

(Free Excerpt)

MISS  
ALICE MERRIWETHER'S  
LONG LOST CAKES

&

Further Arcane Inducements to Wonder

Barry Aitchison



velluminous

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## **Author's Note**

The events in this story are entirely made up. I have it on good authority that no town in the Midwest of the USA has ever completely disappeared, at least not in one go. No, the events herein are but a good-natured look at the Midwest through the eyes of an odd Australian who has thoroughly enjoyed his visits there and loves the stereotypes of Midwest towns. However, if the characters depicted seem just a little familiar to some, maybe it isn't entirely coincidental.

For Braedon Ian Wadams



# Chapter One

There was always something quite odd about Quentin C. Coriander. For one thing, no one in Parcival could ever remember seeing him arrive. One day the house was empty, bare as winter trees, and the next morning there was Quentin settled comfortably on the porch, reading the *Parcival Post* or doing the crossword as if he'd been living there for years. From then on, the townsfolk would nod at Quentin as they passed, and receive a cursory nod in return. It never evolved beyond that. Quentin never invited conversation.

The town of Parcival was a hamlet of no importance, noteworthy only for having no fame whatsoever. Of course, the people of Parcival would never settle for that. They would usually point to some obscure event in the Civil War, conveniently forgetting it had been proven erroneous over a hundred years before. Still, as much as the townsfolk wished it otherwise, Parcival was a very ordinary place.

As a town, it was hardly unique. There were thousands of similar settlements all over America, and they fed the big cities their most valuable crop—their children. It was a process that saw the average age of townsfolk gradually increase as young people moved away for an education or more challenging employment. That, too, was far from unusual, but at least Parcival's ordinariness came on a grand scale.

Quentin, on the other hand, was as far from ordinary as a person can get. He had a shock of red hair with a will of its own that rose from his scalp in determined tufts. He reminded many people of an insect with his long legs and bone-thin arms and elongated face. When he sat hunched in the low cane chair on his porch, with his knees bent up higher than knees had a right to be, and his head poised as if ready to strike at the crossword in his lap, he seemed even more insect-like—and the nickname 'Mantis' stuck. On the odd occasions when he'd venture beyond his front porch, people would often huddle together and whisper,

though the local youngsters decided very early that Quentin was not a person to make fun of. In their childish way, they sensed something abnormal and kept their distance.



Alice Merriwether was a spinster—a condition with which she had never come to terms. Jilted in her late teens, she'd been clumsily rejected by several eligible bachelors since. Now approaching forty, she kept a keen eye on Quentin as a means of getting what she'd wanted for so long.

No one in *Parcival* would have called Alice a beacon of beauty or glamour, but they would surely have acknowledged her other talents. She had a fine mezzo-soprano voice and sang in the Church of Jesus in America choir most Sundays. She was well read in the field of American poetry, particularly Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath. Her greatest talent, however, was with the culinary arts, creating fine cakes that men might kill for.

The opening skirmish of Alice's meticulously planned campaign took place on a Monday. She mounted her attack by means of a Trojan horse: a Sunshine-with-Passion Cake of enormous proportions, sculpted in a style that would surely have elicited the envy of Michelangelo. Quentin failed to answer her first knock, but Alice was nothing if not persistent and eventually he opened the door to peer out myopically. Her gift seemed to confuse him: he took it, but instead of inviting her in, he just mumbled a few words that she couldn't make out, and then abruptly closed the door. Never one for despondency, Alice considered she had just won a minor victory. Coriander had accepted her offering, and there was no disputing how memorable—and addictive—her Sunshine-with-Passion Cakes were.

She began planning the wedding.



Alexander Pumpernickel hated election years. They meant putting himself up again for sheriff, and being nice to people. Being nice did not come easy to Pumpernickel: he had a distinct

aversion to nice. Elections also meant trying to make himself appear indispensable to the community. It wasn't easy to do that in a town where nothing much ever happened.

Pumpnickel came from a line of local lawmen who had stood guard over Parcival for over a century. Like his kin before him, he was tall—six foot three to be exact. Strongly built with wide shoulders and narrow hips, he looked like he'd walked straight out of a poster for the Old West—even down to the stride that suggested he'd been born on a horse, instead of actually being a little nervous around them. Pumpnickel was not one for hobbies or unnecessary skills. He took his law and order seriously and they kept him fully occupied. The fact that nothing much happened in Parcival never diverted him for one minute from the important work of keeping the peace.

In every election since '78, Sheriff Pumpnickel had run on a ticket with Mayor Fortescue Glastonbury. This year, Glastonbury was not running, having decided to retire and relocate to San Francisco. The mayor put it around that he was going to care for his sick sister, but that was a lame excuse as far as Pumpnickel was concerned. There was only one reason for anyone to move to San Francisco, and it had nothing to do with any sister, or with any woman at all for that matter.

All of which raised a considerable problem for Alexander Pumpnickel. People were already whispering about Mayor Glastonbury absconding to 'Frisco, and more than a few of them had reached similar conclusions. It was only logical for them to ask why the sheriff was still single at the age of fifty-two, and why he had run on a tandem ticket with Glastonbury all these years. It was a concern very much active in the recesses of Pumpnickel's mind.

Every morning between the hours of ten and twelve, he would ride around town in his official sheriff's cruiser (purchased some five years before from the A&V Law Enforcement Materials Department over in Constantinople). The cruiser carried a prominent sign on the roof, 'Re-elect Sheriff Pumpnickel'. Pumpnickel was no risk taker. He knew the townsfolk were unlikely to

even think about electing anyone else, but he also knew that one should never be too confident.

On this particular Monday morning, at around eleven o'clock, Pumpernickel was making the rounds on George W. Bush Drive when he saw Alice Merriwether opening Quentin Coriander's front gate, carrying what looked like a sweet piece of heaven on a platter. Pumpernickel had often been a target of Alice's affections and had sampled many a cake from her kitchen. He missed those cakes. He missed them as strongly as he didn't miss Alice's other attentions. Putting the megaphone down, he watched from up the street. He observed Quentin poking his peculiar head out, seizing the cake, and then slamming the door in poor Alice's face.

Pumpernickel immediately began fantasizing over those cakes again. He could taste that Sunshine-with-Passion Cake almost enough to crunch down on a phantom passion fruit seed. He remembered how agreeable the cheesecakes had been; how fine the fruit and brandy cakes; how superbly light were her sponges; how heavenly her shortbreads and her double layered cream cakes with strawberry jam.

If only Alice Merriwether herself had been just a little more presentable. It wasn't so much the halitosis that made him woozy every time he had to smile as he reached for a piece of cake. He could have even brought himself to overlook the excess facial hair. It wasn't even that she had so little in the way of feminine charms—hardly any breasts to speak off, and no hips whatsoever. He would have accepted any or all of these impediments for the daily chance to sample those cakes. He would have even resigned himself to the idea of future progeny, as ugly as that thought might be.

No, the main thing that put Sheriff Alexander Pumpernickel off Alice Merriwether was her bossiness. He also harbored a nagging suspicion that the woman was...intelligent.

Any woman with brains was a risky proposition as far as Pumpernickel was concerned; he'd discovered that particular lesson a long time before. For one thing, smart women had

a habit of arguing with their men folk. They always knew best about everything and embarrassed you right in front of the voters. They were always sticking their sticky noses in where they didn't belong.

And what was more, they were invariably lousy in bed.

For the record, that last fact was nowhere near the bottom of Pumpernickel's list, which goes some way to explaining why Alice's bossiness and intelligence were of considerable concern to the sheriff.

One fact that Pumpernickel failed to apprehend was that no one else shared his opinion of Alice's intellect. Most people would have been more likely to observe that a woman who behaved like Alice was, self-evidently, not acting intelligently at all. Of course, the sheriff was no towering genius himself, or he might have reached this very same conclusion.

As Pumpernickel watched Alice Merriwether pass his official sheriff's vehicle, he thought again of those long-lost cakes and how much he missed them. He wondered if he had been too hasty in his assessment of Alice. In his book, any man was superior to any woman any day of the week and even a woman who was bossy—or one cursed with intelligence—would have to get up pretty darn early in the morning to outfox old Alexander Pumpernickel. Almost subconsciously, he offered Alice a slight wave as she went by, but she didn't notice. Her expression was dreamy and somewhat absent, with a smile that could only be classified as 'Mona Lisa'.

This was the moment when Pumpernickel's mental furniture began to rearrange itself, sliding off into unfamiliar positions that would place his future seriously at risk. In short, he forgot all about the necessities of getting re-elected and thought only of those scrumptious cakes. There was one he craved in particular, one of Alice's prize-winning Carrot-and-Poppyseed cakes, crusted with orange icing and laced with generous amounts of exotic liqueurs, that so often picked up blue ribbons at the State Fair. Oh yes, Pumpernickel could devour a whole one of those at a single sitting—and often had.

## Sunshine with Passion Cake

### The Cake:

- Two cups of finely sifted cake flour
- Three teaspoons of baking powder
- One half cup of butter, pre-softened
- One cup of sugar
- Three egg yolks, beaten until they thicken with an even yellow colour
- One quarter cup of milk
- One half teaspoon of orange extract

First sift the flour and add the baking powder, then triple sift the combination until thoroughly mixed. With a wooden spoon, cream the butter while slowly adding sugar until the butter is light and fluffy. Add the yolks and mix well. Gradually add the flour mixture, alternating with the milk, hand mixing all the time, until all is combined. When a satisfactory mixture is reached, add the orange flavoring and mix well until smooth. Take an 8 inch cake tin, grease well and pour the mixture in evenly.

Bake at 350°F (175°C) for one hour.

### The Passion Fruit Icing:

- Three tablespoons of water
- One teaspoon unflavored powdered gelatine
- Two tablespoons of sugar
- One passionfruit, pulped and pureed

Place 2 tablespoons of the water in a small cup. Sprinkle the gelatine over the water; allow the mixture to soften for 5 minutes. In a small saucepan, combine the remaining tablespoon of water, passion fruit puree and the sugar. Cook the mixture over medium-low heat, stirring constantly, until the sugar is dissolved. Add the softened gelatine mixture and cook the mixture for 3 minutes, stirring constantly until the gelatine is dissolved. Remove the mixture from the heat and cool for 10 minutes.

Pour the cooled passion fruit topping over the top of the chilled cake, tilting the cake to cover the top evenly. Refrigerate the cake for 1 hour, until the topping is set.

Share with your lover.

But had he lost the lady already? Had he lost her to this Johnny-come-lately, Quentin C. Coriander? Judging by the look on Alice's face as she'd passed his car, winning back her affection—and her gastronomic talent—was not going to be an easy task. However, the very thought of losing her to some stranger, especially one who resembled a parody of an overgrown praying mantis, was enough to goad Alexander Pumpnickel into the defense of his vital interests.



In 1854, the editor of the *Portland Weekly Oregonian* wrote that authorities should “either exterminate the race of Indians, or prevent further wholesale butcheries by those worthless races resembling human form.” Boy, did the editor get his wish! It was mostly downhill from there for the poor old native peoples of North America.

It is commonly believed that a wholesale slaughter of Whites occurred on the Great Plains. In fact, very few were killed there. It was the Indians on the receiving end. Whole Indian nations disappeared.

On the other hand, Whites who rushed to claim a piece of the west were very creative. They created, out of nothing, the Land of the Free. And free it certainly became. Free of bison. Free of passenger pigeons. And, free of Indians. Well, almost free.

Out of some 50 million bison that once ran the plains when the Whites landed, all but a few hundred were freed. Out of some estimated 10 million native Americans who inhabited North America when the Whites landed, all but thirty thousand or so found freedom. Of the billions of passenger pigeons that darkened the skies for an hour or more flying over, all were freed.

Many other animals were unlucky enough to just miss out on freedom. The beaver, for one, was heading for total freedom, just like the passenger pigeon, when a fickle European market suddenly felt that silk was a more fashionable material than beaver for making hats.

All in all, it was an impressive achievement by the pioneers. Fortunately, there were still enough Indians left to be granted US citizenship in 1924. Most didn't want it.



In a clearing on the wooded west slope of Mount McDermott, Amanda Eaglefeather knelt over the hole she had dug. She took a crushed tobacco leaf and scattered some to the wind, first east, then west, north and south. The remainder she dropped into the hole. She covered it and then began snipping at plants that most people would call weeds. Three types she collected, tying each into a bundle with twine. As she performed her labor, she sang. The words were reverential and promised she only took what was needed, and only for the good of mankind or beast.

Silently, she gave thanks. Hers was a carefully divided world. On Sundays, she prayed to her Christian God and believed totally in Him, yet she could come to the wild as her mother had taught her, to revere the forces of nature. That knowledge would be lost with Amanda Eaglefeather: there would be no daughter for her to pass it on to. She had twin sons, though, and gave thanks for that. Bradley was a fine boy, attentive to his studies and good-looking too, and quarterback of his school's football team. Brad never had any trouble getting girlfriends.

Her other son Michael was altogether different: a strange boy who spent most of his time in his room and who lacked any real interests, unless you counted a weird love of the early works of Perry Como and ancient Big Band recordings. Mike wanted to be an anthropologist and had his heart set on A&M in Texas. Although he was every bit as handsome as Brad, his personality and interests turned off his peers—including any girls he might encounter on his brief forays beyond his room—very quickly.

Amanda erased the traces she'd made in the clearing, returning the ground to its natural state, and then stood up and gazed to the west. It was another good day, but they needed rain for the crops. Unfortunately, there were no signs of that.



The sheriff drove back to George W. Bush Drive around the same time the next day, and again the day after that. This pattern

of behavior continued until Friday, when Pumpernickel observed Alice on her way to the Coriander house. He gave her a friendly wave, but, again, she seemed so intent on her mission that she failed to respond. Pumpernickel picked up the megaphone and flicked the switch.

“GOOD MORNING, ALICE.”

This time Alice did notice, as did several others, judging by the considerable number of curtains that twitched and blinds that shimmered along the street. She seemed quite shocked to see the official police vehicle right next to her.

However, despite Pumpernickel's belief, Alice wasn't really shocked by the presence of the sheriff, sitting there in his car and waving at her with a stupid grin on his face. It was, to tell the honest truth, quite unusual to see Pumpernickel smiling—unusual and unfortunate, since the sheriff's smile was not an appealing sight. Still, Alice knew he was there. She always knew where Alexander Pumpernickel was. Rather than respond, Alice simply frowned, patted her hair bun, and moved on.

Today, the delay between Miss Alice's knock and the opening of Coriander's door was almost immeasurable. A head emerged and two inquisitive eyes appraised the offering. With a brief, but guttural, “Thank you, muchly,” a hand appeared and the cake vanished. The door slammed and Alice was left, as had happened so often in the past, alone. This time, when she departed, nothing in her manner suggested an enigmatic Renaissance masterpiece. She walked straight past Alexander Pumpernickel's vehicle without so much as a flicker of recognition.

“Lordy!” Pumpernickel observed, an observation he reserved for times of extreme angst, and from which we may in turn observe something of his state of mind. “I see I'm going to have to deal with this Casanova personally.”

If only Pumpernickel had been an outgoing man, he might have found a more sociable solution to his dilemma. An outgoing man might, for example, have knocked politely on Coriander's door to discuss things in a civilized manner. He might even have sat down with Alice face-to-face, to explain how he felt.

Unfortunately, Alexander Pumpernickel was outgoing only in the strict electoral sense, and the methods at his disposal were correspondingly limited. Therefore, in the upper reaches of George W. Bush Drive, Parcival, Sheriff Pumpernickel (outgoing) began to plan—with extreme prejudice—the downfall of Quentin C. Coriander.

For the first time since he was elected sheriff in 1978, and to his own considerable astonishment, something had occurred to spur Sheriff Alexander Pumpernickel into action.



The Constantinople Poultry Feed truck backed up to the storage silos at Collins Turkeys. The driver got out, hooked up the delivery lines and began the feed delivery. Rick Collins watched the scales as the corn began flowing. It was a closed system, so they had left their masks off. Damn dust was a pain in the ass, thought Rick.

From the turkey sheds, the noise of the birds rose, as if they knew the food delivery was being made. Of course, they knew nothing of the sort. Turkeys were dumb, stupid as pig shit. Not quite as stupid as Barbara, thought Rick, but pretty damn close.

Rick looked at his watch and cursed his luck. He had planned on a nice morning's hunting, but Barbara had put an end to that by agreeing to take this feed delivery. By now, his friends over in Constantinople would be sending out the foxhounds. He could almost smell the dogs' anxiety and hear them baying as they lit out after the quarry. And what was Barbara up to that was so important? She'd gone off to town for a hair appointment at Yamani's. Rick signed for the delivery and let the truck out of the yard. Once he'd locked the gate, he headed back to the incubator rooms.



Hiram Cassowary III was just leaving town that Friday evening when he noticed Sheriff Pumpernickel striding up to the

door of the Coriander abode. Hiram was on his way home to Constantinople, which was some 61 miles from Parcival, but light years ahead in class. Constantinople even had an Acinus and Vitus branch office, which was where Hiram worked, in the A&V Home Goods Division. He had been in Parcival all week, selling the Medusa range of new, improved, Titanium-Coated, Super Suck Vacuums, the model that was not only bagless, but exited the collected dust in the form of highly compressed bone-shaped biscuits that dogs simply adored. A&V had great success with their slogan, "If It's A Medusa, It Sucks!"

Hiram was acquainted with both Pumpnickel and Coriander, having cold-called at both men's homes in the hope of selling a Medusa Model XXI. He had been unsuccessful, as he had on most of his calls that week. Lots of folks wouldn't give the Model XXI a decent chance. Hiram shrugged to himself. If only more of his customers owned dogs...

He remembered distinctly that Pumpnickel was wearing his uniform, complete with black leather holster and Colt 45—the special with the mock pearl handles—on his hip. He remembered this particularly because—having the exclusive franchise for Parcival—he had been in the town quite often and had never seen Sheriff Pumpnickel outside a building or vehicle before, so the sight of the man actually out on foot made quite an impression. Hiram filed the event away and then promptly forgot about it. His mind went back to Callas singing Mozart on the CD player. Hiram Cassowary III may not have been the world's greatest when it came to selling vacuum cleaners, but no one could deny he knew his opera.



Sheriff Alexander Pumpnickel paid no attention to the Buick that passed as he knocked on Coriander's front door. He was far too intent to allow any extraneous interference to intrude on his concentration. He had spent all day in front of the jailhouse mirror, rehearsing the coming confrontation: practicing what to say and figuring out how to deliver it with maximum emphasis.

Pumpnickel had rarely been better prepared.

It took several authoritative knocks to bring Quentin Coriander to face Pumpnickel's brand of justice. When the door finally opened and Quentin edged his long, peculiar face around the door, Pumpnickel was quite taken aback with the curious condition of Coriander's skin. In fact, if Pumpnickel had not been there on such serious business, he might very well have recommended a type of facial cream that he often bought from the Avon lady. The cream wasn't too bad, and the Avon lady was seriously gorgeous; Pumpnickel often wished he could lay his hands on one or two items not actually on the company price list, but unfortunately the Avon lady insisted on only offering Avon.

"Yes," said Coriander. "May I assist you?"

That seemed a little formal to Pumpnickel. His adversary's politeness made it awkward for him to follow the original plan, which had been to barge in and throw his weight around. But Pumpnickel had the lawman's knack of being quick on his feet, and he soon came up with another approach. "I was thinking of coming in, Mr. Coriander? I have some business to discuss with you."

"What sort of business would that be, Sheriff?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Pumpnickel could already see curtains and blinds in motion on George W. Bush Drive, something else that wasn't in his plan. "It concerns a certain Miss Merriwether, Mr. Coriander. I need to speak to you about Miss Alice Merriwether. May I come in?"

Coriander looked up and down the street quickly, but held the door firmly to his body. "Is this an official visit? Do I have to let you in?"

"Is there any damn reason why you wouldn't want me to come in?"

This was Alexander Pumpnickel at his most commanding. Unfortunately for Pumpnickel, Coriander seemed singularly unimpressed. "Yes!" he said.

Election year or no, Pumpnickel blew it. He threw all his weight against the door, sending Coriander—and the door—fly-

ing inwards. Then, he strode masterfully into the house. That indeed made Pumpernickel feel more than adequate. "I came over real special like, just to give you a free piece of advice," he told Coriander, who was attempting to pick himself up from the floor. His long legs and thin, skeletal frame made this quite an effort. Pumpernickel continued, "Keep your durn hands off Miss Alice or I'll give you a very bad time, my friend. Do we understand each other?"

Coriander simply blinked at him. Now, in certain mountain regions of Papua New Guinea, blinking is not only considered a satisfactory reply, but can get you married pretty damned quick—as long as you can lay your hands on the bride price of twenty-five pigs and a hundred Trobriand pearl shells, but Pumpernickel had never traveled widely and knew little of such traditions. He drew himself up to his full height. "You got it, Coriander? Keep your filthy hands off my Alice."

"I have only been accepting the cakes that she so kindly seems to want to give," said Coriander, after a short silence. "I wasn't aware I was breaking any taboo. I'm usually exceptionally careful not to breach local customs."

"The cakes are mine," said Pumpernickel, forcefully. "Alice ain't thinking straight right now. She'll be back to normal soon and we plan on getting hitched, see."

"I do so like those cakes," mused Coriander. "I never dreamed such delicious delicacies existed."

The thought of Alice's cakes had a soothing affect on Pumpernickel and he relaxed a little. "Yeah, well I can understand that you liked them, but you ain't having no more. If Alice turns up here again, send her away."

Coriander narrowed his eyes. "What if I don't?"

This was the first occasion since his 1978 election that Pumpernickel's authority had ever been questioned, and the confrontation was so unexpected that he could not find an immediate reply. Instead, his hand strayed to the handle of the Colt Defender at his belt. "Are you saying that you're going to challenge me on this?"

"I was asking, for calculation purposes, what you would do if I did not send Miss Alice Merriwether away. I have absolutely no romantic interest in the lady at all..." Coriander's hand rose to hide his mouth which, Pumpernickel was almost sure, had twisted into the beginnings of a smirk.

"...but," continued Coriander from behind his hand, "I find her cakes absolutely irresistible and I do not care to turn those away at all. It seems we have a genuine quandary."

Sheriff Alexander Pumpernickel (outgoing) completely forgot that it was election year. He also forgot that this confrontation had nothing at all to do with his official police work. He saw red. He drew his gun and put the barrel firmly against Coriander's hand and thus—indirectly—against his mouth.

"Now, you listen up, Coriander, and you listen up real good. No one's gonna take advantage of Alexander Pumpernickel. No one, ya hear? People have accidents. People get shot and the killer often ain't found. Do I need to draw it out with a crayon?"

A strange look came over Quentin C. Coriander. For seconds he hardly moved. His eyes remained fixed on Pumpernickel, but his focus seemed a mile back. The spell broke suddenly as his hand snapped down, pushing the barrel away from his face.

"I now see your predicament perfectly, Sheriff. I'm sure we can reach a satisfactory solution to our dilemma. Let me reflect on it overnight and tomorrow—I feel certain—everything will be resolved."

"As long as you understand," said Pumpernickel, sliding his gun back into its holster, "that Alice, her cakes and me, we're joined at the hip, ya hear?"

"Loud and clear, Sheriff, loud and clear," said Coriander, as he ushered Pumpernickel to the door.



Sherman Van Tran climbed the ladder carrying the new sign. Supporting it against the top of the ladder, he reached back for his power drill. It took no time at all to screw the sign to the wall. It looked good, all new and shiny and official. Sherman spat on

it, smirked, then wiped the spittle away with an oily rag from his back pocket.

He climbed down to inspect his work. "Ancient and Benevolent Order of Sainted Bisons," it proclaimed on gleaming mahogany.

"Nothing ancient nor sainted at all 'bout them," thought Sherman. He walked around the hall, examining photos and trophies. There was a smiling photo of the sheriff. It was rare to see Pumpnickel smile. Just as well. It made him look sort of evil, thought Sherman. Perhaps he was. After all, Sherman couldn't join a club like the Bisons. Neither could the Eaglefeathers or that new black doctor up at the hospital. They were a bunch of racists—the sheriff, his deputy, that Goodyear fellah, the man that ran the corner Mini Mart, and all the rest of them.

What on earth did they do in here? On the wall was a set of horns. He tried to imagine Sheriff Pumpnickel wearing the horns along with the rest of the regalia he imagined they dressed up in for their silly meetings. They were just cow horns, hardly bison. What did it matter, anyway? Sherman had only applied because he wanted to belong.

It appalled him to see everyone toting guns. They loved guns more than they loved their kids. Coming from where he did, Sherman had hoped to leave all that behind. Firearms made him nervous. Strangely, they seemed to make Americans feel more secure. That set him to remembering the time his wife, Mai Van Tran, had tried to breastfeed their first-born in a mall. This nourishment of a new life had caused such anger in people—those same people who blasted away with all manner of guns at every living creature in a recreation they called sport.

Another thing that amazed Sherman about Parcival was the number of churches. Somewhere deep in its past, Parcival must have suffered a veritable epidemic of religious fervor, which had resulted in many small churches being built. Parcival still had one church for every 180 Parcivalians, though many of them lay unused, windows broken and god-gone.

The Van Trans had drifted after they arrived in America. They

did well in Florida, at first, growing Asian vegetables for local markets. Then, the boys started getting into trouble—only small misdemeanors at first, but soon enough it would be drugs. Sherman knew the signs. He packed up his family and headed west. It took a while to find, but he liked Parcival the moment he saw it. It was small enough to allow a hands-on relationship with the kids, but big enough not to be stepping on each other's toes all the time.

The Eaglefeathers already had the market gardening business sewn up when Sherman and his family arrived, and they didn't need any extra help. So he'd changed his name from Dung—which made everybody laugh—to Sherman, and set up as a handyman, reflecting wryly that all the years of scrounging a living were paying off at last, because now he could turn his hand to just about anything. Sometimes he regretted not opening a restaurant, but he preferred the outdoor life and Parcivalians seemed perfectly content with their McDonalds.

Sherman took a last look around the hall, wishing he could shake these Bison by the shoulders. Wake them up to what was really important in life. He wished that their safe little world would turn upside down, just as his had. How would they react then, he wondered.

He carried his ladder outside and locked the door.



Hiram Cassowary III was running a little late on his Monday return to Parcival. Cassowary had not had a good weekend—few of his weekends had been good, lately—and now not even the voice of Callas could lighten his mood, so he drove in silence. He couldn't understand why his wife, Ellie, nagged and bitched the way she did. He might not be the best provider in the world, but he put food on the table, most days.

So what if he had a mistress or two on his sales route: who didn't? Was he expected to go a whole five days without performing one of nature's most important functions? Hiram had read of the secrets and pitfalls of abstinence in *Real Men*. He

knew how serious it could get if you allowed all that nasty stuff to build up in your body. As far as Hiram was concerned, he was doing Ellie a favor.

After seven years on this route, he didn't need to give much attention to the road, and he drove the car on autopilot, ruminating on the misfortunes of marriage. It wasn't until something extraordinary happened that data from the subconscious started demanding some urgent attention from the conscious.

By then, it was far too late.

He saw the hole in the same instant that the car arrived at its brink. His attempt to swerve was futile: he might as well not have bothered. The Buick soared, allowing Cassowary a moment of leisure during which he observed a deep depression in the shape of a huge circle beneath the car, some five feet deep immediately below and getting deeper further in. As well as being an opera fan, Hiram loved science fiction and technology, and this massive excavation impressed him no end. Whatever had made it was certainly new. There was nothing remotely like it at the Department of Roads and Home Care in Constantinople.

For the first time in his life, Hiram Cassowary III had found something in Parcival to admire.

This period of admiration was brief, because shortly afterwards Hiram perceived that the Buick was entering the downward sector of its trajectory, and that the likely outcome was unpromising. For a few short seconds, he thought about Ellie's incessant nagging, and felt intense satisfaction that he not taken out adequate insurance on his life. Then, he felt nothing.

The Buick impacted on fresh cut clay a good forty yards from the cliff wall and at a depth of twenty feet. It was fortunate indeed that Hiram had been granted so little time to worry, as he had just introduced the most appalling odor to the car, and Hiram was easily embarrassed.

The hole ran in a perfect circle some two miles in diameter. Over the next twenty-four hours it would become the focus of an amazed nation and the center of attention for researchers all over the world. With such intense interest focused on the hole,

it would take until early Tuesday before anyone noticed that the entire township of Parcival had disappeared.