

BLOWIN' UP SOME SUNSHINE

The New Jack Hagee Story
by: C.J. Henderson

3:00 in the morning and too much liquor is always a dangerous combination. Your defenses drop to the nil point. You grow careless in both deed and word. All in all, it's a good time to be among friends.

"Twenty-one, ass w-w-wipes."

A very good time.

"King an' ace, Uncle Huey dances on your b-broken b-bones. Shove that pot here--no checks, IOUs, or sticky fingers, please."

Everyone groaned. It wasn't that we minded Hubert winning, we just minded him winning so many times in a row. I threw my cards away in disgust, as did Rich, Grampy, and the Lil' Doc. Stretching my arms out, I pulled at the cramps in my shoulders and back, announcing,

"That's it, I need a break."

"Who's half-assed idea was it to play Blackjack anyway?" growled Grampy, running his fingers over his clean scalp. "And how'd that little pisher get the deal?" Shoving his chair back from the table, he eyed his diminished pile of funds, then turned his gaze back toward Hubert, muttering, "I figure out how you been dishin' the cards, the world'll be minus one mutant."

"Oh, g-goodness me," answered Hu in a fluttering, overly dramatic voice. Making a show of dragging his latest winnings

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across the table, he said, "now I'm truly t-terrified. Jack, you'll have to protect me from this b-brute."

By "Jack," he meant me. My name's Jack Hagee. I'm a private detective. Hubert works, when he isn't pulling some scam on the art world, as an information broker for guys like me, guys like the police, guys like the mob--lots of guys. Grampy and I were in the service together. Rich is Richard Violano, a columnist for one of the city's major papers, and the Lil' Doc is, well, just that, a short doctor by the name of William Norman.

"Come to Papa, my little children," Hu cackled to his money. Obsessively straightening and facing all the bills, smoothing them out by pulling them back and forth across the edge of my dining room table, he cooed to them, "Daddy has a g-good home for each and every one of you."

The rest of us groaned, everyone getting up from the table to head for the bathroom, the bar, or the refrigerator. It was that part of the night. A couple of times a month the five of us get together and throw the pasteboards around. Usually Grampy or I take the majority of the pots. Doc is a terrible card player, and Rich doesn't gamble at all except for our games. I think he'd be embarrassed to actually win a night. For the two of them, it's just a chance to hang out with the guys and stay up late acting stupid. Of course, my girlfriend, Sally, would ask "who's acting?", but that's another story.

Hubert plays as seriously as Grampy and me, he just doesn't usually win. He was hot that night, though. We made more

than one comparison to this or that bad movie where the script called for someone to be incapable of losing. Hu did drop a few hands, but somehow he managed to lose all the little pots and take all the big ones. It did not make for the happiest of games.

Nobody likes it when the group clown gets to laugh up his sleeve at everyone else. They especially don't like it when that clown is Hubert. He has a particularly grating quality that makes such times fairly unbearable. Recognizing that the moment was coming in our usual routine when Grampy would be forced to threaten Hu's life--and that for once there might not be anyone who cared enough to stop him--Doc pulled the milk from the 'fridge and asked,

"Who wants a Closed Tent?"

Everyone accepted, except Rich--Rich doesn't drink, either, and unlike his no-gambling rule that one he won't break, even sitting around with us. As he went to fill his glass with seltzer, he asked Doc,

"Where did you get that name, anyway?"

"What? 'Closed Tent?' That came from the worst camping trip of my life."

"Tell the story," I said, half-curious, half-wanting to help defuse Hubert's antics. I was tired and half-bombed myself and didn't mind someone else taking over the entertainment. The Doc obliged, telling us,

"Sure. We were in the Poconos, four of us. One small tent. We just used the tent for storage since we all liked sleeping

under the stars. Anyway, that time, there was no sleeping under the stars. We got this terrific rain storm out of nowhere. Bowling thunder, lightning, high winds, the works." The Doc grabbed down glasses, lining four up next to his work area. As he started pouring a milk base in the first he continued his story, saying,

"So, you've got four guys crammed into a storage tent with all their luggage and equipment, the cooler, et cetera. We kept hoping the storm would blow over but it just got worse and worse. Pretty soon we're getting condensation, then the roof is dripping. After a while it's just one big sticky, humid mess inside." Finished with the milk, Doc started adding Kaluha to each glass. Layering it in carefully, he said,

"Before long, we're all in the worst mood ever. Most of our supplies are out in the van--all the food--so, we start scrounging. Luckily, we had plenty of doobies rolled--and one pack of matches we put half our energy into keeping dry. But, you know, man does not party by dope alone, so we turned to everyone's favorite, present company accepted ..." The Doc nodded in Rich's direction. Rich spread his hands in a magnanimous gesture as the Doc continued.

"Drink."

"Here, here," cackled Hubert. "A story with a moral and a happy ending."

"Quiet in the peanut gallery," said Rich.

"That means 'shut the fuck up', asshole," added Grampy, still smarting over his loses.

"Anyway," Doc cut in in a loud voice as he picked up the last ingredient, "all we had any real quantities of were milk, Kaluha, and Jack Daniel's. And so, the Closed Tent was born."

Everyone clapped as the Doc served his drinks. As we all knocked back big slugs, Rick put down his seltzer glass and said,

"I'll tell you about a bad camping trip." As all heads turned, the newsman started his tale. "We were upstate, about two hours out of the city in some state park. What was it ... oh, yeah ... Lake Taghkanic. Lucky us, we did get to sleep under the stars. And, what did we get for our trouble ... attacked by raccoons."

"Raccoons?" I asked. I was blurry, enjoying the warm feel of the Doc's creation sliding down my throat, and just not capable of picturing a group of little Disney critters invading Rich's camp. Reading my mind, he explained,

"Now, these were no cute Disney raccoons, these were freak monsters from The Valley of the Damned State Park. And I think the rangers there force fed them steroids before they turned them loose on us. These things were big. And I don't mean big like dogs, I mean big like cows." The laughs and cat calls started, but Rich kept a straight face, swearing,

"I'm serious. These things descended on us in the middle of the night and just grabbed whatever they wanted. Two of them were on their hind legs waddling off with our cooler. I swear, if they'd found my keys they would've driven everything away."

Rich shrugged off our disbelief with the practiced ease of a story-teller who had told his tale too many times to let any

amount of heckling slow him down. As we kept on drinking and laughing, he said,

"I'm telling you, we beat these things with branches, rocks--I threw a rock bigger than a baseball, hard as I could ... now I don't have the best arm in the world ... but bam ... I hit the ringleader ..."

"And how do you k-know he was the ringleader?" asked Hu.

"Because he was the one with the whistle around his neck," Rich answered without breaking rhythm. "And so my rock clobbers him in the side--right? Slam--boom. I expect howls and screams--right? Nah, no way. This thing turns around and gives me one of these looks ..."

Rich screwed his face into a perfect cartoon exaggeration of total boredom. Somehow, it struck the rest of us as the funniest thing we had ever seen. I slapped the arm of my chair. Hubert started banging on the table edge as if it were a drum, sending the cards and everyone's stakes bouncing. No one cared. We were all too busy laughing. As the noise died down, Rich went on, telling us,

"And then, he just walks away. You talk about embarrassing, I hit him with everything I had--I mean, this was my David & Goliath pitch, my knock over the Nazi ringleader and save the girl super blow for freedom. And this damn thing looks at me like he's saying, 'Hey, you want us to go, we'll go. No need to get rude.'"

Everyone laughed and clapped and drank deep. Even though the Doc had used my biggest glasses, his first batch of Closed

Tents disappeared in seconds. Maybe it was taking in those six shots apiece in just a few minutes that did it to us. Maybe it was the thirty or forty apiece we'd had before that. Whichever, as the Doc started working on another round by popular demand, Grampy said,

"Hell, I was on a camping trip that made both of those together look like a picnic."

"Oh," I chimed in stupidly, forgetting that some things are best left in the past, "I'm sure I know the one."

"Oh, yeah," agreed Grampy, bitter memory drifting in the back of his eyes, "I'll just fuckin' bet you do." Taking a long pull on his second Closed Tent, he added, "Tell 'em that story, Jack."

Stupidly, drunkenly, forgetting for a moment the burden of knowledge I was about to ask my friends to share, I did.

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Grampy and I had been out of the service for a while. He'd been discharged a year earlier than me because of a hunk of shrapnel lodged in his leg. That excursion was the first time we'd managed to hook up after I'd resigned my own commission.

Being fairly much alone in the world, except at that moment for each other, we wanted to do something that would keep us together for awhile without having to admit how good it was to have someone to talk to--someone who understood. So, we decided to head far back into the nowhere to find a spot away from radios and televisions, away from people and all their noise, where our Special Forces foraging training would count for something.

We headed up into the mountains, cutting off the main road which only led to the state pen, going back into the deepest wood we could reach. For almost two days we had a pretty good time ... drinking, fishing, living off the land ... acting pretty much the way we used to on missions for the government, just with no bullets flying around us. It was a nice change. As long as we stuck to stuffing our faces and killing brain cells, things went pretty smooth. The second night sitting around the fire, though, we started talking about more than where the last guy had left the Jim Beam or whose turn it was to roll a joint. That, as usual, was when things started going sour.

"So, Jack ... what's it been like since you got out?" asked Grampy. He gave his question a short pause, then tapped the side of his head, adding, "Up here."

"You mean, how am I handling being a civilian?"

"Yeah, that was the question."

I told him about the trouble I'd had after I first got back to the world. I'd had to stay by myself for quite a while--not trusting anyone, not wanting to. My surliness grew to a level where it almost got me killed. At the worst point I hit it was only luck that kept me in one piece.

Surviving that moment with my life--although practically nothing else to my name--intact, however, I started to slap my sorry existence back together. I went wandering, scraped by doing odd jobs, picking up free lance from guys from my old unit, men who had done the same job for earlier administrations and knew the kind of down time you need when you're finished--when your

nerve is shot and all you want of being a hero is to be finished with it.

I told him about everything that had happened to me in the few months since I'd packed things in. And then suddenly, I'd caught him up to the present. Having accomplished that, I asked,

"What about you? How you doing?"

"Survivin'," he answered noncommittally. He unconsciously glanced down at his leg, the one filled with enemy metal--the one responsible for his early discharge--while he continued, saying,

"You know. Maybe I woulda ended up like you, worryin' about shit and feelin' outta it an' everything. But ... and, you don't have to tell me, I know how stupid this sounds sayin' it outloud and all ... but I can't help feelin' cheated." Not knowing what he could possibly mean, I blurted,

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Ah, I know the Red Dog Team was the Army's slop bin. Guys like us, we weren't any use to them 'cept for throwin' down the toilet. Any mission we survived, they gave us time to soak up some fun, then they sent us out and tried to kill us all over again. I know everyone thought I was a lucky guy ..."

"You did get out in mostly one piece ..."

"Yeah?" he snapped, a low frustrated anger in his voice. "Who says I wanted to?"

I didn't say anything. What could I say? I didn't know what he meant, what he was trying to get at. I didn't even know if he wanted me to, but I did know that if I gave him a chance

he'd fill in the parts I was missing. After a minute of wood smoke-filled silence, he did.

"I didn't want to leave, you know. I didn't want it to stop. Why would I? I was good. I was the best bang-bang man that squad ever saw. You caught my evaluations. You heard what Rice said after I wired the Dormey Hills, or that fleet of siderunners I sent to the bottom offa Haifa ... or that time ..."

"I know," I assured him. "You were the best, man."

"Demo pigs don't need to run," he said, more to himself than to me. "Work's all different. You were the smack'em-up, I just played with my toys and made things go boom. I didn't hafta leave."

"They didn't court-martial you, you know," I answered, surprised to hear what had never even been hinted at before. "You were still in the service. They were just following the rules."

"What rules?!" he bellowed. "What fuckin' rule were they followin'? Red Dog broke every rule in the book. We took women into the field, for Christ fuckin' sake. Where was it written that I couldn't keep blowin' up bad guys?"

"Jeez'it, Grampy," I answered feebly, not knowing where to go next. Not needing any input from me, he growled back,

"What fuckin' rule was it--the gimp rule? No gimps allowed in combat? No fuckin' cripples allowed to run alongside the big, bad heroes? Can't make the six-footers with all their hair look bad--right?"

"Hey," I snapped back. "It wasn't my idea. I didn't do it. The brass said you couldn't walk on water anymore. They didn't

strip your commission, they didn't discharge you. They gave you a Goddamned medal--they gave you two of them. They said you were a hero and offered you a mahogany seat. You told them to go fuck themselves and resigned your commission. Is that the way it went, or did I miss something?"

"I didn't want to step down. That's what you missed. I didn't fuckin' want to step down. What the fuck did I care if I got shot up next time out? What woulda it mattered? Bein' a Suicider was the best years of my life. It was who I was. Who am I now, Jack? Tell me that, will ya? Who the fuck am I now?"

Grampy didn't want an answer. I knew it and he knew I knew it, but just to make sure I didn't try and feed him a line of slop about fate and getting on with things and the like, he got up and limped away from the fire. Grabbing his smokes and the bottle of JB we'd left out, he snarled, "Beam me outta here, Scotty," and then marched off into the trees and that was that for the night.

The next morning, Grampy was ready to leave and I was in no mood to argue with him. I'd just gotten done with feeling sorry for myself earlier that year. I was in no mood to hang out with someone who couldn't get past it himself. Don't get me wrong, I would've camped out until the millennium if it would've helped Grampy get his head back together, but that wasn't the way it was going to work. Guys like us, we don't take advice well. There's a load of people in this world who would stand in line for hours to tell me what a shitheel I was for not trying to understand my friend's pain. They can go fuck themselves. I

understood his pain, all right. And I understood what a jerk he was making out of himself over it.

I understood because I'd done it myself. Everyone does it. And, sooner or later, everyone grows out of it. Either that or they stay a blubbering, finger-pointing asshole their whole lives, or they take a high dive into a sidewalk. Whatever, when we let ourselves fill to the brim with the importance of our own misery, we make pretty shitty company. One by one, people drift away from us until we find ourselves alone--desperate to find some stranger that will listen to our broken-record recitation of our woes. I wanted to be of some help to Grampy, but I didn't know how. Like him, I was barely in my twenties. I'd gone through some of what he was going through, but I hadn't understood it myself. Hell, I'd barely survived it.

It was frustrating. We were both professional soldiers--big, tough guys. We'd killed more people than we could remember. But we were one-trick ponies. Men with big political ideas had trained us to decimate countrysides. We'd come through for them. And afterwards, the big idea men were on to their next bits of mischief and we were left to sit around with our thumbs up our asses wondering just what the hell we were supposed to do with our particularly unique job skills.

I'd been lost when I first hit the streets. Somehow, Grampy just hadn't been able to get past the notion that life had cheated him somehow. Maybe if we'd been older, had some time between us and the then that was tearing Grampy up inside, we could've done something for each other. As it was, we just broke

camp quietly, both of us still embarrassed by Grampy's outburst the night before and happy just to let it fade from memory.

By the time we had everything packed up in our renter, we were almost feeling back to normal. Knocking back a few slugs of the hair of the dog that bit us, our plan was to drive up over the mountains and down into the nearest town, get some breakfast, and then head off to whatever somewhere each of us thought we might try and fit in next.

We didn't make it.

Since it was blazing hot, Grampy had started the car while we were finishing up to get the air-conditioner juiced. Just as we were climbing on board, however, the engine died. A few minutes searching gave us the answer as to why.

"I can't believe it," snarled Grampy. "The hottest fuckin' summer on record, and those Remfs let us drive off with a car that ain't got no fuckin' coolant in it."

"Must have had some when we left," I offered. "Just not very much."

"Fuckin' A-right, not very much. Just enough to strand us in the middle of nowhere." Grampy threw the car keys at the ground, stomping on them as he growled, "Great. Just mother-fuckin' great!"

I couldn't argue with him. If we waited for the engine to cool and then tried to drive out, the car would stall every other mile. We would be stopping and starting our way up the damn mountain and back down again. I suggested we try using the lake water, but Grampy shot me down. Our car was a German make; air-

cooled engine, the coolant storage tank marked "Use approved coolant liquids only."

Neither of us were technically astute about car engines to the point where we could be certain that doing such a thing might not set the damn engine on fire leaving us having to pay for it. Out of money and stuck in a backwoods jail for non-payment did not look very attractive.

The only other choice we had was to hump our asses into town, buy some coolant, and then hump back for the car.

Marching I was used to.

Because of Grampy's leg, though, we decided to split up. Grampy would stay and watch our stuff. I'd go over the mountain and get some coolant and a ride back. Besides, I figured the extra time by himself in the woods might do Grampy some good. So, leaving him with everything but a canteen of water and a few strips of jerky, I headed off into the woods. Taking the road would have meant a lot of extra hours over the straight line I could cut through the trees. I'll always have to wonder what would've happened if I hadn't been so ambitious.

About an hour away from camp the sky started going overcast and I began to notice that there just didn't seem to be much game about. I wasn't noticing any spoor of any kind, except dog. It wasn't making any sense to me, but only because I wasn't thinking about it. All I was concentrating on was getting to town, and wondering what I could do about Grampy--if anything--and thinking crap like "there but for the grace of God" and the such when I suddenly began to get that itchy feeling that

something was going on to which I should start paying some attention.

The thought of the lack of wildlife came back to me. I should've been seeing traces of squirrels, raccoons, deer, ground hogs, chipmunks--all the normal deep woods mammals. I wasn't, though. Time and again, if I came across anything, it was traces of dogs. And not the same one or two dogs over and over--different ones. Lots of different ones. And then, the little cartoon light bulb went on over my head.

If I was only seeing traces of dogs, then dogs were the only animals around. And, the only way that would be the case would be if dogs had eaten and/or scared off everything else. Fresh spoor meant they were still around. And, if they were still around, and the only things around, that meant they were probably hungry. Real hungry.

Suddenly, the clouds filling the sky began to darken everything, leaving me feeling very small. I stopped moving, all my senses overloading as I threw them into a search for the pack I hoped didn't exist. I didn't see any dogs, couldn't smell anything on the air that said they were nearby. But--my spine froze as a trace of a far-off howl caught my ear--I could hear them. One of them, anyway.

I shut my eyes, listening intently, trying to catch direction and distance. The howl came again--long and piercing ... and different. It was a second dog. I was sure of it. As I stood between two tall pines, I started to pick up the distant sound of an entire network of dogs. Had I not heard them before,

I wondered, or had I not started thinking about them until the back of my mind noticed them signalling each other. Of course, what was really important was figuring out just what it was they were signalling each other about.

Slowly, I took a cautious step back the way I'd come. Suddenly, making our way over the mountain in an over-heating rent-a-car, even if it took a week, seemed like the best idea I'd ever had. I kept moving at a slow but even pace, hoping against hope that I wasn't the subject of the pack's attention. Then, after about forty yards, it dawned on me that if they were aware of my presence, that I'd better not retrace my original steps. Breaking off in a hard right direction, I began making my way down through a rougher, more vertical section of the forest, hoping that the steeper angle would discourage anything that might be on my trail.

The going got a lot rougher. What had started out as a bit of an incline was rapidly turning into a drop off. The boots I was wearing hadn't been designed for hugging the sides of crags. Before long I needed both hands to keep going. I'd miscalculated badly, and was now working my way into a tighter and tighter spot. And then, a thought flashed through my head. What made me so sure that it was me the dogs had spotted? Grampy was down in a nice, level valley, sitting atop a shitload of groceries.

Suddenly I began to think in terms of the big picture. We'd been barbecuing steaks, chops and assorted chicken parts like there was no tomorrow. We'd filled the air with the scent of burning fat for forty-eight hours. For all I knew, the dogs had

been drawn back by our stupidity into an area they'd already vacated.

Damnit, I thought as I tried to hurry my pace, Goddamnit to fucking hell, what'd we been thinking? We'd never gone into an unknown area for the government. Every mission had been 2% action and 98% percent planning--background investigations, map study sessions, language courses, history lessons--how did we forget it all so quickly?

Working my way down the hill, my mind flooded with all the things we hadn't done--did we bring the right equipment for the terrain, did we check the lay of the land, did we tell anyone where we were going, did we ask anyone if there were any dangers we should be aware of ... like marauding packs of fucking wild dogs?

"That might have been smart," I muttered, reaching for a vine. I should've been paying more attention. The vine I caught hold of wasn't firmly attached to anything. It came loose at my touch and before I could react, my foot slipped and suddenly I was in the air. I twisted, angling myself back toward the hillside. I struck it hard, but was unable to catch hold of anything and bounced away.

I hit again, and then again. My fingers grabbed at anything--everything--slipping over weeds, tearing against rocks. On my fifth bounce, I managed to catch hold of the base of an outgrowth of ferns. They held for a moment, cutting my momentum in half before they ripped loose. It was a tiny moment of luck,

just enough to save my life. Instead of toppling over the ledge below me, I just managed to slam against its lip.

Rocks and dirt I'd loosened on the way down rained after me, pelting me as I lay on the cliff edge. Dirt filled my eyes, my mouth, mixing with blood and spit to form a thick, foaming mud that practically choked me. I stayed still for a moment, wondering if the dogs had heard me fall, wondering how close I was to camp, wondering if when I finally tried to stand whether or not I'd find that some of the pain stabbing through me was connected to something broken.

Rolling over and pushing up, I answered two of my questions with one motion. Standing was a cascade of pain that almost caused me to scream. It was temporary pain, however, muscle chastisement over rough treatment. As I spit and hacked and brushed myself off, however, I noticed the camp was now considerably closer. I also noticed something else.

The ledge I'd landed on was a dead run. Down below me at the base of cliff were the bones of scores of animals, big and small, all smashed and mixed together. Taking a moment to study the paw prints all around me, it was easy to see where I was. The dogs had been using the cliff as a death trap--running their prey upward until they were boxed in the cul-de-sac created by the cliff walls. Anything they were chasing had two choices, stand and fight, or run off the edge in blind panic.

Without wasting anymore time I started down the sloping path the dogs had chased so many of their meals up, trying to get back to Grampy as fast as possible. I'd been hoping against hope

that I'd been tricking myself, scaring myself like some school girl. The hundreds of white shards at the base of the cliff let me know different.

After a few more minutes of making my way down the hillside I heard music. Grampy was playing his harmonica. It only took me a few steps to remember what that meant. In the old days whenever Grampy wanted to tell people something without letting any outsider's know what was going on, he had a whole list of tunes with special meanings. Pop Goes The Weasel meant a nasty surprise was waiting. Knowing that he wouldn't waste his breath with such games if he was trying to warn me about the dogs, I knew something else was up.

Great, I thought. Just fucking great. What now? Aren't our lives shitty enough? Hasn't enough happened to us? What the Hell else could have possibly gone wrong?

Approaching our camp as cautiously as I could, I soon found out. Peeking through the trees, I saw Grampy sitting next to the fire, playing his harmonica, surrounded by four men--two of them with guns. My first thought was that some over-zealous deputies had busted Grampy for having an open bottle, or for our little bit of grass. Getting a few yards closer told me the real story.

The four were convicts. Where they had come from, what they wanted, how they had gotten a pair of guns or the drop on Grampy, none of that was important. My only worries at that moment was how to get close enough to help, and what kind of help could I provide? I started working on the first part immediately.

Quietly sawing free two low, thickly needled pine branches for camouflage with my SEAL Trident, I began making my way forward. As I got closer, I settled into a spot from which I could hear what was going on. Covering myself with the branches, I relaxed and then cupped my hands, using my thumbs to squeeze my lips into the right shape to give Grampy a signal that I was close by. After I gave my little lark call, Grampy immediately started swinging the conversation around so as to fill me in.

"Look guys, like I told ya, why don't you just take the car and head out? So the coolant's low? So what? What do you care if you burn the shit outta the engine? It ain't your car. Hell, it ain't even my car. God knows when my buddy's gonna get back."

"Don't tell us what to do, baldy," answered one of the pair holding a weapon.

"I'm not," Grampy insisted, using the #2 Pleasant-Voice-For-Dealing-With-Hostiles they'd taught us way back when. "I just don't want to get shot, and I don't see the reason for anyone else to get hurt, either. You guys have gotten money, food, coffee, booze--grass--which oughta show ya I don't want the fuckin' cops around here anymore than you do."

"Look you," snarled the talkative one, moving closer to Grampy. "We've been on the run for two days. We already killed two guys--understand?"

"Mother-cock-suckin' keyheads deserved it." Talky turned on the younger man who had spoken up, snarling,

"Shut up--don't interrupt me, you shit sack! You don't think unless I tell you to. And, as for you," he snarled,

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spinning back toward Grampy, "You want to do something for us, make the fuckin' sun come out. Elsewise, shut the fuck up!"

"You want the sun back?" asked Grampy, as if filling the order was the easiest thing in the world. "Sure. No problem."

I could see Talky react. His body went instantly rigid, his head snapping to one side. If not for Grampy's calm matter-of-fact manner, he might have put a bullet through him right then. But, as he watched, Grampy picked up his harmonica again and start playing any beat or measure that came into his head. Talky's nerves went calm for a moment, his confusion overriding his need to be in charge. After a second, though, he snapped,

"What the fuck are you doing?"

And then, the entire campsite was bathed in sunlight. Looking up again, Grampy answered, "Why, just blowin' up some sunshine."

As he spoke, however, the light faded, the darkness returning as quickly as it had been dispelled. Instantly, Grampy bent back to his efforts, wailing on his mouth organ, piping up any tune that entered his head. He pushed the harmonica to the max, his face going red from his efforts. And, amazingly, the harder he blew, the lighter it got. He went through song after song, and as he reached the climax of each, the sun would blaze through again.

While he was entertaining the four cons, I abandoned my branches and started moving forward again, making my way to our firewood stack. We hadn't brought any firearms with us. Hadn't seen the point--then. But, I did have my SEAL. Quietly I put its

wickedly sharp steel blade to whittling a two foot length of hard wood down into a stake .

I was just mentally thanking Grampy for having grouped Talky and his pals over by the lake when suddenly, a long piercing howl filtered over the water from the other side. The dogs had massed--they knew where everyone was and were ready to make their move. No matter what I was going to do, I had to do it then. At the same time, over next to the lake, the younger convict whistled in low amazement.

"It's like magic," he said, staring at Grampy as if he had fed a multitude with a small basket of loaves and fishes. As Grampy bent to his playing, doing his best to keep the attention of the quartet, Talky slapped the younger man in the head, snarling,

"You idiot. Can't you see what he's doin'? He just watches the clouds. Whenever they're gettin' ready to let the sun through, he plays harder--jazzin' it up so it's like he's doin' it."

"Gee," I said, "You're smart," and then I drove my stake into the back of his neck. At the same time, before the others could react, Grampy stood up abruptly, ramming himself into the other gunman. That con fell backwards into the lake. And then, the barking began. Ignoring the convicts, I screamed,

"Keys?!"

"In the car," answered Grampy, moving toward my side. The two cons still standing jumped out of his way, not certain what to do. Not wanting to get into it with them, I kicked Talky's gun

toward the lake and then ran for the car with Grampy. As the convicts helped each other to their feet, we jumped into the rener.

"Get those fuckers!" screamed Talky. "Kill 'em! Grind 'em up! Do 'em--now!"

One of the unwounded trio managed to get to the back of the car as Grampy fired the engine. We blasted out of the clearing, dragging him for a dozen yards until we hit one bump too many and he fell away.

"What the Hell's the hurry?" asked Grampy. "We coulda finished off those saddle burrs without any trouble."

"No argument," I agreed. "But they aren't what I was worried about."

And then, from around both edges of the lake, dozens of low, snarling figures raced into view. Screams and growls intermingled. A few gunshots sounded, and then, whatever noises were left to be heard, faded as we did our best to leave them behind.

* *** *

"Yeah," said Hubert, pulling at his chin, breaking the quiet. "That's some b-bad ass camping trip, all right."

"What happened after that?" asked Rich.

"We went up the mountain a mile at a time," I answered, "coasted down the other side, then went to the car rental people and told them how their incompetence got us lost in the woods. We settled for our money back and a pair of train tickets to Pittsburgh."

"What about the cons?" asked the Lil' Doc.

"What about 'em?" growled Grampy. As the silence hardened around us, Hubert broke the uneasiness settling through the room by asking,

"Fuck them, what about the cards?"

Everyone began to shuffle around the room, cleaning or filling their glasses, getting a paper towel, involving themselves in any little bit of business they could find to allow them to ignore the disturbing memory I'd just shared with them. What the other guys thought about what I'd told them, I really don't know. Nor do I care to. Hell, sometimes I'm not even sure what I think about it. I knew what I thought then, though.

For Grampy and me the telling had been a return to a bitter moment ... and I don't mean the dogs or the half-assed punks who thought they were righteous dudes because they knew how to go to the bathroom standing up. There are defining times in our lives that set us on held courses which can not be escaped. Those that don't think so are only kidding themselves. Talky was right--it's all tricks. There is no magic.

For a long time I'd thought I'd gotten past a lot of things. I was wrong. Some things we never escape, no matter how good things get or how many lies we tell ourselves and others. No matter how much hot air we blow, the sun is always in the same place. Like the lady in that Civil War movie--like most people--I'd been telling myself that tomorrow is another day. That tomorrow would be a chance to start over and put the past behind me. That's great for books. Real life's a little different.

BLOWIN' UP SOME SUNSHINE/C.J. Henderson

Trust me, nothing ever changes.

Tomorrow never comes.