

# The Barn Grill Tales From All Over

as told by

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This document is approximately 15,567 words long.

Additional stories are available on my personal website.

Except for *Night Watch*, these stories aren't entirely original. They're part of the folklore of America and I've embellished them to my own satisfaction. *Night Watch* is my own original story.

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## Trouble Ahead

As retold by Sam Aurelius Milam III

The Barn Grill (we call it the Barn) was pretty quite that evening, with only the regulars in attendance, all at their normal places. Molly was tending bar. I was polishing glasses. The card game by the jukebox had been going long enough that Joe was grumbling about his losses and Ed was looking smug. Sid and Ernie were, as usual, concentrating on a serious game.

Molly was just taking another round of Bud to the Ferguson's table when the stranger walked in. All talking stopped. All eyes turned his direction. He was about five feet tall and weighed about 180 pounds. You might think that's a little chubby, but he wasn't. He was about five feet at the shoulders, well proportioned from there down. With a normal head, he'd have been 5' 10" or thereabouts. But his head wasn't normal. I'd say he was about 5' 3" at the top of his head. That's right, from shoulders to top of head was about three or so inches.

He walked casually, even gracefully, like a dancer. He came straight to the bar and took a seat as if he'd been there a thousand times. He didn't seem to notice how everybody'd noticed him. Molly was still standing halfway to the Ferguson's table with a tray of Bud balanced on her hand, so I walked down the bar and said, "Whuttle it be?"

"Miller draft." His voice was high and thin, like a kid.

I've been pumpin' suds long enough that I don't make many mistakes. I figured with such a small mouth, drinking from a mug would be a problem. When I sat the mug in from of him, I placed a straw beside it. He picked it up casually, as if it was nothing. "Thanks," he said.

"De nada."

The end of the straw fit comfortably in his little mouth. He sipped his beer, Molly delivered her Bud, Joe started gousin' about the stakes and dropped a quarter in the jukebox. Things started gettin' back to normal. It takes a lot to ruffle the regulars at the Barn for long.

The stranger sipped his beer and, when he'd finished, I had another one waiting. I'd decided to adopt him for the night and Molly got the signal. She's been with me long enough that she always gets the signals.

I have the gift of gab but, more important, I can bring it out in others. By his third mug he was talking to me like an old friend. His name was Burt. He was 30 years old and had recently left his job at a car dealership, in Houston. He was just driftin through, lookin' for work for a few days.

"Thought I might pick up sumpin." he said. "Mop a few floors, stock some shelves, wash a coupla dishes. Things where ah don't hafta deal with the public. Got a room over ta tha Little Bend."

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That's Debbie Cooper's little motel. It survives mostly on the tourist trade that spills over from the Park, about 60 miles from here around the corner and down Highway 385.

"Just need anuf cash to get me on my way again. Preciate tha suds, by tha way."

"So-kay. Got any family?"

"Sister in Lubbock. Folks in Sundown."

"Never heard of it."

"Lubbock?"

"No. Sundown."

"Little place. Hockley County. Just west of Lubbock. Wife in Houston."

"Separated?"

"Sorry. Ex wife in Big Spring. Divorced last month, 'bout tha time I left ma job. Been travelin' ever since."

"Too bad. She cleaned you out?"

"Na. Just kicked me out. Didn't like my looks."

Bingo. Now I was hittin' pay dirt. "Why'd she marry ya, if she didn't like yer looks?"

"I didn't look this way when she married me."

"Oh," I said, and made as if to drift away. I know when to show just the right lack of interest, so's to keep a story goin'. You have to be that way if you want to be a writer, and I want to be a writer.

"Course, if yer not interested — " he said.

"Well, o' course I am," I said, soundin' apologetic. "Just don't like to pry. So, you weren't born, uh — the way you are now?"

"Hell no! Was normal as apple pie 'til a month or so ago. Yeah," he said just a little belligerently. "Wasn't always like this. I was as normal as the goddam flag — uh, sorry, 'm a good R'publican, 's just tha beer talkin'"

" 's O.K."

"Yeah, well I wasn't like this 'til a month or so ago. Happened on tha beach. Sonovbichin beach at Freeport."

His words were getting pretty slurred, and I decided to speed the story up just a bit, so's to get it before I lost him to the booze. Never saw beer hit anybody so fast.

"So what was it? Chemical spill? Lot's of petrochemical down there!"

"Naw."

"Fallout?"

"Worse 'n that!" he slurred.

“No shit!”

“Damn right! Waza fuckin’ genie. No wasn. Thasa problem. Was a non fuckin’ genie.”

“Huh?”

“She wouldn’ fuck!”

“Hey Burt, how ’bout you start at tha top, uh, I mean, at the beginning. OK?”

“Yeah. Wul, I was walking tha beach. Did that a lot back then. Stay away from beaches nowadays. Bitches, too.”

“Life’s a beach,” I said, but he wasn’t listening any more.

“An’ there it was. Layin’ onna sand. Purtiest durn bottle ya ever saw! Looked like marble, ’r porcelain, ’r sumpin nice. Picked it up.”

He stopped and took a long slurping drag at his straw and wiped his face on his sleeve. I sat another Miller in front of him, and a fresh straw.

“Sho, I waned ta see it better. Purty flowers ’n stuff on it. So I rubbed some pieces of seaweed off it, and Poof! There she was!”

“There who was?”

“Tha genie’s who!”

“Tha what?”

“Tha genie! Set me back, tha way she popped outa nowhere! Dropped tha damned bottle I did, but she caught it. Handed it back ta me and called me Master!”

About then, I decided this guy was out of some nut house. Probably born this way, they’d have some fancy name for it like Degenerate Cranial Malaise or Infantile Cerebral Dystrophy or some other bullshit collection of buzzwords that means that they don’t understand it. So here’s this poor jerk with a head the size of an orange, probably spent his whole life in some institution polishing this story for the day he’d finally escape. How’d he get here and why’d he have to walk into my bar? Oh, well, time for help. I signaled cops, not urgent, but sometime soon. Molly saw the signal and drifted unobtrusively toward the phone.

“So,” Burt went on, “I said ‘What tha hell!’ and she said ‘No master, I’m a genie and you get one wish.’ I said ‘What? Only one? Don’t ya get three? Everybody knows ya get three.’”

The guy was really goin’ now and everybody in the bar was listening. Even the card game by the jukebox had stopped. Everybody had turned in their chairs to stare openly while he told his tale.

“So she says ‘No, ya only get one wish’ an’ I said ‘well if I only get one I’ll want the best ya could ever give me. I wanna make love ta ya!’ ‘Sorry,’ she said, ‘It’s forbidden for a mortal to make love to a genie.’”

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Molly completed her call and signaled O.K. Cops on the way. That'd be Brady, this time of night.

“So,” he continued, with a break in his voice, “well shit I was jus tryin’ ta git sumpin good outa her, anybody woulda said it, anyway I said if I can’t make love to her, how ‘bout a little head? ’n Poof! I been this way ever since, ’n Poof! she was gone.”

Sometimes the crowd at the Barn Grill can be a little heartless. I’m afraid they laughed and poor Burt started to cry. Deputy Brady arrived before things got any worse and bundled Burt off to the Little Bend. I promised Brady one on the house later, for his trouble.

After they were gone and things quieted down a little, several of the customers began to recall relatives or acquaintances who’d had crippling diseases and somebody remembered a cousin who’d died of leukemia. The conversation slowly died away and everybody sat sippin’ his drink. Finally, Molly started feeling so bad about Burt that she walked over to the Little Bend to see if maybe she could patch things up a little. She came back in a few minutes and said Burt was gone. He’d apparently just walked away, leaving behind him a battered backpack that contained a few articles of clothes and a beautiful porcelain vase bearing lovely pink and blue flowers on a white scrolled background. Looked Chinese to me. Molly had left a note with Debbie, inviting Burt back in case he returned. She’d promised Debbie to return the vase if Burt ever came back and then brought it back to the Barn with her, so that I could see it. I kept it on the bar for a while and invited customers to rub it, hoping for a genie. At the time I still had a lot to learn. I still get nervous remembering all the polishing that jug received. I don’t do that kind of thing anymore.

One morning I showed up and the vase was gone. I didn’t find any indication of burglary or of any forced entry. There wasn’t anything out of place and nothing else was missing, just the vase. At the time, it was a real puzzle for me. Today, I’m a little wiser than I was then. Today, the disappearance doesn’t seem unusual at all. Indeed, hindsight informs me that it was probably the best thing that could have happened.

## The Littlest Angel

As retold by Sam Aurelius Milam III

It happened that I went through a rather unpleasant divorce late one year and wound it all up about halfway through December. I was at loose ends and was finally starting to think seriously about writing. In a fit of rebellion and the beginning of a rebound, I decided to keep the Barn open on Christmas day that year. It was pretty quiet 'cause I'd always spent Christmas with Beth and Jenny before so all of my regulars were used to the place being closed on Christmas day. I hadn't really expected many customers, but there were a few. Then, in walked Santa Claus. Somebody called somebody, word got around, and before long the place filled up. Since then, Santa has become a regular tradition, the afternoon and evening of Christmas Day. I don't want it to get outa hand so I keep the door locked, the "closed" sign facing out, and the neons off, but I let in the regulars. Santa is one of the regulars. He drops by once a year and that's regular enough.

Christmas evening is one of the best times of the year, in the Barn. Santa, we're all on a first name basis with him of course, usually has a few left over gifts, not always enough to go around, but nobody's ever complained. The best part is the stories. As the evening wears on and Jack Frost nips at the window panes, Santa can get real laid back. The old guy's been around and he can be real entertaining, especially after a few tankards of my special Christmas Spirits.

This particular year there was a little problem with a couple of newcomers. Paul and Arthur. They're regulars, but they hadn't been with us long. Anyway, these guys didn't believe that what we had here was the real Santa Claus. They challenged him on the basis of reindeer. Santa said he'd parked his reindeer in Gillespie's Car Barn. John Gillespie owns an enclosed parking lot, near the edge of town. "Go see for yourself," he said.

They bundled up and left, and Santa passed out some gifts. It happened that there were just enough to go around without Paul and Arthur. I got a genuine gold cork screw with Santa's own personal crest emblazoned on it. You drop by some time when we're open and I'll show it to you.

Paul and Arthur came back, cold, wet, and unconvinced. The rest of us were just settling down with tankards of Christmas Spirits. The Car Barn, they claimed, was closed for the holiday and locked up tight. They couldn't get in and hadn't seen any reindeer. Santa's response was to lay his finger alongside of his nose and suggest that getting inside of locked places was a special talent of his. Then, before they could start some damned fool argument about something, Santa started a story.

"It happened," he began, "many years ago at the North Pole."

Paul started to make some other objection but Joe caught his eye and shook his head.

"About six months before Christmas," Santa continued, "I notice that things were not going well. My first hint of trouble was an unusual amount of grumbling among the Elves. No one seemed willing to tell me what was wrong but I eventually dis-

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covered that the Easter Bunny was offering better pay and the Elves were annoyed at their thousand year contracts.”

Santa paused to sip a little of our Christmas Spirits, which is a secret recipe of mine. He loves the stuff. In fact, he’s the one who named it for us.

“Well,” said Santa, smacking his lips, “All I could do was boost my pay scale to match the Bunny’s but I had to cut a few corners on the toys to make up for it. Not fair, you know. Chickens do most of his work for him. You could get eggs for chicken feed, them days. Me? Back then, I hadda make everything from scratch! Didn’t have Mattell, and Hasbro, Milton-Bradley, and whatever! The Bunny never did understand professional courtesy.”

He puffed on his pipe for a minute, recalling, and we waited patiently.

“All seemed well for a while,” Santa continued between puffs, “but then problems arose with raw materials. It turned out that the Dwarfs had been spending more time than usual making trinkets for their lady Dwarfs and shipments had fallen behind schedule. While I was out of town negotiating with Snow White, to get the Dwarfs back on line, a virus attacked the reindeer and half of them went out of commission. Because of the supply problems, many of the Elves had been traveling extra distance to get raw materials from alternate suppliers until the Dwarfs could get back up to speed. For that reason, my lovely wife had to deal with the sick reindeer. She despises reindeer.”

Santa chuckled around his pipe, evidently recalling some amusing vision of Mrs. Santa tending the deer.

“When I returned from my meetings with Snow White, I discovered that Mrs. Santa was exhausted and distraught from tending the reindeer and the Elves, without adequate supervision, had reverted to fun and games. Toy production was a month behind schedule and Christmas was only 4 months away. I tentatively withdrew the Elves’ toy allotment and reassigned it to the kids. Boy did they scream but I showed ’em the contract. It’s right there on paper in red and green. Shortfall gets made up outa tha Elves’ toys. That got ’em going again but it didn’t fix the reindeer, who were feeling sick, surly, uncooperative, and were slow to recover their strength.”

Molly started serving sandwiches. Santa stashed his pipe and dug into his Dagwood, talking between mouthfuls.

“I worked long hours,” he said, “cajoled the Dwarfs and promised the Elves extra vacation after the first of the year. Things gradually got back to normal. Just as the reindeer were almost recovered, a blizzard blew through and covered their feeding grounds with about 6 feet of snow. I had to re-assign some of the elves to begin carrying bales of feed from the southern pastures and toy production started to fall behind schedule again.”

At that point, the card game broke up and Joe, Ed, Sid, and Ernie moved over to the bar for food. There was a little reshuffling as people made room.

“One month before Christmas, I had to recall a bunch of toys from the staging area when I discovered that defective paint had been used on many of them and was flaking off. I had to pull some Elves off the transportation of reindeer feed from the southern pastures, and assign them to re-painting.”

“Two weeks before Christmas, I came down with the flu. The Mrs. had to take over all supervision and the Dwarfs immediately started screwin’ off again, makin’ trinkets for the lady Dwarfs. Snow White was visiting Maleficent at the Forbidden Mountain, so she was no help at all. Due to confusion among the Elves, some of the Elves who’d been replacing defective paint ended up transporting feed for the reindeer and somehow some of the reindeer ended up drinking paint instead of water. They were sick for a month and missed Christmas completely except for one youngster who, it turned out, was immune to the effects of red paint.”

“Two days before Christmas, the Mrs. just couldn’t take any more and marched off in a huff. Uncle Rudolf had heard of my problems and arrived from Transylvania to run things for me. He loves the reindeer, but the thought of Christmas stockings filled with Halloween goblins and toy vampires was more than I could bear. I pulled myself out of bed in spite of lingering flu.”

Santa waited while a few folks chuckled over that. Since we see Uncle Rudolf at the Barn every year the day after Halloween, I’m sure that mental notes were being made to ask him some questions next November the first.

“So, for the last two days before Christmas, I dragged around with chills, general weakness, nausea, diarrhea, and dizziness. Naturally, nobody had checked the medicine cabinet in months and we were all out of everything except Preparation H.”

That got him a few chuckles.

“Christmas was approaching and I just had to improvise. I farmed out the transportation of raw material to Sgt. Preston and a team of huskies, led by Yukon King. Toy production was completed by seven little dwarfs who were fanatically devoted but not among the best qualified. The reindeer, largely unsupervised, had wandered far afield and had to be rounded up at the last minute. Uncle Rudolf was able to locate only eight adults and the youngster who had drunk the red paint.”

Paul and Arthur started whispering to each other but Joe glared at them and they quieted down.

“On Christmas Eve, my lovely wife deigned to show up but she was in a surly mood. She tried to make supper but burned the corn bread. I didn't dare refuse to eat it but it sort of left a bad taste in my mouth. While the Elves were loading the huge bag of toys on the sled, the bag split and a new one had to be requisitioned from stores. The storekeeper had already gone home (so we thought) for the Christmas break but his wife claimed that he was working late. It took an extra hour to locate him where he was visiting with one of the lady Elves. Both the storekeeper’s wife and his lady Elf were furious, which only added to the confusion. Most of the other elves were amused.”

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“While the toys were being re-packed in the new bag, the reindeer got their traces all tangled and I had to completely unhook them, unsnarl the mess, and re-attach everything. I don’t know where all of the elves were while I was doing that but the place was as deserted as the North Pole.”

Santa paused with a quizzical expression on his face, shrugged his shoulders, and continued.

“When I finally got ’em all hooked up again, I noticed that I had inadvertently put the youngster in front but I wasn’t about to re-arrange anything. He’d have to lead the sleigh tonight, blizzard or no blizzard, and that was that. When I was finally ready to leave, it was almost dawn and I knew that I’d be late at every home south of the Arctic Circle, but what the hell! I gave the command, the reindeer strained, and nothing happened. The sleigh had sat so long that the runners had frozen to the snow. While we were trying to rock it loose, I snagged my pants on a jagged edge and everyone had to wait while Mrs. Santa stitched the tear. Since she was also trying to deal with the Storekeeper’s females, I had to wait my turn. When she finally got back with her needle and thread, she had a look in her eye that caused us all to maintain a careful silence.”

“Ready to go at last, with Christmas morning just breaking, I drew breath for the command when I was interrupted once more. A very small angel came running from the fields, dragging quite a large Christmas tree, which was to be decorated for Christmas morning. She shouted, ‘Santa Claus! Santa Claus! Don’t go yet! You have to tell me where to put this Christmas tree!’”

Santa paused and glanced around apologetically.

“Well, I was in somewhat of a bad temper by then so I told her where she could put the damned thing and left immediately. I was told later that the poor little angel actually tried to follow my instructions before she could be convinced that I hadn’t really meant what I’d said. I guess that I inadvertently started a Christmas tradition.”

“What tradition?” asked Joe.

“Well,” said Santa apologetically, “that’s why there’s always an angel on top of the Christmas tree.”

It was a good story and everybody got a good laugh out of it but it hadn’t satisfied Paul and Arthur, who were still lurking. Arthur immediately wanted to challenge Santa for ID and Paul wanted to know how they had Preparation H at the North Pole, way back then, and why there were so many fictional characters in the story. Sergeant Preston, for example. Joe got between them and Santa, took them aside, and spoke softly to them. He’s one of our original regulars and few remember his first encounter with Santa. He, too, was a doubter. Once, years ago, he secretly followed Santa, who leaves before we close. When he returned he wouldn’t say what he’d seen but he never questioned Santa again.

I don’t know what Joe said to Paul and Arthur but they didn’t give us any more trouble that evening. They watched Santa carefully and I noticed that they left qui-

etly, right after he did. They returned a while later but they weren't answering any questions. They retired to the Dark End for the rest of the evening and they've never questioned Santa again. They won't let anybody else question him, either. I decided then that the next year I'd follow him and see for myself but a lot of things can happen in a year. Before the next year was over, I was a little more cautious about just what I really want to know. Do I really want to follow Santa? No, I guess not.

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## Anatomy Lesson

As retold by Sam Aurelius Milam III

I have this radar, you see, that tells me where everybody is. I know who's in the John or in the Juanita and how long they've been there. I know who's up in the Dark End. I know who's been served, who's left their table to dance, and who's there with who. It's like an air traffic controller. I keep track of my customers.

Anyway, the Barn was really bouncin' the night the Eccentric walked in. He was wearing an expensive three piece suit but we're pretty tolerant so nobody said much. What we really noticed was the two lovelies clinging to him, one on each arm. I was just getting into a rapt appraisal of them when my radar warnings all went off like you wouldn't believe. Three beautiful women came strolling out of the Juanita. Now that might not seem like a problem except the Juanita had been empty. I know it. And two more sweeties came wandering down from the Dark End. There hadn't been anybody at all in the Dark End. And get this. One final gorgeous babe came out of the John. The John. You know, the men's Juanita.

I was stunned for the next few seconds and it takes a lot to stun me. I couldn't imagine how those voluptuous babes had gotten in past my radar. Molly was upset too. Her radar's almost as good as mine and she just stood watching me, waiting for signals. The regulars, who know us, began to take notice, knowing that something unusual was afoot.

The Eccentric, who was now surrounded two deep by impressive beauties, eight in all, found a place at the bar and there was a lot of re-shuffling and good natured grumbling while he and his retinue got situated. He looked at me, smiled uneasily, and glanced at the front of his coat. That's when I noticed the bulge. "Jesus!" I thought. "It's a gun. He's gonna rob us." I started signaling Molly for cops, quick, but she didn't see the signal through the man's gaggle of girls, all of whom were (by the way) giggling, wanting to touch him, trying to be the closest to him, and whenever he let his guard down, getting downright personal with him. I couldn't figure it.

"Barkeep!" he said, and I didn't even object to the appellation, which usually annoys me, "Drinks for everybody!"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a stack of hundreds. I said a **stack** of **hundreds**. He dropped it casually on the bar in front of me. The thing just sat there and I just stood there looking at it. Suddenly I had him figured. He's George Bush, I thought, incognito (that'd be easy), out for a night on the town. These gals were all Secret Service. That's how they'd got in. Some secret stealth shit or something. The one from the John, I still knew which one that was, probably she was a man in disguise. I relaxed and picked up the stack of hundreds with a negligent movement.

I signaled Molly "celebrity" and started feeling normal again. People started ordering drinks like crazy. Molly started moving so fast, delivering drinks, that she was almost making a sonic boom. My arms were as limber as tentacles, making drinks. Money does that to me and Molly. Just as everybody was getting settled down to

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some serious free drinking, it got real quiet. My back was turned but I heard the quiet start near the Eccentric Celebrity and spread out from there. I didn't look around but glanced at Molly for some kind of a signal. She signaled look around, so I did.

It was a little man. He was about a foot tall and wearing a three piece suit that was the spittin' image of the one that the Eccentric Celebrity was wearing. A puppet, I thought. How cute. Then the puppet spoke, in a high, thin, but very understandable voice. "You asshole!" it shouted, and shoved a customer's drink in his lap. Under different circumstances, it might have been funny but the few scattered chuckles didn't sound convincing. The little man then turned to the next customer and shouted "What tha hell 'er ya lookin' at, motherfucker!" Now we're pretty tolerant but one thing that I don't like is heavy language so, right away, I said, "O.K., whoever owns that thing, keep it clean or put it away."

The little man started to shout something at me but the Eccentric Celebrity Ventriloquist grabbed him and stuffed him back into his coat. That's what the lump in his coat had been.

"Sorry," He said and handed me another stack of hundreds. I tried to be casual but it was getting a little tough. I hoped this guy didn't have any more tricks.

"That was quite a puppet," I said. "I couldn't even see the strings."

"No strings," he said around one of the female bodyguards, who'd just crawled into his lap. Great technique these people had. Even if I did have a beef with the guy, there wasn't any way that I could reach him. He was surrounded at all times and I'll bet any one of these gorgeous goons would've bit my hand off if I'd reached for the guy.

"No strings? Then how'd ya do it?"

"I didn't," He said. "I can't really control him. Wish I could."

Just then, the little guy jumped out of the coat and onto the bar again. He ran down the bar, jumped across the jukebox, and onto the table where Joe, Ed, Sid, and Ernie had their card game going. Quick as a wink, he grabbed the deck and heaved it over the edge of the table, cards all over the floor. "Ya ya!" he jeered. "Fifty-two Pickup's tha only thing ya got tha balls ta play!"

Joe reached for the guy and got his hand bit. Sid and Ernie, who're serious card players, jumped up, overturning their chairs, and started to yell about their game. Just then the Eccentric Celebrity Ventriloquist arrived at the table, trailed by his nebula of nubile women, grabbed the little man and stuffed him back into his coat. Then so help me God, he handed each of the card players a stack of hundreds. Everybody shut up after that and it was real quiet as Eccentric Celebrity Ventriloquist and his ladies walked back down the bar to their places.

"Mr. President? Sir?" I asked, but he smiled and shook his head.

"Marvin Snell," he said.

I'd had all I could take for one night, stacks of hundreds or no stacks of hundreds. "What the **hell** is going on!?" I asked.

"It always comes to this," he said, and I noticed he was keeping his hand firmly pressed over the lump in his coat. "I don't usually go out, because of it."

"You some kinda politician?" I asked.

"Naw. Nothin' really."

"Movie star? I don't remember seein' ya."

"Naw," he insisted. "I'm nothin' special. Used ta drive a bus. Broke down crossin' tha desert once. Just got lucky was all."

"I guess," I said.

"Been a couple a years now. Seems like a lifetime."

"What happened? Win tha lottery? Inherit a fortune?"

Everybody was listening. The regulars have that habit because we do get some unusual drop-ins but tonight the others had caught it too. The place was quite.

"Rob a bank?" I asked.

There were a few scattered chuckles.

"No," he said, "I got three wishes from a genie."

Now, up 'til about six months before, I'da decided right then and there that the guy was nuts. But there was this guy named Burt, with a little — well, that's another story. Anyway, I said, "I thought nowadays genies gave only one wish."

"This one gave me three," he said. "Maybe she was an old fashioned genie."

"Oh, yeah," I replied, "That'd explain it. You didn't meet her at the beach, did ya?"

"No. Why?" he asked.

"No reason. Just a crazy idea I had. Go on with your story."

"Well," he continued, "she was living in the desert."

"The desert?"

"Yeah. In an old whisky bottle."

"Wait a minute. I thought genies lived in porcelain jars."

"Somebody had her jar. She told me. She had to move into a bottle. Things are tough all over."

"Why didn't she just give herself a free wish and wish for a new jar?"

"Beats me," he replied. "I didn't think to ask her that. Maybe next time."

"Yeah. Find out for me."

"Sure," he agreed. "Anyway, there was this old bottle — I still have it." It was one of those flat, slightly curved bottles that fit in a pocket. He pulled it from the pocket

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on the other side of his suit from where he kept the little man, and held it out to me. I didn't take it. There'd been a few other stories told in the Barn since Burt and his little head and I was learning to be cautious. I didn't want to touch the thing.

"Don't know why I bothered to pick it up," he continued, "but I did and went to knock the dirt off it against my leg. When it rubbed against my pants, Boing! there she was!"

"Not Poof? Boing?"

"Yeah," he said. "Say, who's telling this story, anyway?"

"Sorry," I apologized. "Sometimes I have trouble keepin' my mouth shut."

"That could be a real problem if you ever meet a genie," he warned. "I'd be real careful if I were you, workin' around all those bottles."

He pointed and, sure enough, he was right. I'd never thought about it before but there are hundreds of bottles behind the bar and I do spend a lot of time polishing things. I didn't want to think about that so I got him back on the story again.

"So what'd she say?"

"She called me master and offered me three wishes. The first thing I wished for, as you can see, was to always be surrounded by lovely, eager, willing women."

He glanced around him, and shrugged.

"They're always here. They're not always the same ones but there's always at least two. Usually more. I don't bother with names anymore. I even got used ta sharin' tha bathroom but would you believe the hardest part is bed? It'd be so nice to sleep alone sometime, be able to roll over without bumping into somebody, be able to stretch a little."

He got a wistful look on his face, so I prodded a little.

"So what'd ya wish for next?"

"To always have lots of money." He reached into his coat and handed me another stack of hundreds.

"As you can see," he said, "she granted that one too."

"O.K." I objected, "that explains the dolls and tha dough. What about that thing in your coat?"

"I probly could've dealt with the other stuff," he complained, "but that was what ruined it for me. The little prick."

"Yeah," I agreed. "He seems a disagreeable sort."

"No," he objected. "You don't understand."

"What?"

"The little man here in my coat? My third wish was that she should give me a 12 inch prick. Before I could explain the mistake, she was gone."

I'm afraid the next few minutes were filled with some rather unsympathetic laughter. Sometimes people are callous. Shortly after that, Marvin began passing around the bottle. He'd been rubbing it day and night for over two years but the genie wouldn't reappear. He offered all the money that they could carry to anybody who'd rub it. A few tried and left wealthier for the effort but the genie never reappeared.

I wouldn't even touch the thing.

Meanwhile, we got quite a party goin', what with all that money circulating, and me and Molly were haulin' ass with drinks and the occasional hamburger from the grill. In the commotion, I made a rare mistake and didn't pay enough attention to my radar. I didn't notice that Marvin was gone until I heard squealing tires on the pavement out front. It was then, and with a sinking feeling, that I realized that the twelve inch prick was on the bar, right in front of me. Marvin had gone off and left him.

Molly and I sprang instantly into action. We've worked together for a long time and there wasn't any need to discuss anything. Surprise was our only advantage. I grabbed the little prick and slid him down the bar where Molly dropped an empty plastic bucket over him. Then we slid the lid under it, turned him over, and snapped the lid on tight.

There ensued a lively debate among the customers as to whether it would be murder to just let him suffocate in the bucket. I was listening with some interest when my radar blipped me so hard that I jumped. Molly got blipped too and we carefully checked the bucket. The lid was on tight. The bucket was empty. I suppose that a gift from a genie is permanent because the twelve inch prick was gone, presumably back with Marvin. I thanked my lucky stars that I'd had sense enough not to rub that damned whisky bottle. I take enough chances just serving booze to women.

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## The Witch

As retold by Sam Aurelius Milam III

The Barn Grill has a regular clientele but we also get a lot of drop-in business. If the regulars give the place a certain stability, the drop-in's give it life.

On one particular afternoon, there wasn't anybody in the place except for Joe, Ed, Sid, and Ernie. They had the usual card game going. Joe was losing, as usual. Ed was winning, as usual. Sid and Ernie were concentrating on a serious game, as usual. Molly wasn't in yet. Her shift begins at six, giving her time to get here from her "regular" job.

Not much was happening and I was polishing glasses, which makes me nervous. I used to enjoy polishing glasses until a character who was buying drinks for a full house one evening told a story about a genie who lived in a whisky bottle. Since then, I've never been comfortable polishing glasses.

Anyway, I was polishing glasses when through the door came a big man, about 45, looking pleased. He strolled over to the bar and sat down, with a secret smile showing through his face.

I said, "Whuttle it be?"

"Coke."

I gave him his Coke and went back to my glasses. He sat and sipped.

I wandered around the bar doing various odds and ends, and got a bit of a look at him. I decided that he was a truck driver. Cowboy hat but tennis shoes instead of boots. Western shirt but a pen and sunglasses in the pocket. A certain unconscious attention whenever a rig went by outside. He looked like a drinker but he wasn't drinking. Therefore, he must be driving. I have a certain respect for truckers and, since he was being careful not to drink, I gave him credit for being a professional.

I came by, filled the napkin box near him, and asked, "Long haul?"

"Yup. Headin' fer Frisco."

"Got a ways ta go. Where'd ya start?"

"Dirty S.A."

"Ya must be a mover."

"north American."

The Fergusons came in and I took a tray of Bud to their table. Ben wanted a hamburger so I was busy at the grill for a few minutes. The trucker, whose name was Big Al, was in a friendly mood and got involved in some small time banter with Ben while I was doing the burger. When I got back they were discussing an article on the local page of the San Antonio Light, the Ferguson's are subscribers, about a witch's coven that was operating somewhere east of town. Ben ventured that there were no such things as witches but Big Al smiled at something private and came back to his place at the bar. Ben started on his hamburger.

## The Barn Grill: Tales From All Over

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I scrapped down the grill and came back to the bar. “So you believe in witches?”

“Well,” said Big Al, “Sorta. Well, not really.”

I raised an eyebrow and waited. I could sense a story here.

“Well, Hell,” he said. “It’s just a lotta crazy things happen on tha road.”

“You met a witch?”

He couldn’t contain his secret smile any longer.

“You might say that. Leastwise, she claimed she was.”

“So what’d she do? Ride a broomstick?”

He snorted a short, hearty laugh, and said, “You could say that!”

I brought my three-legged stool, refilled his Coke, and sat across the bar from him. Whatever it was, I could see that he was pleased with it. From the smile in his face I was already pretty sure about which ‘broomstick’ the witch had ridden but one thing I’ve learned about my side of the bar is, don’t try to tell the customer’s tale for him. I sat and waited.

“Yeah,” he continued, “I had a small drop in Del Rio, so I took 90 instead of the Interstate. That’s how I happen to be here.”

“You left San Antonio this morning?”

“Naw. That was yesterday. Spent last night at the All Hallow Inn.”

“Where?”

“The All Hallow Inn. This side of Del Rio.”

“On highway 90?”

“Yeah.”

“Didn’t get very far since ya left S.A,” I said, but my mind was racing.

“Depends on how ya mean.” He smiled from ear to ear.

“So you met a witch this morning on highway 90.”

“Nope. Met her yesterday evenin’.”

Right. He met her yesterday. Just as I thought.

“Yup. There she was, standin’ by tha road with her thumb out.”

“Only her thumb?”

“Well, she didn’t seem all that unusual. Tight jeans an’ a blue pull-over sweater, all very nicely filled. Long blond hair in a pony tail, dark blue ribbon. Green eyes. She was right out on tha highway an’ I was doin’ about 65 when I saw her. Made a little grey smoke stoppin’ tha rig ’fore I was passed her, but I managed it. I reached over an’ pulled tha handle an’ she just climbed right in.”

“I asked her, ‘How far ya goin’, ma’am?’ an’ she said ‘a ways.’”

“I said, ‘Ya know, it’s kinda dangerous fer a lady ta be out on tha road alone like this.’ ”

“ ‘Naw,’ she said, ‘I can handle myself.’ ”

“ ‘Why ma’am,’ I said, ‘a purty little thing like you’d most likely git carried off an’ never heard of again, out by herself.’ ”

“ ‘Nope,’ she said, ‘because I’m a witch.’ ”

“Well, I just sorta chuckled when she said that an’ she looked at me real sharp. ‘Now don’t you go laughin’ at me like that,’ she said, ‘I’m a witch.’ ”

“ ‘Aw, now ma’am,’ I said, ‘There ain’t no witches!’ ”

“ ‘Well, I’m one!’ she said, ‘I turn people into things!’ ”

“I’m afraid I laughed out loud at that.”

“ ‘Yes I do,’ she insisted, ‘I turn people into things so you don’t need to worry about me. I can take care of myself!’ ”

“We rode for about 10 minutes an’ I finally decided I had her angle figured. I’d heard a joke once that sounded a lot like that, so I said, ‘You really expect me to believe that you could turn me into something?’ ”

“ ‘I can,’ she insisted.”

Joe lost the card game about then and ordered a round for the table. They’d been kinda halfway listening to Big Al’s story, so they took a break and brought their drinks to the bar to hear the rest of it.

“So,” Big Al continued after everybody had found seats, “she insisted she could turn me into something.”

“So did she?” asked Joe.

“Pretty much,” said Big Al.

“Well,” insisted Joe, “either she did, or she didn’t.”

“Well, she did, then!”

“Into what?” asked Sid.

“Well, what happened,” continued Big Al with a smile, “was I said, ‘Ma’am, you ain’t gonna turn me into nothin’. That a lotta bull malarkey.’ ”

“Well damned if I guess she hadn’t heard the same joke, ’cause she just leaned over purty as you please, that sweater o’ hers turned out ta be purty loose in front and I damned near drove off tha road. Anyway, she leaned over to me an’ whispered something inta my ear, and damned if I didn’t turn into a motel!”

Sid had to repeat the punch line for the Fergusons, who’d missed it and about then Molly arrived so Ben Ferguson repeated the whole story for her. Big Al sat through it, looking smug and pleased. Well, what the hell. He’d got a good lay for free and a good story to tell about it.

## The Barn Grill: Tales From All Over

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The place started to fill up after that. Big Al left and he's never been by here again. I guess he sticks to the Interstate. Maybe you wonder why I bothered to write down this particular story. It gave us all a good laugh and it's been retold here many times but it wasn't very original. Everybody's heard that joke. However, there's a reason. Before Big Al left, he showed me a book of matches he'd picked up at the motel, a kind of souvenir of his 'witch ride.' The All Hallow Inn, just like he'd said.

Most truckers use I-10, 70 miles north of here, but we do get a few, and a lot of tourists on their way to Big Bend. We get a lot of people traveling for dozens of reasons and I have a good memory. There's no such motel as the All Hallow Inn, anywhere on highway 90. As I said when he first mentioned the place, my mind was racing. If there was an All Hallow Inn, somebody else would have mentioned it, sometime. I'd have heard of it. I was interested enough to do a little checking, later. There's no such motel anywhere in the state, as far as I can tell.

My memory didn't draw a complete blank. A quick trip through an encyclopedia firmed it up a little. Maybe you don't know it, but All Hallow E'en is one of the four traditional Witch's Sabbaths. Our Halloween celebration is a sanitized version of it. All Hallow E'en, and Big Al stayed at the All Hallow Inn. I hadn't thought about it until I checked that encyclopedia, but I got a chill when I recalled the date. He'd passed through town on the first of November. At first, I'd intended to ask Uncle Rudolph about it the next November the first, when he made his yearly visit. Before the year was over, however, I'd changed my mind. I don't know what happened out on highway 90 on that All Hallow E'en but it wasn't what Big Al thought, it wasn't just a joke, and it didn't happen in a motel. Whatever it was, I'm happy to not ask any questions.

## The Leprechaun

As retold by Sam Aurelius Milam III

At the left end of the Barn Grill (as I face the door from behind the bar) is the Dark End. That's a section of floor that's elevated about 4 feet above the main level. It's only half as wide because the John and the Juanita are to its right, along the inside of the front wall of the establishment. The J's are on the main level, as are the entrances to them, so the Dark End is a cul-de-sac. Instead of tables, it has booths on each side, with tall backs, and the walk-way is down the middle. The lighting is always very dim and there aren't any windows. The Dark End is used mostly by romantics, by people having affairs, by people with hangovers, by people who like to drink alone, and so forth. This place really was a barn, many years ago, but I've never figured out what that elevated platform section was used for, back then. Today, many folks consider it gloomy, but it doesn't suffer from a shortage of advocates. I once considered closing it off and using the space for storage and I still occasionally get criticized for that plan.

The Dark End is partially shielded from view by a lattice arrangement of thin wood slats. The bar extends beyond the lattice on the left, so that people in the Dark End can come down the stairs to the bar in relative privacy. On this side of the lattice is a jukebox, against the bar, and two tables. The table in front of the jukebox is where Joe, Ed, Sid, and Ernie play cards. They used to play cards at the other end of the bar, away from the jukebox, as you'd expect. Eventually, they moved their game right up against the jukebox. They say they can concentrate better when the music drowns out all of the other noise. Included in their stakes is the loser's obligation to feed the jukebox.

I always know who's in the Dark End, even if they arrive during our busiest hour. Only once have I ever been surprised in this regard and that hardly counts because the lovelies who appeared from the Dark End had been placed there by a genie. So, when the distraught businessman came in I saw him go by and I knew that he was there.

Molly doesn't go into the Dark End and distraught businessman didn't come to the bar, so I went to take his order. Martini. When I brought it to him, he asked an unusual question. No, not that. I've been asked that many times in the Dark End, by both sexes, so it isn't unusual. He asked me if I believed in Leprechauns. At one time I'd have said no but that was before I bought the Barn. There've been a lot of strange stories told here and I'm not too sure any more what I don't believe. One thing I am sure of, though, and that's a story. I detected one here.

"Well, I've never actually met one."

You never just ask. I learned that long ago. When there's a story waiting to be told, you don't push but you stay handy. I started cleaning ash trays and polishing tables. I hummed softly to myself, because it disarms people. I worked for a couple of minutes and watched him from the corner of my eye. I'm good at that, so I saw him make his decision.

He said, trying to sound casual, "Well I did."

## The Barn Grill: Tales From All Over

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“Oh?” I didn’t seem too interested.

“Yeah.”

“What’d he look like?”

“By tha way, name’s Jake.” he said. We shook hands.

“Little guy. Four feet tall.”

“Who?” I asked.

“The Leprechaun,” Jake said.

“Oh, yeah. Go on.”

“Kinda stout. Wearin’ all green, and he had pointed ears.”

“Yup,” I ventured, “that sure sounds like a Leprechaun.”

“I thought you’d never seen one.”

“Jenny eats Lucky Charms when she visits.”

He snorted and I realized that it hadn’t been the right remark. “Actually,” I added hastily, “my aunt Kathleen described them to me. Pardon my sense of humor.”

“Your aunt saw one?”

“Never would really admit it but she had opinions about them, and there’s rumors of something peculiar about the O’Mally side of the family.”

“Yeah,” he said, “Well, I don’t believe in Leprechauns!”

That startled me. I’d been getting all of the signs that this guy had seen a Leprechaun.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Ah, you don’t want to know.”

I went back to polishing tables and after a few minutes, he said, “See, I missed my connection in Denver, is what happened.”

“Where were you headed?”

“San Antonio.”

“Shit. How’d you end up here?”

“I got on one of those little locals. Two engines. Propellers. Noisy. Stunk. Came through El Paso, then developed engine problems. Had to land at Alpine. Probably still there, waitin’ for parts. Never even heard of the place before. Caught a bus from there to San Antonio, got off here at that little motel, Cooper’s, where the bus stops. To use the John. She didn’t have a public restroom, had to go to the gas station next door.”

That’d be Rascal’s Gas, I said to myself.

“Missed the bus when it left. Next one won’t be ‘til tomorrow morning.”

“How’d you miss the bus?”

He looked stressed and I knew that I was on the right track.

“I was at the urinal,” he said, “and I just happened to look to my right as this little guy came out of the stall. Had a green Robin Hood suit and pointed ears. You know.”

“A leprechaun?”

“Well, I — naw. Well anyway, the little guy looked up and saw me lookin’ at him and said I’d caught him, fair and square. Damn! I wasn’t tryin’ ta catch anybody.”

“He said you caught him?”

“Yeah, with a phoney little accent. ‘Ai, and there ye caught me, that ye did!’ ”

“What’d you do?”

“I kept pissin’ and said, ‘Huh?’ ”

“He said, ‘Ye got me fair an’ square, ye did! An’ that means ya get three wishes!’ ”

“I guess I was kinda tired. I just said, ‘Huh?’ again.”

“And that’s when he said he was a Leprechaun. ‘Ye caught yer Leprechaun, mon,’ he said, ‘yer Leprechaun! an’ that get’s ya three wishes, an’ I’m bound ta grant ‘em, or I can’t leave! Ya got me fair an’ square, mon!’ ”

“Pardon me asking,” I interrupted, “but you didn’t happen to be rubbing anything, did you?”

Jake looked startled.

“I mean like porcelain jars or whisky bottles!” I added hastily, blushing. I don’t usually slip up like that with a customer.

He looked uncertain. I smiled sheepishly and backed off a couple of steps. “Sorry,” I said. “It’s a long story. Several, in fact.”

“Well anyway,” Jake continued, “this guy said I got three wishes and I told him nuts or bullshit or some such thing and headed for the door.”

“But you didn’t actually leave?”

“Not likely! He wanted to know if three wishes wasn’t enough and I stopped and said ‘three’s plenty, but shit! Ya take me for some kinda yokel? Nobody grants wishes!’ ”

“ ‘I can, me mon! I can!’ ”

“I told him I didn’t think so.”

“He said it was a bit o’ tha Leprechaun’s Magic an’ a Leprechaun’s own sweet secret! He told me to just make the wishes and leave the grantin’ em ta him.”

“I snorted something and turned to leave and he told me I’d never get a second chance.”

## The Barn Grill: Tales From All Over

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“Well shit! I didn’t believe a word of it but I couldn’t see any harm in wishing. It’d been a terrible day. I’d missed an important meeting with Pierce, Imerson, Stacy, Sloan, & Taylor, probably lost the contract, so I turned back and made a wish. ‘O.K.’ I challenged him, ‘I wish I had a hundred million dollars.’”

“‘Granted!’ said the Leprechaun.”

“So I asked him where the hell it was, anyway, and he said that it was in my savings account at the Frost National Bank, in San Antonio. ‘An’ where else,’ he wanted to know, ‘would I be aputtin’ it?’ Same phoney accent.”

“It did set me back a little, because how did he know I used Frost National Bank? In San Antonio? I guess I still didn’t look convinced, because he suggested that I check the account first thing in tha mornin”.

“I had a sudden thought, and asked, ‘But what about taxes?’ ”

“Ah,’ he replied with a knowing nod of his head and a wink of his eye, ‘As far as anybody knows, that money accrued from the Bradley contract, five years ago, when ya opened tha account and ye’ll have already paid the taxes on it.’ And, he added that the IRS was no match ‘fer a little o’ tha Leprechaun’s Magic.”

“I thought that was very clever and I think that’s when I started gettin’ sucked into the scam. I was tired, not thinking, and besides, he seemed to know an awful lot about me. That Bradley deal was confidential! How’d he know about that? I don’t know. Boy do I feel dumb!”

Jake seemed to have run down a little so I got him another martini and sat down in the booth across the aisle.

“So then what happened?”

“He asked me for my next wish.”

“And you made another wish?”

“Yeah. I told him it would be nice to own a Rolls Royce.”

“‘Granted!’ he said again.”

“So I asked him where it was and he said that when I got home I’d find that Highland Hills had acquired a vintage Silver Shadow in new condition.”

I interrupted him again. “What’s Highland Hills?” I asked.

“I live in Highland Hills,” replied Jake. “Nice area, north side of town.”

“How do you reckon he knew that?” I asked.

Jake said, “I don’t know. Maybe the same way he knew about the Bradley contract. Maybe it was a lucky guess.”

“Sure,” was all I said, but I’m not the skeptic that I used to be. This was beginning to sound too much like some other stories that I’d heard. “So that was it with the second wish?”

“Except that I asked him about the keys.”

“What about the keys?”

“I asked him if they were in the car and he said of course not. Somebody’d steal the car. He said they were hanging on the key peg over my desk! How’d he know I had a key peg over my desk?”

“Probably just a little more a tha Leprechaun’s Magic,” I told him, but I’m not sure if he was listening.

“So then he asked me to make my last wish and I was really getting flummoxed! I asked him if he could make my wife look like she did when I married her.”

“He gave me a lecherous wink and made some comment about ‘achangin’ tha 40’s fer the 20’s’, and I said that if it wasn’t too much trouble that’s what I wanted.”

“ ‘Ah!’ he chirped, ‘Nothin’s too much trouble fer the Leprechaun’s Magic! Yer wish is granted!’ ”

“I tried to ask just exactly what he’d granted but I didn’t know quite how to ask. No problem. He knew what I meant.”

“ ‘She not only looks like she did when ya married her, but da ya remember those nights at the cabin in Colorado, those — ’ ”

“ ‘Say no more!’ I interrupted, ‘I’m convinced! What can I ever do to repay you?’ That’s where I made my big mistake. The Leprechaun looked embarrassed and agreed that there was one little thing I could ‘be adoin’ fer ‘im. ”

“I told him ‘anything, just ask.’ Jesus, what a jerk!”

“The Leprechaun?”

“No! Me! Offering to do anything! Dumb-ass! So he claimed that being a Leprechaun, and always hidin’, always bein’ afraid a gettin’ caught and grantin’ wishes, well, he said Leprechauns didn’t get around much, and these days they had a pretty poor sex life. An’ he’d just been thinkin’ that if I could just sorta drop my pants—”

“That’s what he said?”

“Yeah, that’s what he said, an’ then bend over an’ let him have his way with me — ”

“He really said that?”

“Yeah. The little jerk! I told him no way! and he said, ‘Well mon, I mean I’d never ask, except ya did offer ta repay me.’ ”

“Ya, but I didn’t mean that, an’ I told him so. He looked like he’d lost his last friend, and headed for the door. Said he’d just be on his way.”

“Well shit! He looked so hurt I felt like a heel, after he granted all my wishes. I told him I was really sorry, but it’s just, you know, well I’ve been around as much as the next guy. I mean, I’m not, well, but, it’s just, you know, painful! And that’s what I told him.” Jake actually blushed at the memory.

“So he told me not to worry. Said I was forgetting the Leprechaun’s Magic. Told me it wouldn’t hurt at all.”

## The Barn Grill: Tales From All Over

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“Well, hell! He had me believing everything he said by then! Nobody **knew** about that Bradley contract! Me and Sarah never **told** anybody we’d been to Colorado! We weren’t even married yet at the time! ‘Why, ye’ll hardly even know I’m there!’ he said! An another thing he told me. Leprechauns are a lot faster than people! ‘It’ll be over in a twinklin!’ he said!”

“So, what the hell! I told him to go ahead.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.” Jake looked completely abashed.

“You dropped your pants?”

“Yeah.” Jake squirmed a little.

“You bent over?”

“Yes, dammit!” Jake’s face was bright red.

“So what’d he do?”

“So what tha hell do you think he did! An’ if there was any goddam magic involved, I sure as hell couldn’t feel it! Shit!”

“Well, was he faster than a -” I started to say a speeding bullet, but thought better of it, “than a person?”

Jake grinned a very evil grin at me and said, “You still haven’t figured it out yet, have you. Well, don’t feel bad. I didn’t either and I was there! Dumb-ass! God damned stupid dumb-ass!”

“He lied about how it’d feel?”

“Oh Jesus!” Jake muttered. “O.K. Here’s how it went. I hung onto the God damned pipes as long as I could and when I’d about had it,” Jake paused and grimaced, “No pun intended, I assure you, I was about to turn around and kick his little ass, when he stopped and asked me my age!”

“Your age?” I’m afraid I was a little bit lost at this point. I hadn’t figured out just where this story was supposed to be going and Jake’s age didn’t make any more sense than the rest of it.

“Ya! I can still hear him. ‘Ah, mon, if I didn’t be afergittin’ ta ask ya yer age! Phony accent and all!”

“So what’d you tell him?”

“Well, crap! I could hardly talk but I told him my goddam age!”

“How old are you?”

Jake snarled, “What tha hell difference does it make!”

“Sorry. So what’d he do then?”

“He jumped off and headed for the door, zippin’ up his pants on the way. This is the part that’s really great. Do you know what he said on the way out the door? He laughed and said, ‘An’ at that age yer still abelivin’ in leprechauns, are ya?’”

Well, this ending was so unexpected, that I laughed before I could stop myself. I shouldn’t have, but I did. I immediately apologized, but Jake wasn’t in a very good mood. He pitched some cash on the table and left before I could even make change.

The next day, I checked with Debbie, at Cooper’s Little Bend, the motel where the Greyhound stops. She confirmed that some guy named Jake had spent the night there and caught the eastbound bus that morning. I expected that to be the end of the story, but there were a couple of footnotes.

About six months later, I had be out of town one evening so the Barn was closed. The next day, Debbie dropped by to deliver a message. A rather wealthy middle-aged businessman named Jake, and his young wife Sarah, had stayed overnight at the Little Bend on their way to Colorado, to a mountain retreat they’d recently bought. Debbie wasn’t sure who they were but the man seemed to know me and said that he owed me an answer. He’d made a special detour here just to tell me, then headed north.

“What’s the answer,” I asked.

“Fifty-two,” she replied.

“That’s all? Did he say what the question was?”

“Yup,” she said, “His age.”

Debbie had a motel to run and couldn’t hang around to chat.

Later that day, Phil, came in. He runs the pumps over at Rascal’s Gas, on the other side of Debbie’s motel. I waited until I could catch him alone and asked him if he’d gassed any unusual cars recently.

“Yeah!” He was ecstatic. “A Silver Shadow! An honest to God Silver Shadow.”

“You’re this excited about pumping gas into a car?”

Phil glanced around with an air of conspiratorial confidentiality. “Not just pumping gas,” he whispered in a pleased tone of voice. “That old man what owns the Shadow? His wife can’t be a day over 20. Energetic young thing she is, and cute as a bug’s ear. He can’t keep up with her, I guess. She snuck out of Debbie’s after the old man was asleep last night, and visited me. Just about closin’ time. I keep a mattress in the back room, fer the occasional nap. She couldn’t stay long, but my-oh-my!” he said, and smacked his lips. I went back to polishing glasses and Phil sat sipping Bud with a dreamy look on his face.

Nowadays, I don’t spend a lot of extra time in the John. I go in, I take care of business, and I don’t look around a lot. You never know who else, or what else, might be using the facilities. Especially around St. Patrick’s Day.

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### Two Big Boobs

As retold by Sam Aurelius Milam III

Debbie Cooper showed up in town late in December of 1971. She used to be a “stunt man” in Hollywood, specializing in things like jumping off of high places, parachuting, that sort of thing. She was a little larger than average and often did stunts for men. Debbie and I go back a long way together. I don’t want to say that she had anything to do with my divorce from Beth, so I won’t say it.

She eventually got tired of Hollywood and conveniently inherited a lot of money, just in time. She bailed out one last time and that time it was out of California. She went to Alpine, did a little research with a real estate agent there, and ended up here. She bought several pieces of local real estate. One of them was the old wheezing Lazy 8 Motel. She renovated the place at great expense and still operates it. She calls it Cooper’s Little Bend and gets a lot of fall-out business from Big Bend, which is only about 50 or 60 miles to the south of here, just around the corner in Marathon and down Highway 385.

She also bought an enormous piece of land adjacent to the old motel. It was several thousand acres and extends south of the highway toward the Woods Hollow Mountains. On her property at the highway, right beside her motel, was a broken down farm. She leveled part of the farm and turned it into a parking lot and swimming pool for the motel. Another part she sold to me, barn and all. The bulk of the land has lain fallow for all of these years. It’s slowly reverting to a little piece of wilderness. I converted the barn into a bar and grill, which I called the Barn Grill and which I still operate. I get a lot of fall-out business from Debbie’s motel which is only about 50 yards to the east of here.

One evening about 6 o’clock, just before Molly arrived, some unusual people walked over from the motel: a woman and two men. I might not have noticed either one of them alone. As individuals, they weren’t all that unusual. It was the three of them together that were unusual. The woman was rather plain, and (if I may say so) somewhat flat-chested. I hasten to assure you that I wouldn’t ever notice such a thing by itself. I appreciate a woman for her mind.

The two men were identical except that one was a little bigger than the other. Their real distinguishing feature, though, was that they looked stupid. Also, they were big, I’d say about 6 feet, and close to 300 pounds. Each.

Entering the door, one of them stumbled and fell flat on his face. Neither his twin nor the woman paid any attention. He picked himself up and followed them to a table, as if that sort of thing happened all the time. I walked over to their table to take their orders.

I don’t get many orders for strawberry shakes but, after all, this is somewhat of a family establishment. There’s a few places in Marathon that stay open evenings but that’s a few miles along Highway 90, west of here. The only other local place is Bob’s Restaurant. After he closes at 8 o’clock every evening, the Barn is the only place this side of Marathon that you can buy a meal. Also, I feed a lot of Debbie’s customers ’cause she doesn’t run a restaurant at the Little Bend. Anyway, this

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place is almost as much of a restaurant as it is a bar. Strawberry shakes weren't completely beyond my resources.

Strawberry shakes for the big guys and a strawberry daiquiri for the lady. I kept my thoughts to myself and brought them their drinks. She sipped her daiquiri and they attacked their shakes. Pretty soon they wanted hamburgers but by then Molly had arrived so I let her handle them.

The place filled up and the big guys retired to the pinball machines at the far end of the Barn. I keep the pinball machines way down there, at the opposite end from the jukebox, so they don't disturb the card game. Sid and Ernie are serious card players and the pinball machines annoy them. Joe was the only one who grumbled when I moved them because they were his main excuse for losing.

Anyway, the two big guys spent most of the evening playing pinball. The lady spent most of the evening sipping strawberry daiquiris. Molly spent most of the evening making change for the big guys and mixing strawberry daiquiris. It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it.

By the time that the evening was over, I could see that Molly had accumulated a story to tell me, that she wasn't entirely happy with it, and that she wasn't sure she believed it. That's kind of normal for the stories we get in this place but Molly seemed perturbed and the stories told here don't usually perturb her.

After we'd chased out the last customer, tidied up, and I was dealing with the cash register, Molly sat on a bar-stool and waited for me to finish counting.

"OK," I said, "Let's hear it."

"You won't believe it," she warned.

"I don't believe half of what I hear in this place." Of course, that wasn't necessarily true.

"Well, here goes," she said. "The lady's name is Dorothy, but she calls herself Dee."

"And the big guys?" I asked.

"She calls them Tweedledum and Tweedledummer."

At that, I had to laugh. "To their faces?"

"Yup," stated Molly. "To their faces."

"What's the deal? She ain't old enough to be their mother."

Molly hesitated, unsure how to proceed.

"She isn't exactly related to them at all, at least not in the normal way."

I just waited.

"She's in her 30's now and she's had them since she was 16 years old."

"Surely she didn't adopt them."

"No."

“Well, where’d they come from?”

“That’s the peculiar part. I’m not sure the lady’s telling the truth.”

I could see that there wasn’t any way to hurry this so I pulled my three-legged stool over and sat down.

“You may have noticed,” said Molly, “that Dee wasn’t, well, not real well built, as they say.”

Amazing. All these years of working together in a bar and Molly’s still bashful around me. I don’t get it.

“Anyway,” she continued, “By the time she was 16, it was clear that she wasn’t, uh, developing normally. Her family didn’t have much money, and 5 kids. Worrying about her, uh, breasts,” amazingly, Molly blushed, “wasn’t really in the priorities.”

Outside, a coyote yipped. A winter storm was blowing in, and Molly shivered.

“Cold?”

“Scared,” she replied.

“Of what?” I asked.

“I don’t know. It’s just that the world seems awfully strange.”

I smiled, trying to comfort her. “It always has been,” I said, but I couldn’t ignore the little chill that ran around on my own back. There just seemed to be something in the air that evening.

“Anyway,” I asked, “Did we just change the subject?”

“Not really,” she answered, “I was just thinking about her two boobs.”

“You were what!?” I asked.

“No, uh —” and this time she really blushed.

“It’s just that you haven’t heard the whole story yet.”

“Well, get on with it. I’m all ears.”

Molly actually jumped. “Please, Sam! Don’t say things like that! You scare me!”

“Jesus, Molly — ”

I stopped, because of the look of pleading and fear on her face.

“OK, I’ll try to be quiet until I hear this. Please, do proceed.”

“OK,” she continued with a quiver in her voice.

“It was her sixteenth birthday party. Some of her friends gave her the party, they hired one of those pizza places that does that sort of thing. They had a birthday cake, a band playing 16 candles, the whole nine yards.”

Molly stopped and looked uneasy, very unusual for Molly. I was beginning to wonder if, after all of these years, I really knew the lady.

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“Anyway, she made a wish and blew out the candles. That’s when she got those two guys.”

“They were at the party?”

“Not at first.”

“Party crashers?”

“Sam, you’re not going to believe this and you’re gonna think I’m a complete ninny, gettin’ so worked up over it.”

I said nothing.

“Well, what she wished for was to have two big boobs. What she got was —”

I laughed before I could stop myself and Molly got up and headed for the door. I leaped the bar and got there first.

“I’m sorry, Molly, really. I don’t mean to laugh at you,” then I couldn’t quite suppress another laugh, just a small one.

Molly was in a most perplexed mood.

“It’s just so God damned stupid!” she said. “Before I came to this crazy bar I’d have thought the woman was crazy, but the stuff that I’ve seen here,” she swept her arm around at the Barn, “I’m not sure what to believe anymore. And that makes me wonder if I’m crazy.”

“Take it easy, Molly, it’s a weird world.”

“Yeah, Sam, but not that weird. The woman wished for boobs and got those two guys.”

“Well after all, they are kind of stupid —”

“That wasn’t what she meant!” Molly was really upset by this.

“Well, yeah, Molly. I know. Remember Burt, and — ”

“Yeah, Burt and his little head. I remember all of those things. That’s what worries me. That’s why I panicked when you said you were all ears. I had this instant horrible vision of two big ears of corn talking to me!”

I laughed again and this time she laughed halfheartedly herself. She didn’t have anything more to say, so I let her out and went to sit behind the bar for a while. During our conversation the storm had arrived and outside the rain had started beating against the windows.

Two big boobs. Shit. What a dirty break for a young girl worried about her sexuality. I know enough about this kind of thing to imagine her efforts to get rid of them. I remember Marvin Snell and his 12 inch prick. He couldn’t get rid of it no matter what he tried. Molly was right. Something strange was changing in the world and I’d have to be more careful what I said in the future. I’d never heard of a genie living in a birthday cake but the birthday wish superstition had to have come from somewhere. If a God damned genie — oops, lets just say a genie, OK? If a genie

could live in a birthday cake, then you might find one anywhere. I looked around my establishment and shivered.

I'd never been spooked in the Barn before but, as I said, there just seemed to be something in the air that night. First I noticed the lights on the pinball machines, off to my right, where the boobs had played all evening. Then I noticed how dark it was up in the dark end. The wall behind me was just filled with bottles. I whistled a little louder than was necessary while I locked the place, and drove home.

Molly's right. There's a lot of weird stuff happening. But what Molly hasn't noticed is that the weirdness isn't apparent anywhere else except in the Barn. Does that mean the Barn is the only normal place left, so that we notice the weird stuff? Or does it mean the Barn is the only place weird enough for us to notice that it's weird? It's a mystery to me.

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## Night Watch

Original fiction by Sam Aurelius Milam III

I've heard a lot of weird stories told in the Barn and I can remember when they used to be funny. Of course, they were never funny to the people who were directly involved in them but at least they were funny to those of us who were merely the observers. Lately though, something's changed. I can't recall any recent weird stories that were funny. Yeah, people still tell jokes but the peculiar stories that seem to characterize the Barn have lost their humor. Thinking about it, I'd guess that the change was gradual but it seems to have happened along about the time that Molly told me the story about Dorothy and her two big boobs, or maybe it was Big Al and the witch. Somewhere along in there. I don't know for sure. Anyway, since then the stories are of a different sort. I have an example.

Molly and I were tending a few stray customers one evening before the usual crowd arrived. Ben Ferguson was at their usual table but Mary hadn't showed up yet. Joe, Sid, and Ernie hadn't arrived yet, so Ed was playing Solitaire. I was polishing glasses and hoping that nothing would pop out of them. I looked around, glancing over my shoulder, and just about then a fugitive walked in. Well, I didn't really know that he was a fugitive but he looked like he was running from something. Right away, I was wary. Guys like that used to be the life-blood of my hopes to be a writer. Most of my best stories came from haunted people but lately I've been getting kind of spooked. Anyway, this guy walked over to the bar like he wasn't sure if he could trust the bar stool. He sat down carefully and looked nervously over his shoulder at the window. It was still light outside.

"What'll it be?" I asked.

"Wadaya got?" he asked with a frown.

Well," I said, remembering that we had to finish the rest of our current batch of ground beef before it expired, "Our hamburgers are good."

"Fine." he said. "Hamburger. All tha trimmin's."

I turned toward the grill but Molly was already there. She'd decided right away that this guy was my customer, and I got the signal. Molly and me have been working together long enough that I always get the signals.

I turned back to the fugitive and said, "Hi. I'm Sam".

"Farley," he replied and stuck out his hand. When we shook, his palm was sweaty and he seemed to be trembling.

Molly went to work at the grill while I got him his napkin and utensils. He said he wanted a beer and I got him one.

When Molly had his meal done, she sat it on the counter beside the grill and I picked it up and brought it to him. She didn't even want to come close to him. She's been spooked ever since that visit by Dee and her too big boobs.

Farley picked up his fork like he was afraid of it and started working on the French fries. He used a lot of ketchup.

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I drifted around rearranging things, staying just close enough so that he could talk to me if he wanted to. It worked. After a little hesitation, he asked, “How far east is it before the highway branches away from the railroad?”

“Off and on,” I said, “and if you’re talking about the old highway, they run together most of the way to Jacksonville.”

“Florida?!” he asked, incredulous.

“Yup,” I replied.

“Shit,” he said. “I guess I’ll go north instead o’ east.”

I knew there was a story here, Once upon a time, I’d have been eager to hear it. These days, I’m not so sure anymore. Anyway, old habits are hard to break so I went for the story.

“So you don’t like the railroad?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “It ain’t so much the railroad. It’s just — well, sort of, memories. Makes me nervous.”

“The memories or the railroad?” I asked.

“What?”

“Which makes you nervous? The memories or the railroad?”

“Oh, both, I guess.”

I finished refilling the napkin container near him and walked over to the next one. I was still within range but making as if I was drifting away. It almost always works. If the story teller thinks he’s about to lose his audience, he continues.

“It was”, he continued, “something that happened on the railroad a couple of weeks ago.”

“You ride the train a lot?”

“No. Well, not as a passenger, I mean. Up ’til then, I drove fer a little branch line in Oregon. The ol’ girl was a beat up ol’ F9.”

“F9?”

“EMD,” he said.

“Oh,” I replied, acting as if that explained everything.

“Anyway, tha line went up through the hills into a big valley in the mountains. I hauled farm equipment up and crops out.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Well,” he replied, “it was kinda irregular. Depended on when somebody ordered a new tractor or harvested something.”

About then Joe, Sid, and Ernie arrived. Molly was making a salad for Mary Ferguson, who'd come in about 5 minutes earlier, so I took the beer to the card table.

When I got back to Farley, he was concentrating on his hamburger so I prompted him.

"I'm surprised the railroad would provide service under those conditions."

"They didn't," said Farley around a mouthful. "UP unloaded that line years ago. Farmers in tha valley got together and bought it, so they could keep it runnin'. 'cept for a dirt road it's tha only way in or out. They hired me ta drive whenever they was a run ta be made. Other times, I'm a hired hand. Was a hired hand."

"Not any more?"

"I'm sorta between jobs."

"You could probably find something here."

"Too close to the railroad."

"Oh, yeah. You don't like the railroad. So, what happened?"

I don't like to be that direct, but this guy seemed like he was going to yak forever and never tell me his story.

"Well," he said, "I was late startin' up tha hill one evening. Coupla weeks ago. Left right after that. Ain't been back."

He stopped again, so I had to prompt him. "They fired you for being late?"

"Hell no. Wasn't my fault. UP was late gettin to tha main yard and I had to wait for a flatcar. New combines for one o' them big farmers. Anyways, I headed up tha hill about 4:30. Knew it'd be dark 'fore I got ta tha valley, but what the heck. Tha ol' girl had a good headlight, beat up as she was. Woulda been fine except for the tree."

"Tree?" I asked.

"Yup. Right acrost the tracks, it was. Not really all that unusual. Some pretty thick woods in places along there an' sometimes a tree goes over. I always kept some tools in the cab. Chain saw, reg'lar saw, bow saw, axe, that sort of thing. Well, there this tree was, right acrost tha track, must have been over 18 inches through. Big 'un. I stopped tha ol' girl about 20 yards back and got to work."

A few more people arrived and I went to take orders. When I got back, Farley was done eating and looked like he was ready to leave.

"Pie?" I asked.

"Well," he hesitated.

I wanted to hear the end of his story.

"On the house," I offered.

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“Chocolate?” he asked.

“You’re on!”

I set an overly large slice of chocolate pie in front of him, pulled my three-legged stool up to my side of the bar, and sat down.

“So,” he said between bites, “I went to work on that tree, with the old girl idling on tha rails behind me. I cut limbs and branches like Wild Man Yakowitz for a while, ’til I got down ta tha trunk then I went ta work on that. After about an hour I was partway through the trunk. We was right at an edge, overlookin’ the creek way down below and I figgered I’d save myself some haulin by cuttin’ tha trunk on tha other side of the tracks. I figgered that tha weight o’ tha tree hangin’ over tha edge would pull the whole blamed thing over tha edge an’ I wouldn’t have ta haul the big pieces outa tha way.”

“Did it work?”

“Yup, but not right away. Like I said, I worked like a crazy man for about an hour, an’ then I needed a breather. I walked over to a power pole, one o’ them big cross-country power line things, just slightly up the hill from the track, an’ sat on the cross-bar at tha bottom of the tower. I can still remember how cold tha iron felt through my sweaty clothes. I sat on the cross-bar and leaned against the corner post of the thing, listenin’ to the hum from the wires overhead. I could even feel ’em vibratin’ in tha cross-bar. Tha pole was far enough up tha hill that I was out of the beam of the ol’ girl’s headlight and I was facin’ kinda off to tha right, so while I was restin’, my eyes kinda adjusted to tha dark. I musta sat there for about 20 minutes an’ after a while I could see the red glow on the trees where the big red light on top of tha thing blinked on and off.”

Farley shivered, and glanced fearfully out the window again. It was getting dark outside. None of this made any sense yet but my experience was that these stories always went somewhere, even if it didn’t seem like it along the way. Anyway, he was finally on a roll so I decided to just wait and let him tell his story.

“So,” he hesitated nervously and cleared his throat, “well, anyway, I went back and finished sawin’ through tha trunk. When I got about through, she gave a big crack an’ I jumped back outa tha way. She eased right over tha edge, just like I wanted. I had a bad second when a stub o’ branch snagged on tha rail, but it lifted off without no damage. I hauled my tools back into tha cab an’ headed tha ol’ girl on up tha line.”

Farley hesitated again and looked at me like he was trying to decide something. He seemed to be getting more agitated as the story progressed. I tried to look neutral. Sometimes if you act too much like you “understand”, then they decide that you’re patronizing them and you don’t get the rest of the story. Neutral seems to work best.

“Well,” he continued nervously, “I was about five more miles up tha track before it hit me.”

He stopped talking and stared at what was left of his pie.

I prompted him. “What hit you?”

“Well, I didn’t want ta believe it, an’ I guess you won’t either, anyway I knew I had ta be wrong so I waited until the next day when I ran tha ol’ girl back down ta tha yards, an’ checked on it on tha way by. Sure enough, there it was, the cut off tree stump, roots still pulled over sideways where it’d come partway out of the ground. Branches just where I left ‘em. Ever thing just like I left ‘em. Except — ”

Farley still wasn’t sure about me. I just waited. He looked over his shoulder at the window again. It was just about dark outside. Farley looked like he was near to panic.

“Well, it’s like this,” he said, reaching in his pocket. He took out a twenty and slapped it onto the bar with the flat of his hand and stood up. He seemed suddenly angry.

“Ever blamed thing was still there by the track just like I left it, except for tha damned power pole.”

“The power pole?” I asked, suddenly puzzled. Had he somehow cut down a high-voltage power pole and not noticed?

“Yeah! The damned power pole!” he said, clearly losing control, his voice quivering. Suddenly, the Barn was quiet. Everybody had turned to watch Farley.

“Here’s the damned problem! There ain’t no God damned power poles on that blamed route! Not nowhere on it! Never has been! Never will be! I knew it all along! I traveled that line a hundred times! There ain’t no God damned power poles!”

“But — ” I hesitated.

“So what tha Hell did I sit on!?”

He stormed out into the night. I hurried to the cash register, grabbed the change for his twenty, and ran out to catch him. But for that, I’d probably never have noticed the discrepancy and the story would have ended there. I wish it had.

The Barn Grill sits about 25 yards back from the highway, with a gravel area between the highway and the sidewalk in front of the building. Parking is “head in” at the curb along the sidewalk. I remembered that when Farley’d arrived, he’d parked near the west end of our curb. That’s to my left as I face out the door, since we’re on the south side of the highway, facing north. The problem was that when he ran for his car, he went to the right. By the time that I got out the door, he was already spinning his tires in the gravel and he didn’t slow down. He hit the highway accelerating and kept going. East.

I wasn’t sure what to do and, after discussing it with Molly and of course getting unsolicited opinions from all of the customers, I decided to call the sheriff. They sent Deputy Brady. He usually gets to deal with me on those rare occasions when I feel the need to report something. I guess he’s more used to my stories than the

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other officers. He listened with his usual stoic skepticism and called in an edited version of my story. They ran the plates on the car that Farley had arrived in and, sure enough, it's his car. Nobody has claimed it. The car that he left in looked a lot like it, as near as I could tell in the dark. Nobody has reported a stolen car. Nobody has found the mystery car and nobody has reported a sighting of Farley. He's been officially missing ever since.

Nowadays, I have a reserved parking space at the Barn, and I use it. Other places, I'm very careful to remember where I parked my car and I don't get into it until I'm sure that it's mine. I count the telephone poles outside of the Barn every night before I leave and I pay attention to the big power lines that run across the landscape. I want to know where they are. More important, I want to know where they're not. I try not to slow down when I drive past them at night, especially if I'm not sure that I've seen them there in the daylight. And if I ever encounter a tree across a road at night I'll be damned if I'll stop to investigate. I'll just do the quickest U-turn that I can do and not look back.

Hell. I'm not sure if I even trust my own bar stools anymore.