time around.”

For a moment, the mother forgot her fears, and even her children’s fears, and her face lit up:

“That is a beautiful idea! All the children in the world will have the greatest art in the world to inspire them.

“I wish I had thought of such a noble thing,” mourned the writer. “ ‘*Carve your name on hearts, not tombstones. A legacy is etched into the mind of others, and the stories they share about you.*’ Shannon Adler.”

The lizard portraying the richman was pacing around on his rock, as though he were feeling all the greedy frustration of the dying richman:

“How did I never hear about this? I have purchased hundreds a great works of art, my library is the greatest in the entire Hamlet

and beyond, I am patron to a dozen genius artists--how did I never hear about this Storeroom, so that I could have fattened my collection from it?"

"You yourself just said the reason," said the placid artist, "Because you collect art and hoard it and hide it away--a great painting, a wise book--instead of sharing it with the world, you lock it away, and its power is lost. Our way--the way of the artists who have created the Great Storeroom--the magnificent art of the world will belong to the entire world, and from it they will take strength, wisdom, and beauty."

"You are right!" said the soldier, jumping to his feet, and the lizard who bore his spirit suddenly seemed to freeze in a stance of rigid attention. "It is a grand idea! And if I survive this cave, and this war, I will spend the rest of my life guarding the entrance to the room, fighting to protect it."

"*'A man who won't die for something is not fit to live.'* Martin Luther King." muttered the writer, his energy obviously fading.

The Flower Child was dancing about and effusing, almost as though she had forgotten that she might be minutes from death: "Yes, and I will spend the rest of my life teaching others about the beauty of the art contained within it, so that no more wars will be fought that destroy the great buildings and churches, museums and artworks, and people along with it."

"And I will spend what is left of my fortune making the treasures of the Great Storeroom even greater, gathering art from all around the world and--"

But the writer cut the richman off before he could finish. "This is actually funny, folks! Don't you get it? We all spent our entire life immersed in wars--fighting them, trying to prevent them, to write about them, to protect the world from them--all for nothing. Our lives stand for nothing, yet we are terrified at the thought of giving them up. . .our lives that is. How laughable!

***‘Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh. ..’ ”***

Suddenly, there was a deafening clap of thunder across the sky overhead, its reverberation echoing through the cave. The children all squealed with fear.

“Is that more bombing?” cried the mother, clutching at her children. “Will the enemy show no mercy?”

“No, I fear it is worse than that,” said the soldier, holding out his palm and feeling rain dripping in from the hole in the ceiling. “It is the storm. The storm is getting worse.”

“Yes,” said the richman, still pacing, “And these cave walls will remain as slick as if they were painted in oil.”

“He’s right,” said the Flower Child, the lizard who was carrying her spirit breathing fast, in a panic. “It’s this slick moss that grows on the vertical walls when it rains. . .we cannot get a firm hold to climb.”

The writer began hacking and coughing, his lungs struggling for air. “*‘Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rage at the close of day; rage rage against the dying of the light.’* Dylan Thomas.”

Only the ancient artist seemed unfazed by it all. “Oh, we will get out, my friends. And quite effortlessly. But without these fleshy valises we call a body. That is not the nature of the journey impending. . .”

“*‘If you want me again, look for me under your boot soles.’* Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass. ‘If you look up to see a shooting star, you might miss the silver dollar on the sidewalk. But no matter where you look, or where you travel, you never arrive late to your own death.’ -Jarod Kintz”*

Again the mother snapped at the paunchy old writer. “I told you, please! No more talk of--you’re frightening my children!”

“Mama, I am getting ever so tired.”

“Me too.”

“I can hardly keep my eyes open.” said all the children, in variations, yawning sleepily, and they could not possibly have imagined that this was the yawn which presaged death.

“We are running out of air. Not enough comes in from the hole in the top of the cave,” said the soldier, but quietly, to the rich man next to him, so that the children could not hear.

“I believe God will have mercy.” This from the Flower Child.

“I pray that he will, but fear that he won’t. Greed has ruled my life, has been my God.” This from the Richman.

“I believe that the world beyond this one is glorious.” This from the ancient one, the holder of keys to the Great Storeroom.

After a few more minutes, the “talking” of the ghostly spirits embodied by the Luminary Lizards faded to silence. Then, ever so gradually, a strange sound, something between a moan and a sigh and a song, started swirling around The Cave ... first once voice, then another, then many. The chorus of invisible voices trembled, yet although the tremblato was touched with fear, it seemed mostly to sing of excitement, to thrum of power and ecstasy.

“What is that?” the children all asked of The Piper.

“Do not be afraid, little ones. Those are the angels that usher these poor people to the Great World Beyond,” said The Piper, the tone in his voice as gentle as the breath of a newborn hummingbird.

“So they never get out of The Cave?” Angelica asked, trembling a bit.

“Well, their bodies never get out of The Cave,” explained The Piper in a strangely comforting tone, “But their spirits all ascend to heaven with the help of these Luminary Lizards. The lizards can climb up these slick Cave walls, and when they do, which they do every night, each lizard takes a spirit with him. Or

her. And once the spirits reach the ceiling of The Cave, and ascend just outside of The Cave, with the help of the angels, the souls will shoot up to the sky.”

“Even the selfish rich man?” asked Defcon.

“Yes, and the soldier who killed people?” asked Wee Willie. “Yes, even the rich man and the soldier,” said The Piper. “For the rich man never took what did not belong to him. He just wanted everything to belong to him, was the richman’s mistake--and heaven finds ways to forgive that. And the soldier never took a life but in war, and he thought that he was fighting for peace. Heaven finds ways to forgive that too--or sometimes, God will send the soul back for another life on this earth, with a chance at living a better life the next time. . .”

And as The Piper’s words faded off, the lizards twitched from their utter stillness, and began to stretch and move--first one step, then another, heading up the walls of The Cave, towards the hole in the ceiling, taking the floating souls of the dying with them.

“Are they dying? Are the people dying?” asked Pinkie, a tremble in her voice.

“No, child,” said the Piper. “They ceased to breathe on this earth long ago. But the lizards do this every night, in honor of their memory, this recitation of their last words, which it has now been your honor to hear, and to remember for all time.”

The children all nodded solemnly.

As the little aqua lizard, its color fading from bright turquoise to the shade of a robin’s egg, skittered past the children, they could hear that last words of the sad writer. . .

*“They say you die twice. Once when you stop breathing ... and a bit later on, when somebody mentions your name for the last time. Banksy. Graffiti artist.”*

And with that, the little aqua lizard followed all of the other lizards. . .the soldier and the peacemaker, the richman and the artist, the mother and her children, all hovering around and even

within the lizards, and they skittered out the hole into the sky, and out into the dark starry night. The children watched in amazement as, true to The Piper's predictions, and true to the words of Wheelchair Boy, the human spirits became wild bursts of color and light, shooting high and hard and fast through the heaven, right into the waiting arms of God.

And such a game had the Reaper turned dying into that none of the children feared death any longer, nor would they ever, not ever, even after The Piper later turned them back out of The Cave.

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## LA VENGEANCE DES ENFANTS

But finally, finally, the angels' music faded away, the lizards climbed back down into The Cave and dozed off, and the children grew quiet and still. It had been quite a day (or, technically, quite a night, as they had been kidnapped by The Piper just after the Witching Hour, and the children had been in The Cave for a few hours now), but who could tell if it was day or night in The Cave anyway, since it was such strange lighting that surrounded them?

It was not pitch black, as it might be in some caves, for there was that tiny hole in the ceiling of The Cave that led to the outside, although it was a good hundred plods above them, but still the light trickled in, just the gentlest little bit, so that you could not tell what time it was. In fact, whenever the children looked up, it constantly seemed like that enchanted time of dusk, or of the dawn.

Even now, in the middle of the night, the full moon was out and its dreamy beams were trickling in, making the children feel



safe and all astral projectionesque. They had sucked from the stalactites, they had listened to songs and wise words, they had told each other secrets and gossips and all kinds of notions, and they were all ready to sleep--yet they could not sleep. Their minds were racing, for The Piper's magic had brought their brains back to life, and there was just too much to figure out, before sleep could come.

And then, it happened. The children had the one thing that no child should have too much of:

No, I am not talking about sugar, or recess, or scary stories, or even freedom: I am talking about the one danger that no child should face, especially a child who has survived The Last Great War of Hurlled Things.

The children had too much time on their hands. At first, they just sat around thinking about how lovely life was, here in The Cave, even though they had not been here for so very long. Then, they began thinking about one of the reasons that it was so lovely here: it was so lovely here, *because it had been so very horrible Out There.*

Out in the world.

And for what a long sad time had it been horrible out there! It had been horrific Out There for as long as Humankind had been fighting The Last Great War of Hurlled Things.

It was bad even before that, which should be obvious, for it was the Badness of things that had brought on The War. And since many of the children had been born during The War, they could not even remember the good times, but they heard about the good times always, from the whining and lamenting Grown-Ups, and they read about it in books and saw about it on television, and, well, just about every place you looked, there were memories and images of happier times.

And when the children started thinking about WHY The Last

Great War had to happen, and who was to blame for so much sadness and tragedy, well, it became obvious: it was the Grown-Ups.

### The Grown-Ups!

The Grown-Ups were the reason that there had been so much death and destruction. The Grown-Ups were the reason that so many came home maimed and broken. The Grown-Ups were the reason that those you once loved, those who had once carried you on their shoulders and told you stories and tickled you till the tears ran down your face from laughter ... now those sad souls, those ghosts of mothers and fathers and uncles and aunts and gramps and nanas, some of them dumbly said nothing all day long, but instead just plopped about on old porch sofas and stared into space, speaking not a word, and gazing at something that seemed to be miles away, at some distant point where the child could see nothing at all.

And then, a mystical and bone chilling thing happened. The children knew that they must punish the Grown-Ups for making war. They must make the Grown-Ups terrified at the thought of ever making war again--for nobody ever said it out loud, not so the children could hear, but already, now that wounds were healing and lives were being rebuilt and cities were coming back to life, already you could hear the hushed but angry conversations, cursing about how The Last Great War of Hurlled Things had turned out all wrong, unjustly, what with big hunks of countries being split up unevenly, and the Reparations Treaties had been a sorry joke, in fact the whole thing turned out unfairly, the Grown-Ups were beginning to rumble that perhaps just another tiny bit of war might be needed to straighten matters out. . .yes, just one last little bit of war might just do the trick. . .

For exactly how long those children were stewing and brooding in The Cave, it is impossible to say. But without even talking about it, they looked at each other and they knew what they must do.

They would turn their magic on the Grown-Ups. The children had used the magic to bring the earth back to life, yet for no good end. The Grown-Ups had broken their Promise to The Piper and failed to give him the gold he needed to ransom his poor imprisoned family. (He had not even told them the business of his wife's severed head. They were only children, after all.)

It was clear, then: their magic must turn from the magic of growth and life and love and the gifts of the universe, to a dark and punishing warning of what would happen, if the Grown-Ups dared embark on another Great War.

And since Pinkie had been the first one to practice her Power of the Flowers, it was she who decided to be the first one to turn her magic, now ugly and suddenly cruel, on the Grown-Ups.

She moved to the middle of the circle of children, stared up at the hole in the ceiling of The Cave, pointed her finger, and began to chant:

*Thistle, Cat's Claw, Crown of Thorns  
Will greet you all, this dismal morn  
Your flowers killed, your garden shorn  
Replaced with spine and spike and thorn*

*Hawthorn Firethorn good thorn bad  
Forget those lovely blooms you had  
Firethorn hawthorn bad thorn good*

*Turn every tree to petrified wood*

*Amble through bramble  
Go lie on cacti*

*Pejibaya, Kapok, Sandbox Tree  
Floss Silk, Honey Locust, listen to me  
Cover the countryside, cover the town  
Forest of thorns till we all fall down*

*Choke cherry, Monk's Hood, Castor bean  
Prettiest berries that you've ever seen  
Strychnine, Hemlock, English Yew  
Put them in a salad or cook them in a stew*

*Nightshade, Moonseed, Desert Star  
Drop to your death wherever you are  
Doll's eye, Snakeroot, Oleander flower  
Put them in your mouth, and your dead in an hour  
Angel's Trumpet, Rosary Pea  
Share it from a glass and die with me.*

And then it happened. As Pinkie closed her eyes, The Piper closed his eyes too, for this required a very special kind of magic. You see, since Pinkie was in The Cave, and not able to spread her magic beads, she and The Piper imagined together all the lovely blooms they had already planted--in gardens and on front porches, in backyards and flower pots, in the public green and in the fields which edged the outside of the Hamlet. Every beautiful flower, from Azalea to Zinnia, changed into something that Pricked, or Choked, or Stank, or Gobbled, or Sprayed.

Politicians and representatives of all kinds, now known as

“spokesholes,” who had grown brazen, and were now publicly haranguing about the need for a New War because The Last War had turned out unfairly, suddenly found vines growing up from between the planks of the grandstands where they were speaking! Within seconds, the vines wrapped around their necks, and the spokesholes were choking and gasping for breath, until they turned blue and nearly died. It shut them up at least.

Soldiers listening to the rabble rousing, and armies left over from the last war, still drilling “just in case”, were all sprayed with the Toxic Blooms created by the weapons engineers during TLGWOHT, and they fell into a deep sleep ... some for days, some for months, and they all felt very drunk when they woke up, so they couldn't possible march or aim or fire or slaughter.

Warmongering corporations, who were already building up a whole new set of weapons--guns and bombs and lasers and such (for that very same possible future war of which the choking politicians had spoken, before the deadly vines rose to strangle), these heads and presidents of warmongering corporations, these CEO's and CFO's and CWO's and FUO's all found themselves attacked outside of their fancy high rise office buildings, as they walked from their primo parking spaces, past the beautifully sculpted gardens that fronted the tall glass doors--but lo! Snapdragons had turned into Venus Fly Traps, but not just ordinary Venus Fly Traps--the kind developed in The War from the Great Radiation Experiments. Venus Fly Traps big enough to eat a man with one expansive gape of its giant green, toothy plant mouth.

And the common people, the common people who were dubbed so because they were too busy doing meaningless things to stop the Warmongers and the Rabble Rousers, all the plants around them simply turned into hideous, mind-numbing stink plants, so that one had to lock oneself in one's house, no chance of going out and arming or marching or voting for war, because it

smelled too bad to even open the front door and step out into the sunshine.

Even lovers were punished with the pricking bushes, for even they were so involved with each other that they had not a care for the world, even though you could see, you could see if you watched for the subtle signs, you could hear if you listened for the distant, ominous rumblings, that the world was getting ready to go to war yet again! So when lovers were intertwined, oblivious of the new Armageddon encroaching, suddenly they would find sweet green tendrils worming into the imperceptible spaces between their bodies, their steamy skins, and then that green tendril would turn firm and woody, and then thorns would burst forth from it, leaving the lovers bloodied and prostrate, looking like a couple of crucified corpses.

And when Pinkie looked at The Piper's flute, and saw that it was made of some kind of reed, like a bamboo, that was when she got the idea to cause bamboo reeds to shoot up, not in a matter of days or weeks, such as had grown in the garden of little Kamiko's house, with its coy pond and Buddha, but this cruel bamboo jutted out of the ground within a matter of seconds, and grew with a sharp point to it, like spears being thrust from under the ground by some unseen demonic army. Entire groups of people could not get through these spontaneous thickets of Bambusoideae Bambuseae to even talk to other people.

*"You sit in that bamboo cage and think about what you did!"* was all Pinkie could say, scolding her finger at her visions, and punctuating it with a wicked but beguiling little laugh.

And then, after Pinkie had covered the Hamlet and the world beyond with stinking, stinging, pricking, choking, gassing, swallowing flowers and plants, the excitement was so intense within the group of Cave children, the lust for revenge and the desire to cause suffering had put them into such a frenzy, that the rest of the children started conjuring as to how they might make

the Grown-Ups suffer for the global carnage they had wrought:  
The Last Great War of Hurlled Things.

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The little child who had once imparted the new post war world with such beautiful aromas that a blind man might think he was walking through a bakery which also sold perfume, that same little boy decided that since The War had made the world so ugly, well then it should smell just as Ugly as it was, what with its rubble and bombed buildings and dead bodies and dead dreams. So where before, Odorama Boy, a.k.a. Cameron, had made the old Hamlet drunk smell like Thanksgiving, and the Hamlet wallflower smell like the Rose Bowl Parade, and so forth and so on, now he decided to play a very wicked prank on the Grown-Ups:

He made all the neatly manicured front lawns on the Hamlet, which people had started tending to so lovingly, with the end of The Last Great War, smell like just so many square yards of wall-to-wall vomit. Yes, every front yard smelled of retching, of puke, yarf, chunks o' lunch, so that when anybody opened their front door to step outside in the sunshine, the smell of it made them vomit too, and soon people were yodeling groceries all throughout the Hamlet, from Berry Lane to Maple Street to Persimmon Court. Chunder, chunder, what a wonder! This, in combo with Pinkie's stink plants, made going out into the world like visiting a level of Dante's Inferno.

And all the fruit, the apples and pears and peaches and grapes and berries, they all smelled like turds, but just as god had offered the world an amazing variety of spring fruits, so Odorama Boy made the fruits reek of an *amazing variety of turds*, composed of all different manner of human waste: the turd of a colicky baby,

the turd of someone who eats only the spiciest of cuisines, the turd of a poor man who eats only cabbage soup and the asparagus he grows in his vomity backyard, the turd of the lactose intolerant after a vacation in France, the turd of an old geezer with bowel cancer--well, you get the idea. They say that no two people are alike, just as *no two snowflakes are alike*. Well, you can say the same thing about turds. So much for individuality.

And fresh dried laundry on all the clotheslines smelled like wet dogs.

He made the air during the gorgeous early morning sunrise smell like pig urine and he made the sunrise smell of burning cat shit.

He made the Hamlet gazebo, with its Sunday evening band concerts, smell like a homeless man's underwear, and he made the wee church they had constructed from what was left of the old bombed out one, smell like gangrene.

All spouses smelled like decomposing bodies, while lovers who lay next to each other could only smell in the other the stench of toejam and gym socks. And when they kissed, it was like kissing the mouth of a smoker who sucked back five packs a day after shaking a meth addiction that had rotted his mouth, leaving only jags of teeth, all of which were in a state of extreme decay and in need of root canals.

And anything, anything at all that one tried to drink smelled like the expressed anal gland juice of a sick dog, and all food, no matter how lovingly prepared or spiced, smelled exactly like burned flesh.

All babies smelled like skunks, all flowers reeked of sulfur.

Odorama Boy was pleased with what he had wrought, and all the other children applauded him.



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. . .And now, here is the diabolically amusing thing! What was so funny (or at least, it seemed very funny at the time, if you were there, which I was), was that little Angelica had been working her black magic at the same time that Cameron was making the world stink so badly. You remember Angelica, don't you? The little girl who had no mouth, so afraid was she of spewing profanities and obscenities and epithets like the Grown-Ups, that her mouth just disappeared one day! Until The Piper helped her find her mouth again, by giving her the power to control what came out of other people's mouths. Of ugly souled people.

Well, little Angelica was now back at her mischief, wielding her power, but in a different sort of way. So even as the Curse of Cameron had caused the world to reek, to stink so bad you would have thought the jaws of hell had opened up and spit out the B.O. of every demon doing the Devil's Work, so Angelica was causing folks everywhere, people in the Hamlet and beyond, to pay for their cruel words and bigotry and hatespeak and prejudice and name calling and war mongering--by spitting up the most vile *things* imaginable.

And little Angelica, who had endured many horrific ordeals in her short eight years, could think of many, many vile things.

For the ordinary Hamletfolk, who thought nothing of spewing out words like "Wigger" and "Dune Coons" and "Porch Monkeys" and "Munter" and "Spicaninny" and "Fence Fairy" and "Abbos" and "Tar Babies" and "Alligator Bait," and "Potholder Heads" and "Wops" and "Wogs" and "Zogs," Angelica knew just what they needed. She would fix their wagons. Angelica stared up

at the hole in The Cave, pointed, and in that same moment, instantaneously, folks all over the Hamlet and beyond began spitting up ticks and ants, worms and slugs, lice and maggots, small crabs and snakes ...

... and for the Warmongers, who had pushed everybody towards this World Wide Conflagration, and who were even now, in New Peace Time, making noise about the need for a new war, Angelica made the Warmongers spit up shards of glass and thumbtacks, metal shavings and cigarette butts, and just because she was feeling particularly angry in that moment, she followed all those scratchish bleedly things with a mass, synchronous vomiting of tongues of the dead, and the fingers of little babies, and the nipples of women who had been raped and slaughtered in The War, and the penises of little enemy boys that the soldiers had castrated, so that they could not grow up to make more Enemy boys and girls.

And then, when it came time for her to punish the preachers of hate--the ones who *pretended* to talk from the pulpit, but who spoke not of love and forgiveness and Jesus, but of damnation and the Unsaved, and how it was just fine for *us* to do the judging for god, and how now we must make Holy Wars against the rest of the world in god's name ... well ... for them, little Angelica had special treats: for them, there was the reverse eating (read "vomiting" of course), of Barker's eggs, scabs, boogers, menses, cum, Cowper's gland milk, and the pus that comes out of an infected preauricular pit.\*

(\*The reason that Angelica knew about all of these horrific things [in addition to the simple sad fact that children weren't shielded from anything anymore; The War had seen to that], was that before The War, her father had been a doctor, a fine surgeon and a brilliant researcher, and he knew everything about the human body. Except how to keep himself and his wife from being

poisoned by the Toxi-bomblett that came in the mail one day, when somebody found out that Angelica's father was planning to blow the whistle on some people in the government who were violating the World Rules of War Handbook. [It was more of a pamphlet, really.] Anyway, before this sad postal tragedy, he used to come home every night in time for dinner, enthused about his day at the hospital, and he would talk about the most inappropriate medical things, regardless of how relentlessly his wife chided and nagged about the inappropriateness of the gross subject matter while eating. She left him over it, but returned to the marriage two months later, because she realized that given his job, he had the best damned health insurance plan anywhere, and she decided the trade-off was worth it. Besides, she still loved him sort of.)

Oh, and there was one last thing that Angelica willed with her most powerful magic for all people to vomit forth from their deepest parts, *and somehow **she** knew that **they** would know what they were vomiting up:* tears.

Human tears.

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Now, moving on to Wee Willie, and his turn of heart. Wee Willie was not so wee any more. He was neither fat, nor freakishly muscled, as many young men tried to do after The War in order to feel more personally powerful. But the nutrition falling from the sky, and his running around to catch it, and to tell all of the Hamletfolk that it would be raining food soon, and they should be prepared to catch it while it was fresh--all of this had gradually brought his health back to him. Still, the other children continued to call him Wee Willie out of affection, and he took it that way.

But make no mistake, he was as angry at the Grown-Ups as anyone. He was tired of using his magic on the sky, feeding the people only so they might have enough strength to prepare for another war, to hurt each other--to betray The Piper. To not even give a fig (and there were many of these that had fallen from the sky, moist and juicy and sweet), about what happened to The Piper's poor kidnapped family.

So he decided to turn their nourishment that dropped from the sky into punishment: when the people saw the storm clouds approaching, they ran into the fields with their baskets and wheelbarrows, praying for meat, but it was rancid meat, infested with maggots. They prayed for sweet pink shrimp, and instead got three day old fish. They prayed for berries, they got kimchee, they prayed for plums, they got rotten eggs, they prayed for cheese, they got limburger, they prayed that the raindrops be not water, but rather sweet whole milk. But the milk was sour, and the folks were forced to spit it back out. So sour was the milk that when they regurgitated it back onto the ground, a stinkweed grew, and it grew so fast that it chased the people back home, sometimes slithering a tentacle or two in the front door before the people could slam it fast enough. Then, a plant pod would explode, and the entire house smelled like farts for days.

And then, Wee Willie had a realization:

The Piper had told him he had the power to make food fall from the sky, but The Piper had said nothing about *what kind of food*. Never had The Piper's magic required that it be food for humans. So Wee Willie put his thinking cap on, in the vilest of ways, and began plotting what kinds of animal foods might deluge the people with the next storm. He had read all kinds of nature books in his skinny little solitude, during The Last Great War, to pass the time in his family's bomb shelter, and so he knew the diets

of birds and rodents and wild forest animals and such. And so Wee Willie called forth from the dark heavens the foods that these wild animals might eat.

When once again the storm clouds rolled in, and when once again the ravenous, desperate folks ran to the field, this time there fell from the skies worms and small snakes, and bugs of all kinds. There were baby mice and baby birds and baby squirrels. There were even eyeballs, for Willie had read that to carrion birds, eyeballs of the dead were quite a delicacy.

Finally, as the folks grew starving and desperate beyond all reason, they collectively fell to their knees and prayed as hard as they possibly could, they prayed for any protein that was not too old to eat ... so Wee Willie obliged them, oh how he obliged them, with the freshest of fresh meat, *fresh road kill*, now falling from the sky. Deer and foxes, possum and skunk, raccoon and gophers and woodchucks and box turtles, all bloodied and disemboweled, some still agonizing in the throws of death, fell with ghastly thuds out of the devilish dark clouds and onto the fields, their helpless eyes staring in mute pleading at the people, some of them with a bit of life left in them, blinking, still gazing, baffled by their own sudden end, mystified by the cruelty of their pain, and a single, accusing animal tear sometimes falling from one eye.

Finally the people gave up on the rain, and realized that the bounty it had once promised on such a cheerfully regular basis was now probably gone forever, just as so much of the great beauty and good health of the earth was gone forever, destroyed as it had been by the Grown-Up's waging of The Last Great War of Hurlled Things.

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*(The children were well aware that, in executing their magic, they had overlapped, and they loved that they were all thinking on the same wavelength now, so that even as Wee Willie caused the sky to rain eyeballs, Angelica was causing people to vomit them up, and even as people leaned over to kiss their loved one and smelled nothing but old cigarette butts, so they vomited cigarette butts back into the mouths of their lover. It was a beautiful thing, this synchronicity of the children. They thrummed and hummed together, and their auras began to rise and shine, and play all around the bodies of the children, in a phantasmagorical display of colors . . .)*

But something was missing. Yes, the world literally stank to High Heaven, and yes, nauseating food was falling from the sky, and yes, people were retching up the most horrible organic and inorganic atrocities--that is, when they weren't being scratched or squeezed or poisoned or swallowed or otherwise attacked by vegetation . . .

But there was something missing. It was quiet out there.  
Too quiet.

(Except for the occasional lone or group hurl.)

And so now it was dear Defcon's turn to make a little trouble. Defcon, who had lost his hearing when the Enemy put peppers in his ears for eavesdropping. Defcon, the little boy whose special Piper magic was to but look at the sky, and point, and with that, he could make the Music of the Spheres! Any kind of magical music that he imagined at any moment. He could make that Music of the Spheres blast forth from all around, as though invisible surround-sound speakers were positioned all over the little Hamlet,

both indoors and outdoors. But in spite of this glorious gift, Defcon, too, was angry at the Grown-Ups, and he decided to punish them with the nightmare of music.

Of poor musical choices. Perhaps you know a little about that.

He would punish their days and nights, their prayers and play, their meals and their meanderings and the mindless tasks that filled up their hours. All of the most frightening music ever written, this was his stockpile of weaponry.

When the folks would gather by the public bandstand, and would try to pass a Saturday evening with a Hamlet square dance, nothing would come out of the band instruments but "*Dance Macabre*" by Saint Saëns. Over and over again. Until, near midnight, the band instruments inexplicably began playing "*Le Sacre De Printemps*," and when the band reached the climactic "*Danse Sacrale*", everyone turned on the youngest, prettiest girl at the hoedown and they all stabbed her to death. Sometimes they just tore her apart with their bare hands, her tutu flying everywhere like tickertape at some festive parade. It became a regular Saturday night ritual; on the upside, those square dances really went up in attendance.

And when they went to tend their gardens and their yards, and burn the autumn leaves, Manuel de Falla's "*Ritual Fire Dance*" would begin to play, loud and demonic in the air all around, and the spirits of the dancing gypsies would appear, and the poor gardener would begin dancing with his rake, or her rake, whirling and spinning like a dervish, until the possessed gardener leapt into the burning leaves in an orgiastic frenzy, and would thus be burned to a cinder, screaming maniacally as the neighbors watched helplessly. And somewhat apathetically I might add, once the novelty of these suicides-by-gardening wore off.

And when the morning traffic jam would press and groan in

the Hamlet square and on the side roads, traffic cobbled together from push carts and what was left of cars and jeeps and golf carts and tanks and some skateboards and a couple of rickshaws, R.W. Smith's "*Inferno*" would be playing, inexplicably, on everybody's vehicle radio.

And when the Hamlet magistrate would try to conduct Small Claims Court--because everybody felt sure that everybody else owed him something, the judge issuing his decision could barely be heard over the bizarre demonic chorus that seemed to be coming out of a hundred invisible speakers, belting out a sizzling mash-up of Requiems: Mozart, Verdi, Faure, Britten, Berlioz, Dvorak, Shafer, the entire pantheon. And just as the Judge would say, "I award Bernice Higginbotham a judgment of--" he would be drowned out by unseen voices coming from nowhere and everywhere, all at the same time: "*Lacrimosa dies illa, qua resurget ex favilla, judicandus homo reus.*" It was all very annoying.

And when fat, flabby lovers would try to consummate their stale marriage for the tedious thousandth time, suddenly they would be surrounded by a very different kind of mash-up, specifically Richard Strauss's "*Dance of the Seven Veils*," as well as the John Cale version and Liz Durrett's take on the tune. It made for some heady love-making in the beginning, but more than one woman got a little too much into the frenzy of it, and decapitated her dear husband, gazing at his visage on a platter as a part of her afterglow, which now had a hitherto unimagined sensual satisfaction to it.

And when the pastor preached peace, he had to do so over the thundering strains of Holst's "*Mars, Bringer of War.*"

And when soldiers streaming in from the east and south and west and north of Hamlet dragged their shell-shocked selves to the



make-shift hospital, seeking treatment for their wounds from The Last Great War, it was not Muzak that played over the hospital elevator speakers, but "*Ride of the Valkyries*", and it *kept* blaring when they stepped into the hospital halls and found a constantly changing system of Triage, its irrationality and unpredictability caused by the fact that the music had made everybody quite insane--on one day redheads would be treated first, on another day, Baptists first, on another day, wounded with a Bronx accent received immediate medical treatment, and so on and so forth.

And when folks sought out their psychiatrist, and asked him to explain this angst of post-war that was paralyzing them, nay strangling them, like some gigantic boa constrictor, the doctor would just open his mouth and out would trumpet Edvard Grieg's "*Hall of the Mountain King*."

And when teachers were teaching the older children, who were already quite ruined and had not been taken to The Cave by The Piper, the teachers had to lecture to the strains of the deafening "*Tabula Rasa*" by Arvo Part screaming around their desks and podium.

And when sad tired men, who had been young and energetic at the start of The Last Great War of Hurling Things, when these sad men went to confession and tried to get forgiveness for starting The War or for their part in the carnage of The War, all they could hear was *not* the soothing voice of the priest, but the terrorized baritone of Faust in "*Ride to the Abyss and Pandemonium*". Not "Say three Hail Marys and take two aspirins and call me in the morning", but "*Dans mon coeur retentit sa voix!?*"

And when people were trying to write of their lives, and of the Last Great War of Hurling Things, they had no music playing on their radio or on their phonograph, yet inexplicably, Penderecki's "*Dream of Jacob*" began playing, and suddenly, all

that the writers could scribble was “*All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.*” Then they suddenly got a wild hair and decided to chop up their wives and children, and sometimes they actually followed through on these brutal acts of cabin fever with homicidal panache, as Kubrick was dead and not there to rescue the nuclear family.

When children died before their mother and father--which did happen quite a lot--and the parents buried a child, no lullabies were heard at the funeral, nor Pachabel or Pie Jesu, but Orff's “*Oh Fortuna.*”

There was no peace for anyone, anywhere, thanks to the rage of Defcon. Old Geezers who just wanted an afternoon of fishing were drowned out by the theme from “*Jaws*”; women trying to take a cool shower after a hot summer day couldn't escape the soundtrack from “*Psycho*”, and--

And for the youth ... ah, youth ... the hope of the future, those few young souls who were brave enough to leave that sad Hamlet and strike out for places unknown, like some 22<sup>nd</sup> century Road Warriors .. as they met in secret places, basements and alleys and even treehouses, and planned their escape from that confining and narrow Hamlet, with its residual detritus of bigotry and anti-everything and war hate, Defcon began blaring from the very ground the townsfolk walked upon the scariest of all musical tortures: the “*Theme song from Barney*”, and also “*The New Zoo Review*”, and of course, John Cage's “*4:33*”.

And for those who were actually fool enough to think they could follow through with their dream of a Great Escape--as though anyone can truly escape the small-minded bigotry and hatred of their childhood--as those hopeful youth attempted to flee on their choppers out of town, fast and far away from the little

Hamlet, they heard, blasting from the neon skies above their bikes, the very worst of Ozzy: “*Road to Nowhere*” and “*Shot in the Dark*” and “*Bark at the Moon*” and “*Mama I’m Coming Home,*”--and oh, did I forget to mention “*Born to Run*”--the Ozzy Osbourne version, with Miss Piggy.

And of course the thundering wondering skies played that loudest of all, the heading horror of it all spewing forth from what could only be described as the Bang and Olufsen Beosound 24ct gold Diamond Edition sound system.

It was horrific beyond words, and so I shall say no more for now.

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And even the little girl who had the power to change the texture and the firmness of things decided to wreak her share of havoc on the Grown-Ups. She had noticed how very crazy everybody drove after The Last Great War of Hurlled Things, everybody always being very very angry and so much in an extreme hurry and mostly always drunk from drinking roach beer and vodka made out of turnips and cow patties, and high from smoking grass grass (again, thanks to KindChem) ... and so it made the highway dividers that still stood stalwart after The War more important than ever, for folks were forever crashing into them--from tiddliness or tiredness or whatever, as they cruised their strange ramshackle assortment of vehicles down the highway.

But Bendy Brenda showed them all; she made that highway divider as pliable as a politician, and basically turned it from cement to rubber with one snap of her finger. If drivers fell asleep and drifted into the cement dividers in the middle of the road,

instead of it being hard enough to stop them, it acted like a huge slingshot and slung them right across the lane of traffic, into oncoming traffic, and caused no end of havoc, blood, carnage, and death.

Bad little Bendy Brenda.

And highway dividers weren't the only things that were once hard, but which now suddenly went limp and soft, and seemed to stay that way. In fact there were many things that many grow-ups wanted very much to be hard, and which used to be hard mostly all the time, during the time of the White Magic, but which were now suddenly soft, soft all the time, and which caused a Very Great Disappointment for all of the Grown-Ups.

But she worked the reverse spell as well, turning soft things hard. The exercise trampolines in everybody's backyard, for example, which the government had issued, way back after the beginning of the end of the war, to keep everybody in shape, as health clubs were no longer in existence. These went from bouncy to hard as a slab of pavement, and all the children had great sport watching the Grown-Ups nearly break their necks jumping onto the trampolines, and then breaking their backs as they splatted to the unforgiving cement.

And Bendy Brenda had her way with textures too. If you drank something from a soda fountain glass that you were expecting to be delicious and smooth, imagine your shock when you put it in your mouth and found it to be like drinking shards of glass.

And then she could do the reverse, the effects being just as wicked, making rough things smooth:

For example, if you were trying to be a Goodwife, and when your man came home, you hugged your husband's face, and instead of the exciting manly rough stubble of bards, it felt as smooth as if you were hugging another woman's cheek, and what

disturbed and upset the ladies most about this texture change was that it didn't upset and disturb them nearly as much as they might have thought. And it led to more thoughts ... and fantasies.)

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Exitium gignit initium gignit exitium

*"The way leads from playing the flute to pleasure, from pleasure to laziness, from laziness to sleep, from sleep to sin, from sin to death, from death to the devil and hell."*

*--Stephen Cossman, of Puritan England*

There was only one child who had not yet used her magical powers. As you may remember, it was little Origami Girl, Kamiko, the sweet pixie who had single-handedly repopulated the Hamlet, the surrounding forest, and yes, the vast world beyond as well. . .the oceans, even, with fantastical creatures! And all from nothing more than pretty pieces of paper. Even the mightiest elephant or tiger had started out as a mere papyrus scrap, perhaps from an accounts ledger, or the pages of a phone book, or even a wad of paper from the trash--and from all these, she had restored the creatures of the earth, the fish of the waters, the birds of the skies.

But nobody was as angry as little Kamiko at the Grown-Ups for their Cruel Warring. She had watched in a dazed, crazed sort of blissful rage, as the other children turned their dark magic on the

Grown-Ups. She found it all very satisfying, but not satisfying enough. (Perhaps evidence that Kamiko herself was starting to turn into a little Grown-Up?)

Finally, when all the children had finished with their magical cruelties, they turned and studied Kamiko. She smiled at them, but it was a smile such as she had never smiled before. It was a smile such as they had never seen before. It was a smile that came from Revenge. If there was anything left out there, outside The Cave, that the Grown-Ups had to use for the planning and making of war, she, Kamiko would destroy it.

Decided the child.

The only way for the Grown-Ups to have any hope against themselves, was if they were all, ***all of them***, to have to ***start all over again***. Somehow she knew this sad truth to be almost sad fact, down deep in her mourning soul.

For Kamiko's parents had taught her much about history, and what she had learned was that only when a world was new and struggling did it have a chance. Once it had everything, that was the beginning of the end of hope. It was always the Beginning of the End.

Kamiko knew what she must do. This time she would not send hundreds of little pieces of folded paper out into the world. This time, she would create one magnificent Origami. It would be--she knew--her last one. It would be her final creation. How she knew that, or why she knew that with such certainty, she could not say, but this would be her last.

She reached back in her quiver for a role of paper. She had taken to doing that, you see--so magnificent had her Origami creations become that no small sheet of paper was enough any

more. So she had found, amidst the rubble of her home where she still played sometimes, the quiver from the bow and arrow set that her father had used for hunting game during The Last Great War, when food had become scarce. She had visited the rubble of her home after everybody had died but her, and she had taken what she could, and kept it in a secret place. But now she wore the quiver proudly, and kept lovely rolls of beautiful Origami paper in it, where before there had been exquisite handmade arrows.

Some of the paper was of a solid color; other pieces were magnificent prints and patterns, and she would choose each one carefully, suiting it to the animal she wished to bring to life.

She gently pulled out a roll of paper. Kamiko had been saving this one. She had not been certain up till now exactly why she was saving it, or what she was saving it for, but in this moment, she knew.

The paper was the most magnificent iridescent green, and it changed oh-so-mysteriously when it caught the light. At some moments it seemed to be a true emerald green, then an electric kelly green, then a deep turquoise. And its pattern changed with the changing color. One moment it seemed smooth, then bumpy, then. . . *were those scales appearing on the paper, is that what the children were seeing?*

The children all watched breathlessly as Kamiko folded the large piece of paper, almost as large as she was, with deft precision. They all caught their breath and stepped back a bit when they saw what she had created: a magnificent dragon! It was a bit tiny, as dragons go, being only about as tall as Kamiko, and it looked rather endearing, as though perhaps it was a baby dragon. So enchanting was it that the children all ran towards it, to play with it.

“NO!” Kamiko called out quickly, in a warning tone, and at her orders, the children all jumped back.

“If you touch it, it will not be able to fly,” cautioned Kamiko.

“Stand back further. You must not frighten it.”

And then, she reached into her belt--it had been her father's samurai belt--and she pulled out a magnificent, ancient, bejeweled samurai sword. She handed it to the dragon, who said not a word, but bowed humbly at his diminutive mistress. Then, she locked eyes with the paper dragon and began to chant:

***Mighty Dragon of fable and song  
Change from paper to flesh so strong  
Fly from here with sword of the Just  
Cut down Evil into the dust  
Change the world with your fiery breath  
Let all armies meet their death!***

Suddenly, the dragon's wings began to flap ... awkwardly at first ... but then with a great power, most awesome for the dragon's tiny size.

And when the dragon reared its paper head back in delight at its new found animation, the children jumped back again, this time so far that some of them fell into the little pools and had to be rescued by the fish quartets. All of the children, and even The Piper stared in awe as the dragon lifted off the cave floor, and, with the grace of a bird that had been flying for a hundred full moons, it spiraled up towards the hole at the top of The Cave and out, out, out into the night sky!

Now, you may be wondering how it was that the children knew what had been going on, out in the world, all this time, during all of their black magical shenanigans. . .you may be wondering how they already knew the effect of all the angry spells they had wrought--and I am almost surprised that you have not yet figured it out.

Almost surprised.



It was Astral Boy, Claude, the oncesad child in the wheelchair, who had the power to tell them everything they wanted so desperately to know. You see, as soon as the dark magic had started, he had willed his Second Self out of the wheelchair, leaving his withered body behind, of course, and he would scoot his soul up through the hole in The Cave, just as had the dragon.

And what a storyteller little Claude turned out to be.

He would fly over the Hamlet and beyond, and report back to the children, all about the effect of the ugly music and the hurtful flowers, the disgusting bits and blobs vomiting from folks's mouths, and the foul food raining from the skies. And then he regaled them with descriptions of all the nauseating smells rising up from the earth, as Odorama Boy had changed the aroma of everything sweet and delicious and innocent to wretched stench from the evil and the dead and the End Times.

Astral Boy told them of animals having power over humans, speaking the language of the humans, and of people speaking gibberish, even as they tried to secretly plot the revenge of waging the Second Last Great War Of Hurlled Things.

His Second Self would fly back into The Cave and beguile the children with stories of hard things turned soft, of moist things turned desiccate, of rainbow colored things turned film noire--entire households, entire lives were being lived out in nothing but shades of sienna, Astral Boy said.

Naturally, the boy agreed to make one last trip, to see what havoc the dragon would wreak, although he too was getting tired, and felt that he had used up all of his magic. He wasted no time in shimmying his soul up behind the paper dragon, as it was making its way out into the moonlight:

All of the children were imagining it, but only the little flying boy Claude was their witness to it: the transformation of the dragon. The rippling of the textured skin as paper turned to flesh, the fattening of the frightening torso as the body filled out, the wings soaring through a night that seemed to grow blacker with the dragon's every new breath, the muscular legs treading the air as a mighty whale treads the ocean, the real talons springing forth, sharp and deadly from its fearsome feet, the eyeballs turning red with bloody ruby rage, and the fire from the dragon's jaws jutting out in magnificent golden flames.

And it was just as Kamiko had said it would be. Since almost everybody had been involved in The Last Great War of Hurlled Things, nearly everyone out in the world outside The Cave felt the wrath of the dragon.

Death was everywhere. There was burning and screaming and smoke, then embers and sobbing and wisps of memories, but everybody was so exhausted that they could not even be sure what it was they were remembering. Were they remembering the last moments before the dragon's descent and the fire he brought with him? Or were they remembering the peace before The Last Great War Of Hurlled Things, and how joyous life had been then?

And in the end, does it really matter? Does it matter what it was they were trying to remember, since those happy times were now gone with the wind. . . . .

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In fact, if I were to tell you about the ending of The Last Great War, I would tell you that it does not really matter either, for it ended as all wars end: with the blame going to the losers, as

history is written by the winners. It ended with millions dead, as do all of the Great Wars To End All Wars, but there were many who lived too--enough to begin life again in the world.

And all though there had been immeasurable destruction (more than the human mind could comprehend, really), there were also those who grew wealthy because of The War. Pets were maimed or killed or starved or eaten or lost, but there were pets who came back to families, who all reunited and whose lives went on. New families were formed, as were new neighborhoods and towns and cities and countries and worlds.

There were stirring stories told about what had happened in The War, some touching because they were true, some moving beyond words because they were lies.

All in all, The Last Great War Of Hurling Things was not that different than all of the other wars which had come before it.

But what of our mischievous children, happily imprisoned in The Rainbow Cave, and what of the Grown-Ups whom they had taken such pleasure in torturing?

Well, I must tell you, the children were getting bored, as children will, but the good news is--and of course, that is all relative--is that the children's Beelzebubian broo-ha-ha had brought the Grown-Ups to their knees. The entire Hamlet, and lands beyond, they all surrendered. Come the dawn after the visitation from the dragon, and white flags popped up everywhere, in every form:

There were white sheets run up flagpoles and white tablecloths tied to trees. White gloves were stuck on the ends of fence posts and diapers covered doghouses. Boxer shorts flew from birdhouses and white handkerchiefs from mailboxes. White panties and white brassieres flapped from the tops of car antennas, or from antennas attached to any piece of transportation:

rickshaws, litters, pushmepullyous.

The Grown-Ups had had enough.

They were ready to give up their gold.

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## THE SHADOW GAME

*"The heart of the cedar... the center of it, or the pit, is red and soft. That has to be removed by the flute maker. And so then the flute player, of course, has the obligation to restore that... to replace that with his own heart."*

*--Kevin Locke*

In the end, it was all really quite anti-climactic, really. Astral Boy saw all of the white flags flying around the Hamlet and beyond, once the flames from the dragon's fiery blasts had turned to burning embers. And as his Second Self, his Astral Soul, made its way back to The Cave, he told the children, and of course The Piper, what he had seen.

The Piper went to the Hamlet, collected his gold, plus 8.5 percent interest (which he had not even asked for!), and then he prepared to leave the Hamlet for the last time. He had to go rescue his own family, of course, but first, there were long tearful goodbyes with all of the children.

He explained to them that they would no longer have their magical powers, but that they would not care, because no child

really wishes to be that different from other children, even if it means that they can do magic. They think they want that mighty power, but then, after they have lived with the burden of it awhile, they want to give it back again. And so that was how it all happened.

Goes the Piper.

The children were healed, though, and went on to thrive without their powers. They imagined, laughed, celebrated, fantasized, created, trusted, played and slept without troublesome dreams.

Little Kamiko lost her fear of paper, and went on to write great stories on it, while Astral Boy became a historian of legend, telling the tales of The Last Great War from a bird's eye view, far above the politics and partialities. For the gift of Astral Projection is the gift one can give one's self; it need not come from The Piper. Pinkie helped replant the planet, Wee Willie grew up to help feed the newly starving generation, Angelica became famous for her kind words all over the cruel world, and Amadeus (Defcon) went on to make grand music plucked right out of his memory and his mind, just as a man named Beethoven had once done.

As I said--in the end, it was all really quite anti-climactic. But you will learn this important and secret lesson yourself, one day, if **you** ever survive a Great War of Hurlled Things: sometimes, anti-climactic can be good.

It is, after all, just a pejorative synonym for peace.

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There is one thing you should know, before we end our story.

The Pied Piper returned the children. But he kept their Shadows. Insurance, you might call it, against the bouncing of Karmic checks.

For a Shadow, as you know, is nothing more than the Devil's reflection of your soul. Of your self's darker side. Of what you might become, with just a wink and a nudge from Him.

It took a while for the Grown-Ups to get used to it, watching their children play on the sunny sidewalks during lo those long brilliant summer days, and no greyblack mimics imitating the boys and girls in their frolics. Just bleached, bright pavement. At high noon.

But the Shadows still play. Oh, they play. They cavort in The Cave, in the Pied Piper's spelunking palace, with it gorgeous stalactites and stalagmites, and its mystical creatures, and jutting crystals and funky formations and hidden pools of Kool-Aid and secrets.

There they sleep, and there they romp, those Shadows. Their games are vile, their creations are vicious, their lullabies are vulgar. And their dreams are worse than all their dayplay put together. And yet, the Shadows do not call them nightmares. They love their dreadful dreams. They look forward to their cruel somnambulistic imaginings. But I suspect you know all about that.

Because those dreams, of course, are what led to The Last Great War of Hurlled Things in the first place.

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*"God picks up the reed-flute world and blows.  
Each note is a need coming through one of us,  
a passion, a longing pain.  
Remember the lips  
where the wind-breath originated,  
and let your note be clear.  
Don't try to end it.  
Be your note." -- Rumi*

*THE END*