

Three Brothers Laughing

Day dawned hot and smoky from a rash of flash fires burning uncontrollably to the east. Bart looked towards his older brother Gus and wondered for the tenth time how three brothers had arrived at this bankrupt, near-abandoned Florida farmhouse. Here their father had hidden out for years. What had he been doing? Bart had grilled his brothers for any strangeness in their father's behavior at the Alakaway farm since their mother's death but without success.

Without saying so, Bart feared his father was involved in some illegal importing scheme stemming from the old man's fascination with Florida pirates of the twentieth century and the character of his fishing buddies living in coastal Steinhatchee sixty miles further west. Bart's family cross-interrogation was his typical behavior as the lawyer and financial advisor, which the other brothers tolerated with incessant internal jokes. Bart was largely concerned with covering his own inexplicable experiences whenever he visited Papá, as they called their father. Bart used his silent accusations to hide his own growing conviction that his own five senses were not totally trustworthy. Each passing day Bart sensed a hidden realm lurking just behind his experience of daily events, beginning with his growing awareness of sensing his brothers' thoughts as bright shadows, whether they were near or far off.

Gus appeared as another being, a brown bear prowling after prey in some dark, trackless woods. Stefán, deaf from birth, was far more mysterious. He took the form of a hawk of some sort, sailing far above them, observing, alert, ready to swoop down into action. But of his own father Bart could sense nothing.

Papá had moved abruptly to Mexico without sharing with his boys any details as to his own motivation or hopes -- possibly to start a new life after his faithful wife's recent passing. Rumors abounded that many other U.S. citizens had fled to Mexico before him, taking the

remnants of their salvaged wealth to rebuild an ancient island city, the supposed origin of the Aztec empire -- Mexcalititlán.

The after-effects of the Collapse of 2014 had rippled out from the financial centers of Atlanta and Jacksonville to overwhelm this mid-Florida prairie, phased out of any practical use, reverting into mindless marshes. The tiny town of Alackaway remained dazed in the economic evasions and ennui that had first swept across Florida and then spread globally. Now the brothers -- Bartólido, Augustín, and Stefán -- found themselves stranded at their father's derelict ranch, economically unable to escape to anywhere better.

With their father's disappearance, the three brothers remained in deadlock over the ownership, disposition, and even the use of the cabin, abandoned fields, dilapidated barn, tired out-buildings, and surviving livestock – namely a horse, a donkey, and a scatter of wild ducks.

Stefán, the most rash of the three and inclined to act before reasoning, threatened to follow their father into exile. Gus, the most educated, stubbornly demanded that they all stay in Alackaway to work together and somehow build a shared business. Secretly Gus also longed for the return of his now impossible ideal work, based on the unlimited world of quantum physics. He yearned to continue his perpetually interrupted research that had once consumed all of his attention: the physics of *absolute elsewhere*. No one researched this concept, or concepts in general, anymore.

Bart, impatient with his brothers' willingness to surrender into default survival in rural Florida, pulled his cell phone out of his jean's hip pocket and pressed the webcam icon that brought up a real-time image from the worksite across the street from his abandoned law office. The Atlanta landscape remained as desolate as when he saw it last, two months ago. Afternoon

downtown, but the streets were deserted with no pedestrians. He was constantly amazed to be able to watch the painfully slow progress at rebuilding the collapsed office park where once he had shared vibrant rental space with a leading commercial outlet in the city, Equifax.

Two construction cranes idled in a newly dug pit, filled with rainwater on the backside, beginning restoration but stalling in midstream. Crews were actively working less than two hours on any given day. He could hardly determine progress over the past two months of watching the construction site. The upper story webcam on an adjacent building, somehow surviving, had not been maintained but still managed to transmit the limited activity of a few cars nuzzling along the far edge of the excavation. He had built up his law practice as a solo venture with clients he found across the Southeast, now all scattered off-net, silent to electronic queries, unable or unwilling to respond to his cell phone calls. Bart found himself stranded away from his wife and children, stuck in north central Florida after a supposedly quick trip to see his Papá, just as interstate boundary skirmishes had erupted between Georgia and Florida.

An east wind blew steadily, plunging the landscape into a dense, reddish haze. The haze then magnified the heat and diffused any sunlight. Bart and Gus stood resting for the moment wondering what to do next in the staggering heat. Both were drenched in sweat. Even now at two o'clock in the afternoon, a savage band of horseflies had marshaled around them and had to be fought off. Yet to kill a single giant fly would be to invite a re-assault by the impatient swarm rushing in for revenge.

“I had the strangest dream last night around 4:00 AM,” Gus said to Bart, who had just finished repairing a four-rail fence that was falling in slow motion under the weight of morning glory and jasmine vines. Gus directed his comment toward his older brother, while keeping his

back turned towards Stefán. The youngest brother was oblivious to any possible snub, being both deaf and preoccupied with a horse, whose left back leg he was holding between his knees, carefully filing a cracked hoof prior to its reshoeing.

“What were you doing awake at that time of night?” Bart asked.

“I couldn’t sleep. Instead I got up about 2:00 and drank a shot of Papá’s bourbon. When I fell back to sleep, I dreamed we were back in 2012. I had just started practicing law in Atlanta. You were visiting me. You and I went downtown to see the Georgia Aquarium. It hadn’t been closed yet. All the water hadn’t burst through the glass walls. It wasn’t so dangerous to be around that area after dark. Not like now. You were trying to buy cell phone batteries because they are impossible to find in Florida. We rode downtown in your Subaru – private cars hadn’t been confiscated by the government yet. Families still ate out at restaurants and some even went to see a Brave’s game afterward.

“In my dream, you asked me about where Jolene was. She had just left me that week, and I looked at you and just laughed,” Gus continued. “Then I woke up.” Gus at the age of 44 had passed through a series of women as lab assistants, lovers, nominal wives, and various scuba diving partners, ending with Jolene, a bar waitress.

“So, where is Jolene now? Has she walked out on you again?” Bart demanded.

“She’s restless about living in Alackaway. Thinks it’s too small a town with no industry but she won’t move back to Gainesville even. She knows that the university goes on dismissing long-term students, blaming the Collapse,” Gus said. “She wants me to find a better paying job than a bartender. What’s a quantum physicist from Atlanta doing serving up warm beer in Gainesville, when we’re lucky enough to have any beer at all? There’s is no other work for me.”

“You could live down here to Alackaway and help us build up a water buffalo herd from the wild stock running free in the prairie,” Stefán suddenly interjected, looking up from his horse shoeing and realizing some serious conversation had passed without him. Unnoticed, he had been reading Gus’s lips. “Live in Papá’s old trailer, do some real work with me.”

Gus spit on the ground and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Must have swallowed a fly,” he offered as his only answer.

“I don’t know how much longer you’ll be farming down here, Stefán,” Gus said in sign language. “The tax liens have added up and the court is hearing our plea next week. Bart is supposed to sweet talk our way out of a county repossession, but it doesn’t look good for any of us. I don’t see any inheritance around here to share after all.” The three brothers fell silent, lost in their individual anxieties. The horse stirred nervously, waiting for Stefán to pay attention and finish.

The water buffalo project had been a sore point of discussion for many months. Their father, forever enthused by outlandish cash flow ideas he picked up from other nearby failing farmers, had heard of a scheme to raise water buffalo in the brackish marshes south of Alackaway. He had met a university professor who was studying a new effort to promote dairy farming with the huge, horned beasts. Water buffalo would help U.S. farmers gain a foothold in the cheese market, where all food stuffs were limited, and Federal rationing held prices to razor thin margins. Meanwhile, that market had vanished along with many other notions of gourmet food, when general starvation becomes common throughout the Southeast. But already their father had sold everything to make his stand in these rural backwoods, land abandoned in the 1940’s as true cattle ranching moved west to Tampa.

Bart looked toward the east where low, glowering banks of smoky clouds masked the flat horizon. Before now the thick air had left them breathless, but a sudden hot wind rippled across the prairie grasses from a great distance. Cows in a neighboring, unfenced pasture interrupted their endless grazing and looked around in alarm.

“We need to take Pa’s jeep over to Riley’s farm to see what’s happening,” Bart said. He slapped Stefán’s shoulder to get his attention away from the horse. “Let’s go check things out, Buddy” he signed, gesturing for his brother to put down his farrier tools. Not waiting, Bart took off running toward the parked jeep behind the barn, with Stefán and Gus close after him. The three jumped onto the jeep and pulled out of the driveway onto the shell rock road leading east. Ahead, Bart saw an abrupt flight of crows rushing up from a pasture, crying warnings to one another. His heart raced.

Despite the intense glare of the afternoon sun, an angry red glow stretched across the eastern horizon, brightening and widening, as if announcing a second sunrise. The barren landscape, punctuated here and there with palmettos and cabbage palms was becoming animated with a low, rumbling sound. The ground began to tremble. Just ahead of the jeep a vast swath of burning marsh grass crackled, racing before a leading wind, sweeping a wide fringe of fire toward them. Bart swerved off the road and charged behind the jeep to pull out a spare can of gasoline. Bart yanked up the false floor in the back cabin, pointing at the fire fighter’s equipment stored there – an extinguisher, smoke masks, and a set of fire shields.

“Gus, take the gas and pour it in along that fence line so it cuts off the brushfire,” he yelled. Gus leaned forward with a bear-like swipe of his left arm, seized the gas can and lumbered off never looking back. “Stefán, ride with me,” Bart signaled, lunging into the driver’s

seat. Gus started off sloshing gas as he stalked north, broad shoulders heaving fuel left and right. Black smoke enveloped him. “What do I do when I run out of gas?” he yelled back over his shoulder to his older brother.

“Light it and run.”

Bart and Stefán drove off towards the approaching front, as clouds of black smoke and ash swirled up to smother them. The distant wall of flame rushed forward, lighting and heating the atmosphere, clawing upwards eight to ten feet above the marsh grass that blackened, twisted as if in pain, and fell away into ash behind it. The entire eastern horizon burned.

The two brothers drove in tense silence straight ahead, following the pitted white limestone road up to a closed cattle gate. Stefán stepped out to open the metal frame and then turned, saw something in the near distance within the swirls of smoke, and started running away from the jeep.

As the fumes were torn apart by a cross wind, Bart saw that Stefán was closing in on a terrified horse caught huddled against the fenced corner of a pasture, moments from being encircled in flames. The horse had tangled its front legs in the four board fence, which despite the horse’s frantic kicks had not shattered away from the corner post, leaving it thrashing but unable to back off. Stefán had already grabbed a sledge hammer from the back of the jeep and was running towards the trapped creature.

“For God’s sake, come back, Stefán, there’s a new flair-up straight ahead!” Bart shouted, forgetting his younger brother’s deafness. Immediately behind the trapped horse, fire leaped across the pasture, landing in a grove of cabbage palms that in turn burst into a bouquet of torches showering sparks in all directions. Bart felt deep fear in which he suddenly sensed the

hawk shadow of his deaf brother, calmly circling overhead, observing them both. In a silent shout he called up to where Stefan soared above the flames, commanding Stefán's attention to more earth-bound dangers. Stefán, perhaps in response, slammed the sledge hammer against the corner fence post, which shattered. The horse, finally breaking free, raced away to safety.

Bart felt his breath raking into his lungs as hot smoke, tears forming in his eyes. The air was thin, lacking oxygen, withering to the lungs more than the bitter smoke that surrounded them with a wasp-like cloud of embedded, stinging embers. He plunged ahead toward Stefán with a fire extinguisher in hand, hoping to clear a swath of safety around himself and his brother. Fire to the left, fire to the right, straight ahead an eight-foot wall of combustion into which the world was rapidly dissolving.

“Stefán, Stefán!” Bart shouted.

A tall, metal radio tower standing alone to the south of Riley's farm had already been surrounded and to the brothers' horror, suddenly burst into flames. The framework arced with ominous certitude toward the prairie flats, the sound of its crashing swallowed up in the growing roar of the convection wind sucked into the flame front.

“Gus, come back to the jeep,” Bart shouted, hoping that Gus at least could hear him. “Stefán has left his fire shield in the trunk.” Gus stepped out of the smoke, grinning, and satisfied with playing with fire to please himself and his brothers. “I thought Stefán stopped to strap it on, but instead he left it here,” Bart explained as Gus lumbered up to him, panting.

“We've got to get Sefán's shield up to him, he's about to be trapped in the fire,” Bart said. They checked their own shields strapped around their waists, grabbed the third belt and raced forward into the advancing wall of flame. Stefán was beating back the fire as it flared up before him from the dry grass, a shimmering wall of disintegrating vegetation.

Leaping flames darkened the sky. A hell-storm covered hundreds acres raging from the east. If they became encircled, trapped by the fire, they had the thin shields to use, all except Stefán. These devices were folded into a packet worn around the waist. Unfolded, the shield resembled a big, baked potato skin with a triangular tent top. Any trapped firefighter could lie inside it and hold the straps down with his feet and hands, after digging a hole where his face would go, filled with water. But the brothers had nothing left in their water bottles.

Bart reached Stefán first, flung the spare shield at him and shouted “Get down, we’re surrounded.” Stefán, oblivious to their approach in his private circle of silence, continued to confront the flames, until his older brother tackled him from the rear and the both men lurched forward, nearly falling in the direct fire path. Bart began digging a shallow pit to shelter his face and gestured to Stefán to do the same. The older brother flung an aluminum shield over Stefán and then stretched the second over himself, diving back to earth face down. Nothing remained for him to see except the crushed grass underneath, the roar of the approaching freight train of flame, and perhaps make time to pray. Somehow he sensed his brother’s inner calm, soaring far overhead, circling, considering flying off, perhaps never to land again...

The fire, widespread around them, was consuming the last oxygen in the air. They couldn’t breathe. They pulled up bandannas over their faces. This filtered the smoke, but yielded them no more oxygen. Bart kept lifting his tent slightly, looking around. He could only guess where Gus had flung himself, or fallen unconscious. The heat twenty feet from them exceeded 900 degrees. But the heat was not the problem; it was the lack of oxygen. It was impossible to breathe. Glancing back west where the only clear horizon remained, Gus saw their father’s farmhouse, trailer, and barn burst into flame.

With a rushing sigh, the flames passed overhead. Suddenly they could breathe again. Bart stood up first, shakily, brushing his face off with his left hand. Stefán got up more slowly, looking at Bart with a puzzled expression. In sign language, Stefán signaled “It’s OK. As long as we’re all alive.”

As the smoke cleared leaving a landscape etched in black inks, Bart and Stefán walked back to the jeep where Gus was waiting for them. The fire lane Gus had thrown up had saved the jeep and the equipment. The three brothers surveyed the devastation to discover that their father’s horse was standing unaltered in the distance, stunned in the middle of the fishing pond behind where the farm house had stood ten minutes before.

Without comment, Bart limped over to the water and waded out to capture and calm the terrified horse. The animal, trembling but safe, stood chest deep next to a sunken rowboat his father had once used for fishing the pond.

Bart reached down, groping through thick mud into the hull of the sunken boat. Moving up under the covered bow, his hand closed around a cylindrical form. He pulled it up out of the water and carefully scraped off a layer of algae and muck. Bart saw that he was holding a classic Maya ceramic cup, vividly painted with images of seated warriors, one divining with a mirror of polished obsidian, one throwing dice with a Lord of the Underworld -- death. The beauty of his find took his breath away. The street value of rare, ancient Aztec pottery back in Mexico dawned on Bart slowly.

He understood what his father had done, trading stolen ceramics from Mexico and smuggling them into Florida. If there were other pottery pieces of this quality buried in the mud in this abandoned farm’s lake, the brothers could be wealthy. Former American managers in

Mexcaltitán, collecting these types of authentic artifacts, would pay handsomely and could well afford the ceramics at staggering prices.

Bart hugged his brothers, despite their reeking of smoke and soot. The three men laughed and danced wildly in the shallow water, ecstatic with the escape route opening before them, even as the dense smoke cleared.

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