

THE FRYCOOK'S REVENGE

Or

Doin' the Chia Cha Cha

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&

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-Ambrose Bierce.*

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THE FRYCOOK'S REVENGE: A PREAMBLE

“Turn it into art. Turn your anger into art.”

-The Fattest Crimefighter in the World.

He had been given so much advice, since the tsunami of tragedies had washed over him ... what had it been, five years ago, since it all started, with the feelings of pain and loss being quite cruelly relentless ... but none of the advice seemed to work. Except one piece of advice. In that, he saw a glimmer of hope ...

It was advice that he had initially given to himself, but he did not trust it coming from himself. Probably because he felt that in some way, he was personally responsible for all of the disasters which had befallen him, and which had befallen so many other souls within his realm of influence. And hence, he had lost all credibility with himself.

But, as he cocked his overly large ears towards the universe, like some petite pair of satellite dishes listening for signs of extra-terrestrial intelligence, he heard others giving him the same advice. And with time, the incidents of hearing this same piece of advice accumulated, until the angry little man felt that *this* was what he was supposed to do, how he was supposed to handle his anger.

He had heard the man who played Tristram Shandy echo his own secret feelings: which would you rather have? A life of happiness, or a successful career? The actor, who incidentally was also the brand new father of a bouncing baby boy, answered with neither pause nor flinch: *“a successful career!”* Because if you're happy, after you die, nobody really knows you were happy. So what? But if you had a successful career, you leave as a legacy, after your demise, this stack of really great DVDs.

The Angriest Man in the World concurred.

And so he sat down to write a story. A story about a man much like himself. A story about a very humble, very unimportant, very angry little man.

Here ends the Preamble. Now begins the story.

THE FRYCOOK'S REVENGE

If you lived in the tiny town of Weighstation, you knew from birth that you were never going to achieve fame or fortune. It was just something you sort of accepted. The highest paid person in the tiny town of 1707 people was Ernie of Ernie's Taxidermy; Lavinia Stout's cousin in Tiddlyville did Ernie's taxes, and it quickly spread through the raisin vine that one year Ernie made a whopping \$28,184 dollars. Opportunity didn't spring up much in Weighstation, so if you were born there, and didn't have the courage to leave (which nobody did), you just resigned yourself to genteel poverty. But secretly, there were those in Weighstation who craved more.

Billy Bob Thornbird was one of them. And when the internet came to town, Billy Bob saw his chance.

Billy Bob cherished his big old ten-year-old computer that he had gotten at the Rustburg Volunteer Fireman's rummage sale, and he had that behemoth hooked right into to the World Wide Web, just as soon as that tower went up on the edge of town. And after a couple of months of surfing the internet late into the night, after his nine to five job at the fast food emporium "Franks for the Memories" (a Germanesque, sausage serving, evil national chain which Billy Bob hated, but which had a fabulous dental plan), anyway, after coming home from that crappy job and logging on, it was only a matter of a couple of weeks before Billy Bob realized that the Internet was a Beast. And a hungry Beast it was.

The Beast, it seemed, was always looking to be fed. Content, content, content.

(As Billy Bob was rewriting the first draft of his novelette, he realized that those three words, thumping like a tribal drum, could be read as the word "conTENT," as in "I am at peace." But what Billy Bob was really trying to get at was *the Web's constant need for fresh flies caught in its ethereal strands*, so he backtracked and reformatted it to read CONtEnt, CONtEnt, CONtEnt.)

It was fascinating, how it worked, this new-fangled Internet thing. Any weird, whacky, whimsical incident or action, any freaky piece of news from any obscure corner of the world, and it showed up there on the Internet. And there never seemed to be enough of it.

That was it! That was how Billy Bob would pull it off! That was how he would get famous. He would stage some piece of bizarre human theatre. All he had to do was pull off some outrageous stunt, and it would be on the Internet in no time. Millions of people, from Boise to Beijing, would log on and see the story, as they scrolled through the chronicles of human shenanigans that had transpired in the last 24 viral hours. And with that fledgling fame, pondered Billy Bob, who knew to what heights he might climb?

His head was reeling with the possibilities...

Billy Bob had observed that a disproportionate number of stories on the internet dealt with people being embarrassed. This seemed to amuse and entertain the world writ large, and it had about it, Billy Bob thought, a certain "gladiatorial" sensibility, as did most reality shows. It was as though we couldn't be thoroughly entertained anymore, unless it involved watching perfect strangers, perfectly innocent souls, being humiliated in front of a world wide audience.

Bathrooms and their scatological possibilities were also featured as log-on type Internet stories from time to time. It was as though we ought never to forget those baser elements that keep us closer to being beasts than angels.

Billy Bob was lying awake one night, falling asleep to Road Runner cartoons and nursing the last of his Yoohoo, when the idea occurred to him: he would pull off an amazing bathroom prank. (!) And it would serve double doody, pun intended, he chuckled softly to himself, and that was the last thought he had, as he rolled gently, but not gently enough, onto the plate of Mallomars that were lying beside him on the bed

The gag was this: when a lady walked into the restroom at the back of Franks for the Memories, she would go into the stall, the middle stall, which was apparently the only unoccupied stall, and prepare to do her business. Then, Billy Bob had it rigged so that when the victim placed her hiney down on the toilet seat, this pressure on the seat caused *another* light to come on in the bathroom. (This light worked on the same principle as The Clapper, an invention which Billy Bob had invented at the same time as the other person who invented it and got it onto infomercials, but Billy Bob hadn't the money for R&D, so his inventor doppelganger had beaten him to the punch and gotten obscenely rich, an injustice which goaded Billy Bob on an almost daily basis.)

Anyway, this special light would come on directly overhead the stalls, and reveal what was *really* going on: where formerly there had been the traditional walls separating the bathroom stalls, Billy Bob, in the plan, would have snuck in during the night and replaced the stall walls with large, heavy duty One-Way-See-Through glass, so that if you were the poor victim in the middle stall, it looked like the person in the stall next to you could see everything you were doing, and vice versa, when in reality, it was far more innocent than that—*the person in the middle stall could see into the stalls on either side, through the glass, but on the other side, in the outside adjoining stalls, it was just mirrors.*

But the purpose was clear and the effect worked: the joke was that the person in the middle stall, being able to see straight through to the stall next to her, naturally assumed that the person in the stall next to her could do the same, seeing everything that the poor lady in the middle stall was doing. And therein lay part of the Great Hoax. The truth was that there was no person in the stall next to her, no, nor no chance of one ambling in, for Billy Bob had placed in one of the stalls a giant Santa sitting on the crapper, and in the other, a big elf. Billy Bob had then locked each stall from the inside, and slid out underneath the locked stall door, so that the only one of the three stalls anybody could enter was the middle one.

One side note that I should mention was that the elf (which was in one of the two stalls flanking the victim's stall) was a really creepy creation. It was smaller than the Santa, about half Kringle's size. What it really was was a clown doll dressed up in red and green to look like a Christmas elf, and it had been fashioned by the town's lone hippie woman, who ran a thriving website called ihateclowns.org. She had made a small fortune copyrighting and selling chatchkees and t-shirts bearing the saying, "*Can't sleep, clowns will eat me.*"

The point is, it was the most terrifying Christmas elf you could envision, even in your darkest dreams. Imagine squatting down to pinch a loaf, then glancing to one side and seeing *that* pressed up against the stall-wall glass staring at you.

And as for the Santa, he was sort of leering too. He looked just like Santa in his costume and everything, but his expression reminded you of a pedophile or something akin to that. He held a

big festive sign printed in big red and green letters, with little musical notes implying song lyrics, that read “*He sees you while you’re Sh—tting.*”

Oh, and in case your mind hasn’t been racing ahead on this one, the victim’s reaction to the whole thing was videotaped, of course, and then fed to a video monitor that folks could watch out in the real world beyond the bathroom. As in, Billy fed it into his computer, then out into the universe. And just in case you are inclined to think that Billy was stupid or cruel, which he was neither, you should know that that camera was positioned such that *the only thing it captured* was the victim’s expression, not the entire indiscreet part of the practical joke.

Manners, my friend. Manners. And an element of personal consideration.

The entire project had taken Billy one long night. He had worked through the wee hours in the darkened Franks for the Memories fast food restaurant, playing Christmas carols on his portable radio and fantasizing about how this would be such an outrageous story that the Internet would gobble it up.

Then, with his name planted firmly out there on the World Wide Web, Billy could pursue his secret passion: to create a company whose job was to conceive and execute massive practical jokes. Practical jokes for all occasions: birthday parties, graduation, bon voyage, weddings, divorces, retirement, Tisha B’Av, or whatever.

Or just as a whimsical way to show somebody that you loved them. It was surefire. It was foolproof. It was his key to fame and fortune.

And what night of the year do you think he pulled it off? Christmas Eve. He pulled it off on Christmas Eve, when the World Wide Web is frantically looking for Yuletide stories, but stories with a twist. Timing is everything. This is pure genius, Billy Bob thought to himself, as he prepared for the feed to go viral.

Billy Bob got fired.

Oh, he expected that—sort of. But even the getting fired part he hadn’t thought through ... not as thoroughly as we might have liked, if we are framing him as our hero, which I am. I think Billy Bob thought that *not only would this turn out great for him*, in terms of the fame and fortune thing, but I think he even thought that he might NOT get fired, the general manager of Franks for the Memories being the same man who had coached Billy Bob for so many years on the Weighstation Wildcats Tetherball Team.

But sports is a feckless mistress, these days, don’cha know, and the old tetherball ties were not what Billy Bob might have hoped. He was fired summarily, first thing Christmas morning.

(Franks for the Memories was open on Christmas Day, catering to all those jolly holiday travelers who were mushing across the snowy state early on the 25th to join with families later on that sacred day. Also for Jews and Muslims. Not that a good Jew would dine at Franks. Pork and all. But it was known to happen.)

Anyway, back to our prank: as soon as the first poor unsuspecting victim walked into the ladies’ room, into the middle stall, (the other stalls being locked), and started in with her

business, the lights came on, she saw Sick Santa and Evil Elf, and she ran out of the restroom screaming.

But here was the puzzler: the Internet showed no interest. Even when Billy Bob communicated with all the online article writers, as he had carefully planned, even when Billy Bob broadcast the lady's reaction on his own website, even when Billy Bob was on the evening news, the shame of little Weighstation, nobody was interested in making Billy Bob famous.

Any fledgling shrink, or anyone at all for that matter, who fancied himself an armchair psychiatrist, could have told you that this was a fairly angry stunt, to begin with—hostile and stalkerish, and a bit misogynistic too—but we haven't even gotten to *The Frycook's Revenge* yet.

Y'ALLTIDE GREETINGS

So here was Billy Bob the Frycook's pathetic little Christmas: he sat alone, all alone, in his efficiency apartment.

Even this apartment building in which Billy Bob lived was considered the pathetic scourge of the town. And the town itself is pathetic, so that's saying a lot. It was built by a greedy developer, and the apartment building sat square in the center of some centuries old brick homes and shops in the very old town of Weighstation—a town formerly known as Railroad, (state withheld), for the important role it played in the Underground Railroad during the Civil War. But the town finally gave up and changed the name of the town, because tourists would flock to the town, and railroad enthusiasts would come from all over, looking for the railroad tracks and mighty locomotives and scenic train rides and quaint dining cars turned to local cafes, but there was none of that. Instead just only some brown signs here and there talking about slaves making their way to freedom. Tourists left, disappointed, and some wrote disparaging things about the town on Internet tourist review sites. So the town decided to change its name. To evoke its more practical and immediate purpose. So "Weighstation" it was.

Anyway, the Frycook sat in his efficiency apartment in the ugly new apartment building on the edge of town. It had been the Frycook's plan to work on Christmas Day, because for some reason, Franks for the Memories had irreverently decided to be open on Christmas Day, and its two dozen employees, (all of whom had a much more rich and robust life than the Frycook), were bitching and moaning about having to work on this sacred holiday. So Billy Bob volunteered. He thought he was quite the Pater Familias for being so magnanimous.

He was even going to branch out and assume duties that were not usually part of the Frycook's lexicon of talents and responsibilities: he would cook weenies, concoct huge batches of the legendary chili, even take helm at the dessert bar and whip up Never On A Sundaes for those with bottomless appetites.

But it had not worked out that way; nothing had worked out the way he planned. Here it was Christmas Day, and he was all by himself in the shithole that he called home.

"*It's a Wonderful Life*" was on. Frycook watched in bitter nostalgia as he opened a new can of Chock Full o' Nuts and made himself one big lonely pot of java for the day. He studied the black and white images on the screen, thought how very untrue everything about this movie was. Where on earth was there evidence that life was so wonderful? And then he wondered if you could sue Hollywood for spouting lies all the time, fantasy being as powerful a drug as LSD.

Then he opened his presents: a Christmas sweater from his mom, which showed a little dog trotting away from a snowman, with a very satisfied expression on its face. The snowman looked distinctly disgruntled, because it had a bright yellow pee stain right at the base of its large snowball torso.

The back of the sweater was the payoff, though. Now it was the little dog who looked disgruntled; a snowball had been lobbed right at its head, and the snowman was looking upward, whistling innocently, as if to deny any blame for having committed the assault.

The Frycook put the sweater on. It did not cheer him up as much as you might think.

His dad had mailed him a gift certificate for the Bacon of the Month Club. The Frycook smiled and put it aside, anticipating the happiness that it would bring him. But he didn't have any *actual* bacon yet, so that joy didn't last as long as you might think, either.

He got three other presents.

The first was from his childhood sweetheart, who was married now and had several children, and who, though blissfully happy in her new life without Billy Bob, was nonetheless plagued by guilt for dating him all through high school, but then finally realizing he was a loser, scraping him off the shoe of her life like a blob of tromped Tewksberry gum.

By way of making it up to him, (for she sensed that Billy Bob would never get another girlfriend, not for free at least), she always remembered him on his birthday and Christmas. She always got the date of his birthday incorrect, Billy Bob always noted with a bittersweet pang, but she never got the date wrong about Christmas. He had to give her that.

The gift from her was the latest variation on "The Chia Pet." The Frycook was always secretly impressed with the marketing department over at Chia, because it was an old chestnut of a gift idea, but danged if every year they didn't trot out some new variation on it, sucking the kiddie market and the on-a-tight-budget-shopping-at-the-last-minute-Christmas-Eve-in-the-Rexall-Drug-Store crowd.

Billy Bob had once fancied that he would apply for and get a job at Chia Pet R&D. He had lots of ideas. An extra-terrestrial line: Martian Chia. It would feature the large head and huge almond eyes of the Spielberg Universe, but with green hair, capitalizing on the little green men image. And he would spin out an R&B afro-style line, for those with smoky musical proclivities: Little Richard Chia. Jimmy Hendrix Chia. Earth Wind and Fire Chia. Leo Sayer Chia.

Billy Bob had even researched other kinds of seeds, more free flowing with longer stems, that could be used for Big Hair Band Chia sets. Gun's 'n Roses Chia. Def Leopard Chia. Black Sabbath Chia. Spinal Tap Chia. And best part of all, these would be sold as four-sets, instead of single Chia skulls. More fun for the consumer. More money for Chia. Genius! Damn, why hadn't the folks at Chia Pet called him back yet?

Sadly, almost tragically, like so many of Billy Bob Thornbird's ideas, nothing had come of it.

So it was with a heavy heart that Billy Bob examined this gift from his lost love, a new variation on the Chia Pet. It was, he had to admit, kind of brilliant. This was the PRESS AND PLAY "15 MINUTES OF FAME CHIA", where YOU were the Chia. You just mixed up this mélange that came as a dry package of powder; it was a flour and cornstarch and Quikrete based concoction that you mixed with water to make a paste. Then you jammed your face into it for fifteen minutes and let it harden.

This was the *Deluxe!* Chia Kit (his Lost Love was never one to skimp), and this kit included a multi-colored bendy straw, like the drink straws that Franks for the Memories gave with kiddie meals. But this was no ordinary straw, this was a breathing straw, which instructions indicated were to be used when you had your face in the mélange, so that you didn't suffocate to death while creating your 15 Minutes of Fame Personalized Chia. That would make it a kind of death mask, thought the Frycook, and a shudder ran down his spine, as this notion caused him to ponder his own mortality, if only for a fleeting moment.

This whole thing, with the straw and whatnot, made Billy Bob wonder if the boys in Legal over there at the Chia Corporation hadn't had some kind of headaches approving the new product. This Chia variation seemed like it would prove particularly dangerous for children, who were probably the main consumers of Chia—not literally, of course, although as a boy, Billy

remembered his mother taking the sprouted greens and using them in assorted health salads, when she was going through her organic health food phase-craze. Then again, in regards to the suffocation dangers, the Chia was made in China, like everything else was these days, dammit to hell, and everybody knew how little regard the Chinese placed on life. They ate dogs, for pete's sake.

The best part of the Chia Deluxe Kit was the little timer, so you could know how long your face had been in the mélange. The great thing about the timer was that you could use it long after the Chia greens were wilted and dead, and that was exactly what the Frycook planned to do: he could use it for soft boiling eggs, or doing his Kundalini Yoga routine in the mornings (during which he always lost track of time, lost as he was in reveries of the Great Oneness), or talking to his mother long distance on the telephone. (They both had lousy bundled phone plans which they could not figure out, neither of them, so timing their calls to exactly ten minutes seemed to be the only way to not get a whopping cell phone bill at the end of each month.)

So now you know about the 15 Minutes of Fame Chia.

This would have been a great present if the Frycook had

A.) A green thumb.

B.) Any more room for bric-a-brac.

Or

C.) Even the slightest desire to jam his face into a pile of white, sticky mélange for 15 minutes.

But since the Frycook had none of these things, the gift secretly did not go over as well as the giver might have hoped.

The next present under his little tree was from the Waste Not Want Not Septic Tank Company, which had employed him for several years after high school. Like Billy's high school sweetheart, guilt was the motivator here, as the owner of the Waste Not Want Not Septic Tank Company had been forced to fire Billy Bob when a septic sweep on a pig farm went horrible awry. (The details of the tragedy are for another time and place; suffice it to say that the local butcher was handing out bargain bacon for weeks.)

Billy Bob opened the box and found inside a handy household item, the beloved Clapper, where you simply clap your hands and the lights go out. No need to drag yourself from your warm bed and your state of near-sleep ... no, just a fleeting moment of applause aimed at the Universe, and there you are, sunk into utter blackness for one more night.

There was only one problem with this gift. The Frycook's efficiency was actually, technically, (although not legally according to local real estate code), a one bedroom. The reason that it was not legally a one bedroom was because The Law said that all bedrooms in apartments have to have windows in order to be called bedrooms—who wants to sleep in a windowless tomb, after all? Even prisoners get windows. But this landlord had slapped up a flimsy piece of board, then he had the nerve to advertise it as a one bedroom on a 3x5 tacked to the local Piggly Wiggly bulletin board. Next thing Billy Bob knew, he was renting this shithole, being too tired and broken to search further.

The point is this—and here is what rendered The Clapper tragically moot in its usefulness: The Frycook's bedroom was so very tiny, smaller than a prison cell really, that by the time he would be getting sleepy and *would raise his hands to clap*, thereby activating The Clapper, *his hand would be right at the level of, and right next to*, the light switch, thereby rendering The Clapper redundant.

In addition to which, you could now buy cute little penlights at the local 99 cents store that came in a variety of festive colors, so who would be leaving a glaring overhead light on late in the evening anyway? Billy Bob figured that because of those frugally minded penlights mass produced in China, (and the fact that the applause-operated gimmick was stupidly named after a venereal disease), well, The Clapper was on its way out. That was probably why his former boss had purchased it, he had gotten it on deep discount. Perhaps he gave it to all employees he fired.

Then again, thought Billy Bob, his tireless brain churning away ... then again, perhaps one day The Clapper would accrue some “retro value” on eBay.

The Frycook placed it in a bottom drawer. With other such gems.

The final present that he opened was not just a nice present, it was legendary: it was a Caroline Bloodworth Mini Rum Cake, and just about everybody who ever sank their teeth into it agreed that it was the best thing they ever put into their piehole. Caroline Bloodworth was the head librarian at Weighstation Regional, and everybody loved her. She was lovable. And she loved Christmas. She made dozens and dozens of her famous Mini Rum Cakes, enough for the entire town practically, such that if you didn't get one, you knew you were not living right, and this in and of itself was a message.

Billy Bob stopped by the library almost every night after work, he loved the library, so he was naturally right at the top of the list as a recipient for a Mini Rum Cake. But what Caroline did not know was that Billy Bob was, among other things, among many other tragic things, an alcoholic. Nobody in Weighstation knew, because the only meeting around was about 40 minutes away, next town over, a tiny place called, ironically enough, Tiddlyville. It was so named because the inventor of Tiddly Winks hailed from there, but to those who craved a warm shot on a cold night, and who were trying to resist that urge, it was a cruel jab of fate that they had to drive all the way over to “Tiddlyville” to find other Friends of Bill. A cake with rum in it, when Billy Bob was already profoundly depressed, seemed like a poor plan.

So, with a heavy heart, Billy Bob dutifully washed the cake down the kitchen drain and turned on the little half-assed garbage disposal. He hated the garbage disposal. It sounded like a lawnmower chewing up a ferret whenever it roared into gear.

So that was it. Billy Bob's Christmas morning. By now, “*It's a Wonderful Life*,” that cloying piece of lying, litigious propaganda, was over, thankfully, and “*A Christmas Story*” was on. Billy Bob smiled through the opening credits. He liked this movie: a frivolous fiction suggesting that the season of Peace On Earth Good Will Towards Men might also bring with it the fulfillment of a child's dream ... a gun, symbol of justice and revenge, protection and catharsis—all in one mighty POP!

(While watching the movie, Billy Bob tried not to think about the fact that the director of the film had died with his son Ariel in a fiery car crash on the Pacific Coast Highway, victim of a drunk driver. Merry fucking Christmas.)

THE GERM OF AN IDEA

But back to our story:

Billy Bob was, first and last, a proud food service employee (or at least he had been, until the bathroom debacle), and one of the conundrums that he could never get out of his mind, upon his annual viewing of “*The Christmas Story*,” was not so much droll amusement at the comic finale of the dog stealing the Christmas bird—but *how long had that feast food been sitting out? Had it been sitting out for the entire time the family was opening presents? Because it was already there on the table when they went into the dining room.*

Every year, this detail disturbed Billy Bob deeply. Entree foul of all kinds—chicken, turkey, duck, and swan—were all notorious breeding grounds for deadly bacteria, pesky little microbes like ampylobacters; also mayonnaise was a popular holiday condiment in many recipes, and the average home in the dead of winter is heated to the point where it would take precious little time for deadly e-coli to set in. In that movie, “*A Christmas Story*,” just how long had the Christmas dinner been sitting out on that table? Apparently the mother had left it sitting out during the grand celebration of this Holy Day, the opening of the presents under the tree and what all, that’s how come the dog had a shot at the bird, and Billy Bob knew from his in-depth training that it did not take long for food poisoning to set in.

So much did this preoccupy the Frycook each year, that he could hardly enjoy the climactic reverie of the child receiving his cherished weapon. A pop-gun!

Well?

If there was one thing that Billy Bob had learned during his tenure at Franks for the Memories, along with the importance of proper food storage and accurate temperature control throughout the entire cycle of refrigeration, preparation, and the critical “stand-by” phase of food service, was when in doubt, *throw the food in the dumpster*. It was better to incur a few dollars loss in tossed food than thousands of dollars or more in lawsuits from a case of food poisoning gone lethal and legal.

Oh many times, to be sure, the Frycook had been tempted to raid the Franks for the Memories dumpster after hours, for piles of weenies, beans, fries, etcetera. If not for himself, for the hungry dogs and people that populated his little life.

But he daren’t. He daren’t. He could not have lived with himself if anything had happened to them, on his account.

But here’s what you need to know. From all these mental meanderings came an idea ... such an idea, it was ... an idea nestled in the nest of the Eagle of Revenge.

What if ... just what if ... Franks for the Memories were to incur *a lawsuit against its big corporate self for food poisoning*? Yes ... yes.. .the idea was growing in Billy Bob’s mind, small and healthy and determined, like the tiny seeds that formed the hair follicles on a Chia Pet, ever so slowly, shyly yet slyly thrusting their green tendrils up from the clay scalp ...

(Mixed metaphors be damned!)

What if. ..what if ... that damnable Franks for the Memories, (which had had the insensitive audacity to fire the Frycook *on Christmas Day no less*), were to experience a slew of lawsuits, all

spawned from the same incident of a large number of people consuming the same tainted food. The same poison!

Aha!

Billy Bob sensed in this a brilliant plan, for he had always had a gut feeling about such things, just as he had known that he was on the verge of brilliance when he conceived of the Nelson Mandela Chia Pet Head. (It would feature a mung bean that grew white, hence the accuracy in portraying Mandela's grey frost of hair, like a dandelion in full bloom.)

He had had this same gut feeling when he wrote the Franks for the Memories corporate headquarters, and suggested that they add to their menu Chili Con Art Carne, and Franks for the Memories actually followed through!

He had had a gut feeling when he thought up the Masturbation Station, a portable DVD player than would not only come with a dozen XXX movies, so the consumer did not have to go through the further risk or humiliation of shopping for them, but it also came with a lotion caddy, a Wet 'n Dry wipes holder, and the "*pies de resistance*" in the Porta-Pleasure Masturbation Station was the built-in ... ah, but better not to reveal the entire invention, lest YOU be tempted to steal Billy Bob's big idea. It has happened before.

Patent still pending on the Porta-Pleasure Masturbation Station, and Billy Bob was convinced that he would hear back from the big corporations whom he had written any day now. After all, who didn't love to masturbate?

The point was, Billy Bob knew that he was on the verge of a really great genius type idea, with this massive food poisoning lawsuit scheme.

What was clear in his mind from the get-go, of course, was that there could be *no real food poisoning* occurring during this fantastic scheme. Billy Bob may have been wounded by the world on numerous occasions, this last firing from his job being one of the worst, but he still had not become the kind of person who wanted to hurt the world back. In his heart, Billy Bob Thornbird was as gentle as a wad of Cottonell.

No, what made this scheme so brilliant is that there would have been no food poisoning at all, no such dangerous game would have been played, but Franks for the Memories would *believe* it had, because—and here was the genius of it—all Billy Bob had to do was find a dozen or so people who, as individuals and in groups, would come forward and claim that they had experienced horrific, near death experiences as a result of food poisoning from Franks for the Memories. And to make it believable, they would have to come from all over the country, and apparently have no knowledge of each other. Franks for the Memories was positioned near a major U.S. byway, and hence the plot was quite reifiable thus far.

Every "T" would have to be crossed, and every "I" dotted, but it was quite simple in theory.

Let us, as they say behind the Tinsel Curtain, "cut to the chase."

THE SALMONELLA SEVEN

In the end, there were SEVEN parties to be involved in the Fake Poisoning Imbroglio—seven besides Billy Bob of course, who could play no public part in the claim of poisoning, as it would immediately be recognized for the fakery that it was, recognized as Billy Bob lashing out against being “summarily dismissed.” Sure, sure. He gets fired on Christmas Day, so he turns around and cries “food poisoning” as a customer.

But no, Billy Bob had to be oh so careful that nobody involved in the Fake Poisoning Imbroglio had any apparent grudge with the franchise, or with the much hated owner of this particular franchise, Tobias Beauregard Jackson Lee—yes, his family came from a long line of very proud Southerners who flew both the American flag and the Confederate flag proudly on their front lawn, with the American flag flying below the Confederate flag, if you can believe that.

But even if he was named after a slew of Southern military royalty, old Tobias, known unaffectionately as “Toby”, was hated by many, and had amassed quite a number of enemies during his years as a ruthless businessman in the small town of Weighstation.

And Billy Bob knew who they were.

Here were to be the players: (In fact, let’s skip over all the repetitive conversations and say that Billy Bob immediately contacted all of the parties named below, and they eagerly agreed to participate, having been assured by Billy Bob that in return for their cooperation and conspiratorial silence, Franks for the Memories would offer them a nice fat settlement. To put a finer point on it, they would all be filthy rich. Or at least, not poor anymore.)

The parties were:

1.) Eugenia Higgenbotham.

Now here is her story. Yes, Eugenia was getting up in years now, but for many decades, she was known by the townsfolk to be the cook who made the best damned hot dog relish in the state. (Numerous State Fair Blue Ribbons, etcetera.) There were some who said she made the best damned hot dog relish in the country, nay in the world, for when the Governor of her home state happened to taste it at the fair, he made sure to get a jar of it into the hands of nobody less than the President of the United States, where it was enjoyed at a semi-formal state picnic by the President’s wife, their children, and a number of international dignitaries. Those dignitaries requested, nay demanded, some jars to take home to their assorted Kings, Prime Ministers, Caliphs, etcetera. And that is why it had generally come to be agreed upon by that very small town that they were proud to call “neighbor” this kind but humble woman who made the best relish in the world.

The only thing was, Eugenia *would not* sell her relish, unless of course it might be for a small charity affair and the money would go to a good cause. Nor would she ever agree to those oft’ repeated offers to mass market this amazing pickley ambrosia of the gods, for surely the gods

must enjoy the occasional wiener with all the fixings? Else what is the point of being a god in the first place?

So for the longest time, Eugenia's relish was a treasure that was hard to come by. You could only get it when cucumbers were in season and she was in the mood to make a batch.

But—cue evil melodrama music—then in steps Tobias Beauregard Jackson Lee. He made an offer to buy her entire season's worth of relish production, about 144 jars all told, *with the clear understanding that the money he made from reselling the relish would go towards helping all the little dogs and cats who had suffered terribly at the hands of that second horrific flooding in New Orleans*. You remember the one, it took place a few years after Katrina and was called "Jean-Baptiste", after the founder of the city.

But what poor Eugenia did not know was that when she signed a contract for the entire season's output, so that hundreds of dogs and cats could be rescued, (Toby had been very particular about the need for a contract, something about LLC's and charitable deductions and making everything right with the IRS), *she was actually signing away all the recipe rights over to Toby*, who had at that time just newly acquired his Franks for the Memories franchise.

Toby immediately took a jar over to Cooter Willoughby, a distant cousin who worked in the state police forensics lab. Working through the night, Cooter determined the exact recipe—precisely what was in Eugenia's world famous recipe, right down to the last mustard seed.

Well, you can guess what happened next.

"Toby's" brand spanking new relish recipe was a great hit on his Franks for the Memories hot dogs of all varieties, and then he turned around and sold the rights to the Franks franchise. And that is how Toby made his first "mill," although he had already been born with a silver (or at least silver plated) spoon in his mouth.

By the time Eugenia found out, there was nothing she could do about it. When she tried to sue Tobias Beauregard Jackson Lee, well, of course the judge was an old hunting buddy of Toby's, and he told Eugenia, in the most condescending of tones, that she should have read the contract more carefully, and Caveat Emptor, and all that.

Eugenia never forgot or forgave, and although she was getting on in years (as I mentioned earlier), she still had a great deal of spitfire in her.

Now to return to the particulars of our plot: Billy Bob knew that Eugenia could not pretend to be one of the poisoning victims, for everyone knew about the bad blood between her and Toby. But Eugenia had a charming granddaughter who lived far away and whose married name gave her plenty of separation from Eugenia. Nobody would suspect a thing. Eugenia's granddaughter had watched her grandmother struggle with genteel poverty for decades, struggling so very much, what with poor Eugenia occasionally reduced to eating cat food, (albeit rendered somewhat more palatable, being garnished with the aforementioned world famous relish). But Eugenia's granddaughter was never in a financial position to really be able to help her grandmother, being impoverished herself.

Until Now.

2.) The second party would be Toby's former fiancé. Toby had courted this girl since she was fifteen, taking her maidenhood from her on the occasion of her sixteenth birthday. They had gotten engaged when they both turned eighteen, but Toby balked and balked at the business of setting a date for a full fifteen years. And yet Jolene stood by her man faithfully, playing country

ballads that affirmed the importance of this until she waited for Toby to be “financially secure enough to raise a family.” Then he got his first million from the relish scam, and oh did he drop her like a hot potato. Got himself a little blonde back-up singer he met while on a vacation to Nashville, leaving poor Jolene out in the cold, after having given Toby the best years of her life, and after having three abortions, all because of him.

But now she was living in a hep suburb in New Jersey, happily married to Goldie Goldstein, a nice Jewish girl whom she had met while kicking her heels up on her first trip to New York City to see some Broadway shows. They now lived in legal marital bliss (in eight states at least), Jolene having decided that her problems didn’t just have to do with Toby being dishonorable, but with the fact that almost all men were, well, assholes. Her word choice, not mine.

But she and Billy Bob had gone to high school together, been in some after school activities together, and they had stayed in touch over the years. Jolene and Goldie could really use the money, since they had dreams of opening a Wiccan Supply Store in Greenwich Village.

So I guess you can see now why Jolene and her wife immediately agreed to participate in the Fake Poisoning Imbroglio. Goldie, with her big hair and Jersey accent, would of course be the one to fake having been poisoned.

3.) Our next co-conspirator was none other than John Johnson. This one is quick, and similar to the relish story. John Johnson was a farmer, an anal retentive OCD farmer at that, and he owned about the prettiest little gentleman’s farm you could ever want to see.

Tourists and folks in general came from all around to see it, because John had an apple orchard that children could pick from freely while learning all about the making of apple butter. He also had a bunch of bee hives which proffered up fresh honey that he sold in his quaint store, and he had some acres of grapes, (a very modest vineyard really), and even a darling little petting zoo. For years, this was one of the most charming country tourist stops in the whole sprawling county ... *then a ghastly series of mishaps: (!)*

Children getting stung by bees and children getting drunk, and even a nightmare at the petting zoo that involved one child being trampled (not to death, thankfully) by a herd of marauding dik diks. Apparently the little cloven hoofed darlings *knew* that there were *food pellets* in that paper cup the child was holding, and, well, you know, all I’m saying is *Pavlov knew what he was talking about.*

One moment the child was filling his festive paper cup with pellets from the little make-shift gumball machine (which held not gum but food pellets), then next thing everybody knew, before anybody could stop it, the child turned around and they were all upon him. The child fully recovered, thank God, but he does still bear the scarred imprints of tiny dik dik hoof prints.

The point is, it was all very suspicious, this rash of disasters within a few short weeks, and don’t you know, the lawsuits forced John Johnson to sell his farm for pennies on the dollar, and to whom? Of course you know to whom. To Toby, who immediately used that land for his Franks for the Memories franchise, along with some lovely picnic grounds all around it.

Nobody can prove it, but everybody knows that Toby was behind the disasters which befell the children. Nobody knows exactly how he pulled it off, but let’s just say that in this town, we know what we know.

4.) Now this next one is a bit tricky.

The fourth participant was to be a woman who loved her husband very much—they had been childhood sweethearts—but she had lost him to a horrific crime. The problem was, it was her very husband who had committed the horrific crime, so now he languished in prison for killing a man, and it did not look good. Fortunately, (if there was anything fortunate about this situation), the death penalty was not in the picture, not in this state. But here was poor Joy (ironic name, don't you think?), left to raise four children on the money she made as a cashier in the Piggly Wiggly Grocery Mart.

The crime had happened like this: her husband, Jeremiah, was a good man, a hard working man, but—how shall I say this delicately—not the brightest bulb on the Christmas Tree. He also seemed to exude that kind of aura that made him like bee nectar to the con artists who had swarmed around him his entire life. He had *actually bought* one of those copper engravings in miniature of Abraham Lincoln for \$9.95, because he was an avid Civil War buff. (And, might I add, one of the few people in our town who was actually happy about who won the war.)

Gullibility seemed to be part of his DNA. His grandfather had actually bought what he thought was a gold mine, when someone had merely fired a rifle full of packed gold dust into the side of a butte.

But Jeremiah and Toby had been friends since forever, they had been on the wrestling team and in band together, so surely Toby wouldn't rip him off, was Jeremiah's thinking. So when Toby told him about a new investment scheme that was sure to pay off tenfold, and Jeremiah better act now, as there was only room for just one more investor on the ground floor and Jeremiah better act fast—sure enough, Jeremiah ponied up his entire family savings.

Then he was instructed to go to a meeting that would take place in the lovely finished basement of the establishment that now housed Franks for the Memories.

(Aside here: I have not yet mentioned the fact that, unlike other fast food emporiums, Franks was not in some glossy windowed establishment with a polished metal counter and drive-thrus. You see, part of the charm of the franchise called Franks for the Memories is that its franchisees were always instructed to select a building that felt and looked like a house, where one might get a home cooked meal, and build from there. The latest data had suggested that finally, after decades of being amused by some Golden Arches and a smiling girl with pigtails, and Burger Kings and Burger Kongs, and yellow-red clowns which I personally always found a little frightening, well, folks were getting just a little sick of it all. Sure, folks enjoyed the inexpensive consistency of fast food, but they wanted to feel like they were having a home cooked meal in someone's dining room, or screened in front porch. So when Toby "acquired" John Johnson's farm, he just emptied out the sweet little Victorian where John and his wife used to live, and turned it into the 57th Franks for the Memories franchise in the American Southeast. Jeremiah had even helped with the transformation of the building

That is why, when Jeremiah went to the meeting, he walked casually through the house where he'd enjoyed so many of Toby's wieners, and went downstairs to where a gaggle of excited people were preparing to watch a power point presentation.

Well, about five minutes into it, Jeremiah realized that what he was hearing was a stupid old Amway presentation. He stood up and caused a great disruption, and demanded his thousand dollars back. Toby and his Amway regional partner Steve Willgood tried to quiet Jeremiah down, and to explain to him that the thousand dollars was non-refundable, but Jeremiah just went insane.

He thought of his sweet wife killing herself doing double shifts at the Piggly Wiggly, and of his teenage daughter staying home all the time and home schooling herself so she could take care of the family's new triplet girls. Jeremiah and his wife Joy weren't prepared for three more mouths to feed at all; they had just been thinking that they'd give it one more shot, after two miscarriages—having a baby boy, that is. And Jeremiah thought about how furious his wife would be when she found out that he had pissed away their last thousand dollars.

That's when he just went nuts. He just totally lost it.

Now what you need to know is that everybody packs (i.e., carries a gun) in the small southern town where this story takes place. So next thing everybody knew, Jeremiah aimed his gun at Toby, and Toby would have been a dead man had not someone grabbed at Jeremiah's arm, and Jeremiah shot dead Steve Willgood instead. Steve died instantly, and the weird thing is, he died with that creepy, capped teeth salesman's smile plastered on his face.

So now, Jeremiah sits in jail, his life passing away before him. He may get out in a few years, but he will have missed the raising of his kids. He prays a lot and works with the prison ministry forty hours a week.

So naturally, when Billy Bob approached Joy about the food poisoning plan, she said "yes" in a heartbeat. By now, her teenage daughter was grown up and married, and again, as in the case with the Great Relish Con, she had a married name which would distance her from the grisly shooting of so many years ago.

(Chilling sidebar: pretty much everybody, including me, will tell you that the charming and impeccably trimmed and finished Victorian which houses Franks for the Memories is...yes...*haunted*. Strange moans are heard in the basement, and sometimes the laser light from a phantom Amway power point presentation can be seen dancing around the deep, dark downstairs. And Amway promotional pamphlets have been known to simply show up at people's tables when they have trotted off to use the restroom or pay their bill.

But it's kind of a lame haunting, if you ask me, a farmhouse haunted by a ghost named Steve Willgood, who, in life, had too many bright white teeth in his large head, and could only converse on one topic. What, after all, is frightening about an Amway ghost? Except for, of course, the fact that it is Amway.

5.) The next party: The next party actually consisted of an entire family that was going to feign food poisoning, and this is actually a rather brief story.

For one shining moment in his life, Billy Bob had come into a little money. That was when his grandfather died and left him eight hundred dollars.

Billy Bob, just a footloose and fancy free young man of twenty-three, immediately knew what he was going to do with that cash. He would fulfill his lifelong dream of going to the Chia Pet factory in Mexico, so he could study the entire Chia Pet process of them being made, right as it actually happened. As you may have already gathered, Billy Bob was (albeit mildly) obsessed with the Chia Pet.

And how great is this? After taking a Greyhound to the border and then groping around south of the border with his Spanish phrasebook and his pesos, he got a ride to the factory, off in the hinterlands, where he met an entire family who worked in the factory. They introduced him to the Boss, the Jefe, the big cheese, and Billy Bob got to spend two whole weeks learning every aspect of production, working on the assembly line, helping to pack them into boxes, even

working the shrink-wrap machine, and he didn't even have to pay anybody for the lessons or this valuable knowledge.

He stayed with the family the entire time, them teaching him about Mexican culture, and him entertaining them with his tales of life in the United States of America. But soon, his money ran out, reality settled in, and Billy Bob had to say his goodbyes. He always kept in touch with the family though, both parents and all six children, and amazingly, they were now living in the United States, only about two hundred miles from where Billy Bob lived. But they were facing deportation—something about riding coyotes into the country—and the family needed a HUGE amount of money for a lawyer who specialized in stalling deportations and in bribing the right people. So they eagerly, all eight of them, agreed to participate.

So that gives us the relish relative, the jilted fiancé, the man who lost his farm, Jeremiah the gentle man who murdered, and the Mexican family. Two more parties:

6). TICK GUNNER:

Tick Gunner used to be a lot smarter before that tree fell on him, one sad winter when they were harvesting evergreens to sell to the city folk, but he still manages O.K. now. The great love of Tick Gunner's life was a pig, a hog I guess I should say. That hog had first come into his life as a wee, darling little piglet; it was part of his 4-H project for the county fair. He immediately named it Trudy. Nobody knows why. And Tick was only ten years old at the time, so that provides us with even fewer clues.

He took excellent and loving care of it, as do all children who raise a hog for the State Fair, and their little minds fight back the tide of truth that is always washing into their daydreams and nightmares: this piglet, this dear pink thing, this thing they have raised since it was a baby and hugged it and sometimes taken a nap in the barn with it and been so proud of it when they took it to the State Fair, this pig is going to be bacon on your breakfast platter soon. That's just how it is, and how it has always been: farm hogs go to slaughter.

But Tick had always been a delicate, sensitive child (his father sometimes wondered if he was gay), so ma and pa decided that the farm was doing well enough, they could afford to let Tick keep Trudy as a pet.

That was nearly seventeen years ago, when Tick was ten. Now, as a young man of twenty-seven, he still had that old hog, and she was doing quite well for her age. She wasn't nearly large enough for the Guinness Book of World Records, but Trudy weighed in at over twelve hundred pounds!

And yes, I know exactly what you are going to ask next: Because not even the large animal veterinarian* in our town had a scale suitable for the job, once a month, Tick would take Trudy in his truck down to the Weigh Station that gave our lovely burg its name. He knew how much his truck weighed, including the thermos and Bible and pack of Black Jack gum that were never gone from it (except to fill the thermos, of course, sheesh, work with me here). Then it was just a matter of simple math—simple enough even for Tick—to figure out Trudy's weight that month. He even made sure the thermos was empty, for optimum accuracy.

(*And by that I do not mean to imply that the veterinarian was portly or corpulent, but that his specialty was animals of larger girth and stature. I would just hate to accidentally and publicly insult the vet, as he treats my Flemish Rabbit, Marie Antoinette.)

Anyway, as I was saying, that hog went everywhere with Tick, riding in the back of his pick-up, and everybody knew Trudy and had a treat for her—

—until one black day, the pig just disappeared. Disappeared right off the farm. And there was also a torrential storm the night the pig disappeared, so there was no way for the local sheriff and his boys to trace tire tracks or anything like that.

Tick Gunner cried like a baby for weeks.

Then, what do you think happens, a mere two months later? A gigantic taxidermied pig shows up way atop a post, on the edge of the farm that now hosted Franks for the Memories in the Victorian home that had once belonged to that sweet gentleman farmer. Oh, there was much buzz about it, and Tick was making such a hue and cry, claiming that it was *his* beloved pig Trudy.

But alas, Toby, who was quite wealthy by now, and “in” with all the other wealthy people and important people in town, like the town D.A. Warrel D. Puckett Esquire, and so forth, Toby managed to pass off the story that *the pig atop the post was actually a pig he had acquired from two states away.*

Tick Gunner just got more hysterical and threatening, and almost got himself thrown in jail.

Oh, sure, Toby *claimed* that this was a giant pig he had purchased from some mysterious small town in Arkansas, and had even announced, right in front of the sheriff and his men: “*But this can’t be the same pig, it can’t be Tick’s hog, you see, this pig was famous for being from the Razorback State, and, in addition to a number of black spots on him, he has one spot that is actually in the shape of the Razorback State. Trudy had no spots.*”

The deputy looked more closely: “*Sure enough, that spot on that pig is the exact shape of Arkansas!*”

But as far as Tick Gunner was concerned, the dangfool deputy simply hadn’t looked closely enough at the awkward scrawl of the state of Arkansas on the hog’s side. Tick Gunner knew the handiwork of a King Sized Aluminum Barrel Heavy Duty Felt Tipped Sharpie Marker TM when he saw it.

So, you guessed it—when Billy Bob approached Tick about the poisoning scheme, Tick agreed.

And no, he didn’t have any relative to pass the plot on to, but he figured if he wore a clever disguise and used his given Christian name to report the incident to an emergency room, no connection would ever be made.

7). The Last Party:

You may find this hard to believe, but then again, I find this entire story hard to believe, and I for one know that it really happened, and that every detail I tell you here is the absolute truth.

Anyway, a few years after Billy Bob’s grandfather died, his grandmother passed too, never really having gotten over the heartbreak of losing her husband of so many romantic decades, so she also left Billy Bob what little money she had. This was more than eight hundred dollars though, it was more like two thousand, and once again, Billy Bob immediately knew what he was going to do with it. The Chia Pet Factory had moved from Mexico to China, and as Billy Bob had been an ardent student of all things Eastern (Buddhism, Confucianism, Yoga, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Muism, Maneki-Neko, Ramen Noodles, Chinese Checkers), he decided that what the heck, he hadn’t had a vacation in years, and he would once again make his humble pilgrimage to the Chia Pet Factory. But this time, it would be to exotic Asia!

Once again, he met a nice family there who was flattered by this Westerner’s desire to learn more of the ways of the East, and they took him in. One of the children, the oldest daughter, was

just as bright as a newly minted Fen, and she harbored within her an intense desire to study medicine in the United States. She had managed to get here, stateside, some years after Billy Bob's visit to the family had ended, but she had run out of funds.

She had not much cared for the way she had been treated and the names she had been called in these small southern towns, so she eagerly agreed to participate in the scam, and she was also the go-to girl to offer specific medical advice regarding how they all might most accurately portray the signs and symptoms of food poisoning. (Including spider-webbing out from Franks for the Memories, and hitting different emergency rooms. It takes food poisoning about an hour or two to set in; I know because I have had it twice, contracting it once in Honfleur, France and the other time in Venice, Italy. And George Clooney just contracted it in Italy too, so when you see him, you can ask him about it, if you don't believe me.)

Anyway, the plan was that everybody would not show up at the same Emergency Room, but rather at Emergency Rooms that would be flung out from Franks' like the spokes of a mighty wheel.

On the day that the Great Poisoning Caper was supposed to take place, Billy Bob made sure that his despicable boss was out of town on one of his many mini-vacations to Cancun. This was a frequent ritual with Toby; he would fly there for a long weekend and come back tan as a Kennedy in the middle of winter, when the rest of us looked like back-up singers for Abba.

The aforementioned parties involved in the plot all made final contact with each other regarding the plans they had already talked about in great detail, calling each other from coordinated payphones and so forth, so that some massive group plot could not be traced back to them via the Internet or cell phone records.

GÖRING FOR THE BRASS RING

Now I am guessing that some of you are waiting for this story to turn into a cautionary tale, or a morality play of some sort, with Lady Justice meting out her unique variety of punishment for those willing to participate in such a flagrantly illegal scheme, a con to bilk a corporation out of—well, let us just say that the lawsuits were settled for an “undisclosed amount”, as far as what the public was told, and I for one intend to keep it that way.

Or perhaps you think that since Billy Bob was really something of a loser, surely this plan would fail just as spectacularly as his other harebrained schemes had ... efforts large and small that he had put forth during his sad, solitary, anonymous little life on this planet.

Not at all. The whole thing went off without a hitch.

In fact, the actual Caper was strangely anti-climactic, everybody in the plot ordering the famous Franks for the Memories Luftwaffle, a magnificent dessert that was a cousin to the friendly state fair funnel cake, but oh so much more German, and all that that implies. The group, acting as strangers to each other, ordered it all virtually one right after another, and in large quantities, so there was none left over for anyone else, and so that there would not be a number of people who ate it, but did not get sick. That would seem to weaken the food poisoning argument.

And a string of orders for Luftwaffles, one right after the other, when they are fresh out of the fryer, is hardly as unusual as it might have sounded when I mentioned it. Then again, if you’ve tasted one, you understand.

Then, within about 60-180 minutes, they all showed up at various pre-selected emergency rooms, which were either near their homes, or on the way to wherever they claimed to be en route to when they stopped by Franks for the Memories. It takes about an hour or two for the symptoms to set in, that way they were able to drive away from Franks and spread out in a circumference like the spokes of a mighty wheel, rather than all showing up at the same emergency room, which might have looked a little suspicious. Oh, but I explained that already.

Medical reports were taken, calls were made, and the authorities immediately ordered Franks to close its doors until further notice. The owner was on vacation you remember, so all he could do was participate in a flurry of alarmed and furious text messages, emails, and telephone calls from the gorgeous white beaches of Cancun, while this all happened to him, hundreds of miles from where he could do anything about it.

Health Inspectors stepped in—and, get ready, here is the payoff that nobody saw coming.

Nobody could get in the basement. And I mean nobody. They couldn’t even break it down, it was like it was steel reinforced on the other side or something. The owner had the key, but Billy Bob, who had pretended to show up out of curiosity (just as did half the population of our small town), informed the authorities that he knew of a secret entrance, a sort of storm cellar that was now pretty much hidden by brush and growth. It hadn’t been used for decades, apparently—but now, given the mysterious inability for anyone to open that door, maybe this other entrance had been hidden from sight *on purpose*.

Well, it was Billy who cleared the thicket and showed them where the storm cellar door was, Billy who opened it with an angry whack of his hammer, and Billy who led the charge in, before health authorities had a chance to stop him and say maybe that task should be their job.

And what do you think they found there? It seems that the hot dog business was just a sideline for the greedy, much hated Tobias. Not only were all the trappings of an elaborate film studio found in that basement, an elaborate *porn* studio, but there were many pictures, reels of film, and DVDs featuring some shockingly underage, and I mean shockingly underage children.

Well, as you probably remember, this became quite the national news story. The owner, Toby, was actually arrested at the Chichen Itza Indian ruins, while he was still on top of that mysterious Mayan pyramid, no less. Apparently he tried to jump to his death, knowing it was only going to get nightmarish from here, but the authorities thwarted his attempt, and of course, our Evil Wiener Man lived long enough to see justice.

One can only imagine what life in prison is like for him.

As for Billy Bob, he became something of a hero, for being the face that first busted the child porn ring, even as he was holding some secret closure meetings with his cohorts in that small, victimless, white collar crime. The corporation that owned Franks for the Memories made big fat fast settlements with all the “poisoning victims,” because they were so mortified about the porn thing, and they were frantically doing everything they could to make the horrific twin incidents of the poisoning and the porn just go away as fast as possible.

Billy Bob had not claimed to be one of the poisoned, of course, because that would have looked too much like vendetta from the firing, but his friends in cahoots were all true to their word, and they each gave Billy Bob fifteen percent of their awards for pain and suffering.

Honour among thieves, and all that.

And although it would be a whole ‘nother set of stories, everybody involved in the caper used the money to significantly better their lives, so nobody, including you, has anything to feel bad about really. In fact, the entire story makes me feel quite good.

DOIN' THE CHIA CHA CHA

And now I shall tell you what the Angry Frycook did with his share of the money from the Fake Poisoning Imbroglio.

He bought Franks for the Memories. But by that, I do not mean to say that he purchased the business, no, that business was quite defunct, thanks to none other than Billy Bob himself.

What I mean to say is that he purchased the property in which Franks was housed, the quaint old Victorian that greedy Toby had purchased, because it was all part of angry justice for Billy Bob. The stuff of poetic revenge.

So now he had a beautiful Victorian (a haunted one, no less), and this was the first step in realizing his life's dream:

He built a grand Chia Pet Museum.

For what you may not know is that although Billy Bob might have seemed like something of a loser, with a simple and unassuming little existence, it just so happened that he owned the biggest Chia Pet Collection in the entire world, this according to that infamous You-Know-Who Book of World Records.

HERE BEGINS THE MUSEUM DESCRIPTION

The museum was, of course, formed from Billy Bob's own personal collection, which he had been amassing for more than two decades, more like a quarter of a century, and then he added onto it by having special pieces and some life-sized Chias (read on) commissioned just for the museum.

For a fleeting, fearful moment, he feared that some might find the museum ridiculous, and not patronize it—after all, here were no Picasso's or Rembrandt's in these humble halls, just clay heads with sprouting seeds. But then he read about a nice couple who had opened the Pez Museum, also from their private collection, and except for a brief legal tangle with the Pez manufacturers (Google all this if you don't believe me), they seemed to do quite well for themselves. Perhaps it was the gigantic Pez they had specially built and then put outside the museum, so that you could see it from the interstate. (Hence, the lawsuit.)

Plus, Billy Bob had something these people did not: he was very cozy with people at the Chia factories. So Billy Bob went forward with his plan.

Now, here follows a description of his collection and a bit about the museum, although I have not described it here as fully as I might, because, well ... it sort of defies description. You will just have to see it for yourself.

BUT, on the other hand, if you are so pedestrian and lacking in imagination or a proper sense of pop culture as to find the Chia Pet boring or inane or otherwise not worthy of your time, but rather you did find yourself embroiled in the plot of "The Frycook's Revenge", just skip ahead past all this to the words, HERE ENDS THE MUSEUM DESCRIPTION, and we will wrap this story up. If you do that, though, you'll never know what you're missing.

OK, SO—Billy Bob's Chia Pet collection included the following:

The first Chia Pet, given to him by his father (who, at that particular youthful time in Billy Bob's life, was still admitting to paternity) was the original Chia Pet, the classic, the beloved Chia Ram. This was followed, for other holidays and from assorted family and friends, by Chia Bull, Chia Puppy, Chia Kitten (not to be confused with the Snoozing Kitty which came later), Chia Bunny, Chia Frog, Chia Pig, Chia Turtle, and Chia Hippo.

Chia doesn't just do animals, though; a major coup for Billy Bob was when he found a Chia Kit, still in the shrink wrap, at a yard sale. The stupid people hosting the yard sale didn't know that this was a collector's item: it was the Chia Tree, and it came out way back in 1983. It was one of the first. Sure, Billy Bob had been alive in 1983, but barely, he was three years old, and not even tall enough to see his grandmother's Chia Pet up on the window sill. Billy Bob bought the darn thing for a dollar and ran home to put it with the rest of his collection.

And it was also at about this time (1993) that a reluctant horticulturalist aunt, who'd had her doubts about the entire Chia craze, broke down and gave him the Chia Herb Garden, as that made some sense to her. The first version of the Chia Herb Garden came with six little plastic pots and saucers, time-released food, plants, plant markers, a recipe book, and of course, the herb seeds themselves: cilantro, sweet marjoram, sweet basil, chive, curled crass, and thyme. Makes me want to have a salad just writing about it. (You younger readers may remember that they

re-released the Chia Herb Garden in 2004, but fancied it up with real terra cotta pots, instead of plastic. The Chia Pet had really come into its own, and you were just that much prouder to give it as a gift. Or receive it.)

It was in 1995 when Billy Bob got the first ever Chia Head, known in more familiar circles as Chia Guy, and poor Billy Bob got so excited because he thought it had been custom made for him. He looked at it and was *sure* that it was his own head, but it is only coincidence that Billy Bob's pate and physiognomy bore an amazing resemblance to the Chia Head, so I guess now you have a pretty good idea of what Billy Bob Thornbird looks like. (Check Google Images, a highly underrated and underused arm of the search engine, to my way of thinking.)

The teen years for Billy Bob brought vast expansion of an already impressive collection, including Chia Elephant, Chia Cow, Chia Lion Cub, Chia Bear, Chia Crocodile, and the more fanciful Chia Dinosaur. Also, Billy Bob further augmented his Chia Head collection with Chia Kid, Chia Professor, and Chia Clown.

There was a major breakthrough in the Chia culture, and much ch-ch-ch-chinwagging about it (albeit no real internet to chat on back then) when Chia began to wade into the murky waters of trademarks and copyrights, enabling it to create Chia Elmer Fudd, Chia Tweety, Chia Taz, Chia Scooby Doo, Chia Bugs Bunny, Chia Daffy Duck, Chia Sylvester, and Chia Tweety. Also there were the instant classics: Chia Homer Simpson, Chia Bart Simpson—and—wait for it—Chia Mr. T. (!) (Gold bling not included. But the attitude was definitely there.)

Needless to say, these were all a part of Billy Bob's burgeoning collection. He had even taken to purchasing back-up kits, lest any of them get broken.

These character-based Chias were such a grand hit that the trend "sprouted" so to speak, and Billy Bob's collection continued its expansion with Chia Shrek, Chia Donkey, Chia Garfield, and Chia Sponge Bob. Chia Scooby Doo and Chia Shaggy were particularly popular.

Cartoons have always been a staple of the Chia Pet, the most recent being in 2008 with "Madagascar's" Alex and Marty, and "Kung Fu Panda" Po coming out not long after that.

Not to be pigeonholed, however, they even came out with another Gourmet Chia Garden, this again was a gift from his aunt.

Now the mood turns:

I guess you could say that Chia generally started taking the world and life writ large a little more seriously after the heart wrenching events of 9/11, because the company expanded beyond the capricious whimsy of cute animals and hilarious cartoon characters (the author is at this juncture not quite sure how to categorize Mr. T.), anyway, a new line called *Chia: Proud to be an American* came out. This included (and I am going in order of history here, not production), Chia Washington, with "George Washington 1st President of the United States" engraved on the front of the base. On one side is Mr. W.'s quotation, "*Happiness and duty are inseparably connected.*" And on the other side, "*Liberty, when it begins to take root is a plant of rapid growth.*" You see how these guys in R&D are always thinking; it's like they never sleep! How clever they are that *out of all the great things Washington said, they find one that is about plants.* Growth, roots, get it? Chia seeds are plants? Get it?

Next in the collection is Chia Lincoln, with the words "Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States" and on one side, "*Leave nothing for tomorrow which can be done today.*" On the other side, "*Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves.*" I guess Lincoln never said anything about plants or roots or anything, unless he did way back when he was a

farmer, and nobody thought it or Lincoln was important enough to jot it down. Still, it's an impressive bust.

Next comes a real crowd pleaser, The Statue of Liberty Chia, but if you haven't seen it, don't get too excited because it's not the whole lady with the toga holding the clipboard with the foreigner names on it and everything. It's just the head of Lady Liberty, and one arm only, the right one, holding the torch up high. (Billy Bob always figured if he got famous enough, and buff enough, and they asked him to carry the Olympic flame from one end of Weighstation to another, that he would dress up as the Statue of Liberty. That Billy Bob sure is a cut up.) But where was I? Ah yes. I am sure you know what it says on the side of the Liberty-bust-with-single-arm-held-aloft. It's the same thing everybody yaps when they want to give all the illegal immigrants amnesty: "*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.*" (Frankly, I don't think that sentence conjures a very attractive image, more like kind of a skid row crowd on the Staten Island Ferry, although I realize I am alone in my thinking.) And on the other side, "*Send these, the homeless, the tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*"

This statue is not only one of my personal very favorites, but it is one of the most gazed upon in general, not just because of America and everything, but because on few Chia Pets is the green as appropriate as it is on this one. Billy Bob redid it (after all, those little seedlings don't last forever) with a lichen growth, the more aquaish, light blue-green kind, so that it looks just like the oxidized copper on the S.O.L.. You must see it for yourself.

And just when you think that this work of art can't become any more moving, or any more elegant—wait for it ... the torch lights up! It changes from red to orange to yellow and then the entire color cycle begins again. I don't know how the actual Statue of Liberty is powered, but this is just a couple of Triple AAA batteries, which are even included with purchase, which is just not true of many Christmas gifts and toys anymore. Not that it ever was. (And I haven't looked it up, but I am a hundred percent sure that the real Statue of Liberty is not powered by batteries.) Anyway, the effect is quite impressive, particularly when it is displayed in a semi-darkened room, as the Chia Hall of Presidents is (which is where Lady Liberty is in Billy Bob's museum). Oh—I almost forgot the best part.

Well, maybe not the best part, because exactly what is the best part of the museum is a different matter for every visitor. But Billy Bob decided that it wasn't fair, not quite respectful, to have only two presidents, Washington and Lincoln, so he had the local Bohemian sculptress Maggie May (yes, after the song) sculpt all the rest of the Presidents as well. Billy Bob almost got into a big lawsuit with the Chia Corporation for copyright infringement, but after they toured the museum, and tracked a major spike in Chia sales generally, they decided to work with him, not against him. I personally think it was a tempest in a teapot, much ado about nothing, since the Chia Hall of Presidents is not nearly as impressive to me personally as, say, the Hall of Presidents at the Reagan Museum in Simi Valley, California. I mean, how many fat old white men with green weeds growing out of their skull can you look at all in a row anyway? By the time you get to Zachary Taylor or Lyndon Johnson, you are definitely ready to move on to another room, or maybe head down the road to Darlene's Diner for some of her famous Rorschach Casserole.

Now I know the question that is certainly burning in your brain, although some of you remember the answer from commercials a few Christmases ago. Yes, there is not only a Chia Obama, there are TWO (2) Chia Obamas. One is called "Determined," with "Barack Obama" on

the front and “*Yes We Can*” on both sides. I guess they couldn’t find anything other than that to put on the other side, although I think that is implicitly insulting to Obama. You would think that after his wife started in with her gardening craze they could have come up with something related to planting so they could continue the George Washington Chia pun, or maybe even started a line of first ladies. (!!!)

The other Obama is called “Happy,” and the expression is as you would expect, not that we saw him smiling much for the first four years, except when he had to smile big for re—election. And don’t you know, the same quotations are on the side of the “Happy” bust. Surely there was some other thing he said that had some razzle-dazzle besides “Yes We Can.”

But here is where some intrigue begins. Not too long after they stocked it, Walgreens pulled all of the Chia Obama Heads, both of the President’s moods, saying “*it does not fit our image.*” What the heck is that about? Everybody loves Chia Pet, it’s not disrespectful. I personally think that it’s because Walgreens must be run by some hardcore Republican far right zealots, maybe even religious fanatics, because it’s the only drug store I have ever been into that doesn’t sell booze. I don’t trust any drug store that doesn’t sell Chia Pets or alcohol. What do they do for fun anyway? Stand around at night making the overhead fluorescent bulbs turn on and off with the Clapper? Spray that hair-in-a-can on each other and style the night away?

Anyway, that’s the skinny on Chia’s foray into history and politics, except one last bit of news which is true (you can Google this) but few people know this: there is a Hillary Clinton Chia prototype in the works. I am guessing that they created it about the time that she and many people thought she could never be beaten by a Negro Community Organizer, and they needed a bust of her in case she won the big election. Who knows, though, what the future holds. I know there are those who think that one day, election night will be covering the catfight between Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin.

But politics is not the only controversy which has tainted the fine Chia reputation. Chia started coming out with all kinds of products that were not true Chia Pets, everything from stuffed toys to time pieces, and many ardent fans wanted to know just what was what. Are they Chia or Timex? Are they selling planter pets or gimcrack toys?

But still others loved the new added merchandize, which was included at Christmas as part of a bonus for fans.

The branching out started on June 29th, 2006, when a trademark registration was filed for Chia Pet Cuddlies, which are plush toys with soft fabric “Chia” fur bodies. And—wait for it ... they play the jingle “*Ch-Ch-Ch-Chia*” when a paw is raised. I know some people think that Chia was just getting uppity, branching out into the stuffed toy world, but I just think the jingle part is too cute. They were only available for the anniversary period, so if you see one at a yard sale, grab it up and sell it on eBay. You may not be able to retire on it, but you can go out and get toasted with your friends.

Also featured prominently in the museum is the Chia Tree with Star Light. A jazzier version of the original Chia Tree, this one, powered by two Double AA batteries, has lights that change colors as it remains on. Billy Bob was so fond of this that he had that Mexican family (all of whom had become excellent Chia craftsmen) fashion a life-sized one for the foyer of the museum. You have to see it to believe it, that’s all I can say.

Another example of this was the year 2008, when they introduced Chia Playing Cards, standard four suit card variety, but the art was hardly ordinary—different Chia Pets ornamented

the non-numbered side of the card. These were proudly on display behind glass in Billy Bob's Chia museum.

Another novelty item which proved that the Chia is far more practical and down-to-earth than some ignorant, mocking people would give it credit for (I love this one, because I own many animals) is the Chia Cat Grass Planter. The 2004 version is—wait for it—Sylvester and Tweety, how cute is that? The 2008 version is the Snoozing Kitty Chia Cut Grass Planter. Both versions come with Chia Growing Mix, and enough seeds for three plantings: a mix of sweet oat and wheat grass—yumbo! I got a bunch of these for my cats. They are a big hit.

Speaking of pets, and great moments in Chia history, while this is not an actual official Chia project, you just know that the Chia people have to be secretly sanctioning this behind closed doors, and laughing their asses off: there is actually a doggie Halloween costume where you can dress Fido up as a Chia Pet. (again, I prod, Google Images.) The dog's obvious humiliation aside, it is one of the most hilarious things I have ever seen. And I have seen a lot of hilarious things, trust me on this.

Finally ... It must be some subconscious Freudian thing that I left what I consider to be the best for last. That would be the Chia Alarm Clock and Chia Watch. The Chia Alarm Clock was packaged with all Chia Pets in the year 2006, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Chia Pet. And what do you think you hear when the alarm goes off? You guessed it: your eyes open to, and you start your day with ... wait for it ... "*Ch-Ch-Ch-Chia!*"

Not as much fun, but a bit more elegant, (and something you can take with you through your day and show off to be the envy of all your friends), was the Chia Wristwatch. It was a simple digital watch with a clear gel watchband (hence, appropriate for both sexes), with colored images of various Chia Pets stamped on it.

Billy Bob thinks that this is the best thing that Chia ever came out with, besides the Pet itself of course, for there is nothing as chilling, as sobering, as melancholy as the sprouted green seeds on a Chia Pet's head fading, turning brown, then finally falling off and leaving Bald Chia to remind us that, well, as Billy Bob puts it, tapping his watch with a hard-won wisdom ... *Tempus Fugit!* Billy Bob has even had his own watch engraved with the words "*Sic Gloria Transit Mundi.*"

And trust me my friends, it is.

And that, my friends, is that.

HERE ENDS THE MUSEUM DESCRIPTION.

AS YE REAP ...

“He who goes out weeping, bearing the (Chia) seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.”

PSALM 126:6

But Billy Bob was not content merely to have a vast Chia Pet collection (the largest one in the free world) inside of a building for the simple folk to come and ogle. Billy Bob turned it into an entire experience for the senses and for the spirit. He built expansive gardens and peopled them with representatives from all the world’s religions, with a keen eye for interfaith bridge building.

“In my own humble way,” he said, when he was being interviewed by Rolling Stone Magazine (they were interested because of the extraordinary oeuvre of piped-in music that entered the garden through speakers disguised as Zen rocks), *“I think my garden may help bring about World Peace.”*

And all the religious figures were life-sized, by the way. He had a Chia Pet Jesus, a Chia Pet Moses, and also Chia Pet Buddha (both the thin, meditating variety, and the chubby one in his “enjoying the sensual pleasures of life” phase). There was a Chia Zoroaster, Chia Muhammad, Chia Vishnu, Chia Krishna, a Chia Babb, Chia Martin Luther, Chia Blavatsky, Chia Ann Lee, even a Chia Gandhi, and many American Indian gods are also represented in awe-inspiring life-sized Chia. After much soul-searching, he finally added a Chia Pet Joseph Smith. You get the general idea—although I should add here that Billy Bob has been, in interviews, rather outspoken and even strident about his refusal to put in a Chia Dr. L. Ron Hubbard.

Surrounding the Chia leaders is quite the menagerie of animals, also life-sized, and he has everything from sacred cows to every kind of primate, enough animals to populate Noah’s Ark. There are also Chia Dinosaurs, a Chia Unicorn and even a Chia Sasquatch.

The gift shop, which features some of the rarest and hardest to find Chia pets behind glass, is actually a building shaped like a giant Chia Pet, a Chia Head actually, and you walk into its large open mouth to shop. The effect is very splendid and impressive.

(I have been there. Actually I think the effect is stupid, but Billy is something of a friend of mine, and I know he would have wanted me to refer to it as splendid and impressive.)

Perhaps one of the nicest details about the story is that Billy Bob, being somewhat overwhelmed by his duties as museum curator (quite a step up from Frycook,) hired John Johnson and his wife to help run the gift shop and tend to the gardens, so it is just like having their old farm back, but without the mortgage

So that just about wraps up the life saga—up to this point, at least—of the Angry Frycook and how it all turned out for him.

(Oh, by the way. For those of you with excellent memories, who have been asking yourselves, “What about his dream to launch a business dedicated to geniuseque practical jokes.” Well, the answer to that is, Billy has. But he wants me to keep mum about it, as business is viral, he has more requests than he can handle, people are naughty, and someone may very well have hired him to play a nasty little practical joke on YOU.)

The point of this story, I guess, is that mass poisoning can not only be harmless, it can even be profitable, and lead to those great elusive twin brass rings of fame and fortune—excepting of course that it has to be staged, fake, carefully orchestrated, and not really involve the actual poisoning of anybody at all.

POST SCRIPT:

The final fascinating tidbit you should know—at least to my way of thinking—is that the Chia Pet Museum is visited very frequently by “Sensitives.” Sensitives are persons known to be able to sense the presence of ghosts, spirits, pixies, alien hybrids, parallel worlds, and to grasp the nuances of String Theory as well. They visit the museum because something about the Interfaith Garden draws them there; it is claimed that the divine energies from all of the world’s religions blend there to create a small world which is overwhelmingly peaceful and powerful. It also explains the extraordinary health and beauty of the blooms in the gardens, and the enormous size and potency of the assorted tubers, rhizomes, and psilocybin.

But once one enters the quaint old Victorian which houses the museum (and once housed Franks for the Memories), the Sensitives claim that there is a whole ‘nother level of phenomenon going on there, all of the time.

You see, there is a museum cafeteria—really nothing more than the kitchen in the old house—where high tea is prepared. High tea is the only item on the menu, and it is served in grand fashion, in the restaurant which is comprised of nothing more than a half a dozen wrought iron tables on a charming wrap around front porch.

But high tea is not to be missed. As delightful as the cake and the scones are *the lovely tea sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Not to be missed.* And, it being the Chia Pet Museum Restaurant, most of the sandwiches, in addition to cream cheese or salmon or anchovy spread or ham salad or whatever, *feature, of course, some kind of sprouts*, sprouts being the signature hair on every Chia Pet since they were first discovered. Invented, whatever.

And herein lies the intrigue: the Sensitives claim that you can hear the screams of the sprouts as they are harvested from Chia heads. (Worker Chia heads, created only to grow food sprouts, not heads that are a part of the Chia museum, are what they use for food preparation.) Yes, claim the Sensitives, they claim you can hear the screams wafting through the rooms of the Victorian, and because many Chia heads feature an open mouthed figure, it is very much of a sort of Edvard Munch’s “The Scream” 3D-Dolby Sound experience. For the Sensitives, that is.

But others claim *it is not the screams of the sprouts* they are hearing. They claim, instead, that it is the still-echoing screams of the poor children, echoing up from the basement’s past, with its filming of naughty movies featuring persons for whom naughty was once a much more innocent kind of adjective.

Still others claim it is the ghost of the murdered Amway salesman. Perhaps someday you shall have to visit the Chia Museum for yourself, to figure it out what you think about all this.

POST POST SCRIPT:

Oh, by the way, in case you are thinking of visiting the Chia Museum, and are wondering about what kind of hours it keeps, that is a tricky one. The address you can Google, but when it comes to the ol' 9-5 grind ... well, Billy Bob Thornbird did just a little too much of that for his tastes working his daily torture as a frycook.

So now, given his newfound, albeit ill-gotten gains, he can afford to be somewhat cavalier about the hours his museum keeps. He wakes when he wishes, usually with the breaking of a new dawn, yet other times he sleeps till quite nearly noon, if there has been a good run of movies on the late late show. (The whole idea of Netflix or streaming or TIVO still remains quite elusive to Billy Bob.) Then he has breakfast and a brisk trot outside, during which he walks his cat Charlotte, who is named after Charlie Chaplin, because when the cat stands up, its black and white coloring makes it look just like Mr. Chaplin.) Then after that, he unlocks the front door to the museum. (Billy Bob, not the cat.)

As for when he closes the museum come eventide, that too is a matter of Billy Bob's own whimsies and caprices—but he does have a rather startling way of letting you know that the doors are about to be locked for the night. When he thinks it's about time to shut things down, he stands atop the staircase in the grand foyer, raises his hands high, claps loudly, and JUST LIKE THAT—a hidden Clapper in the ceiling makes all the lights go out, and museum patrons are left to fend for themselves.

Billy Bob loves the metaphysical symbolism of this, the patrons groping through the utter blackness, past fuzzy head iconic representations of the near and distant past—even if occasionally Billy Bob does hear one Chia being knocked off its pedestal and shattering into a hundred pieces ... nonetheless, this business of stumbling and bumbling their way through the darkness, looking for the light—that is quite how Billy Bob sees life writ large.

It was really the tenor of his entire existence, and he knows that it is a good existential exercise for the occasional tourist, caught off guard, to experience it for themselves.