

# The Fire Keepers

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January 2021  
Crimson Lake, Alberta

If we lived in a cave, I would be the troglodyte who tended the fire in the middle of the night.

Every night of my life I go to bed early, wake in the middle of the night and roam around for a while, then fall back to sleep until dawn. The routine has persisted for forty years.

I fought the pattern for the first twenty years under the misconception that a *normal* sleep pattern doesn't have a recess. Most experts in the field will tell you that interrupted sleep is an *affliction* to be remedied – that is a load of bat guano.



For the past two decades I quit worrying about it and embraced the habit. I wake up around 2:00am and welcome the quiet interlude. I listen to music, read, write, or just ponder for an hour or two, then fall back to sleep until I am rested. If something changed and I started to sleep through the night I would miss my nocturnal routine.

It took a furnace malfunction to understand that my sleep pattern is a Darwinian survival trait. We are at the cabin without heat, waiting for an elusive technician and gas valve to fix the problem. It is not an inconvenience; we have a wood-burning stove, and the outside temperature is mild, for January. I keep the fire stoked. It will smolder for about five hours with the damper closed, which coincides nicely with my sleep programming.

While I tended the fire in the middle of the night, I developed a theory: I have come to believe that approximately 5% of the population is wired to sleep in interrupted stints. Without us, humankind would not have survived.

We are ...

... the Fire Keepers.



# Hell in a Hand Basket

January 2021

Crimson Lake, Alberta

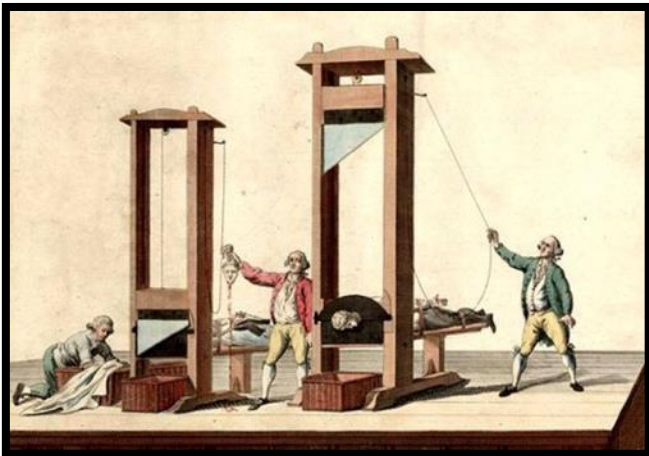
We exchanged New Years e-mail greetings with our neighbour/friends Reg and Karen from the lake. We were discussing common issues like Covid, *Fish Cops* and *Goings-On at the Lake*, and the expression *Going to Hell in a Hand Basket* came up. Reg suggested it might be a good phrase to research and comment on in a journal, so I got on *The Google*.

He was right; *Going to Hell in a Hand Basket* has a fascinating etymology.

Americans think they invented everything, so it isn't surprising that research on US websites came up with this theory:

*"The phrase is attributed to the gold rush where men were lowered by hand in baskets down mining shafts to set dynamite which could have deadly consequences."*

That makes sense, except that the phrase was in use long before the Americans got their hands on it.



In medieval Europe, severed heads were caught and carried from the guillotine in wicker tubs. Victims had "*Gone to Hell in Baskets*".

Much further back, in the Book of Exodus, Moses was sent down the Nile River in a Hand-woven Basket.







This panel of a stained-glass window in Fairford Church in Gloucestershire England was created in about 1495. The blue demon is taking a woman to *Hell*, on a *Hand Cart*.

All these theories make sense. The expression *Going to Hell in a Hand Basket* could have originated with any of them.

But I like the *Hieronymus Bosch* theory best. Bosch painted *The Haywain* in 1515. Enlarge it on your computer and let me know if you agree....



... *Going to Hell on a Hay Cart* may not be the most plausible explanation for the origin of the phrase, but it is the most interesting. The painting depicts a wonderfully bizarre variation of ...

... **Going to Hell in a Hand Basket**

Thanks Reg!

# The New Face of America

January 7, 2021

America

The facial recognition feature on my computer wouldn't work this morning.

My disheveled Covid 19 hair, striking out like Medusa's snakes, could have caused the computer not to recognize me, or maybe 2020 aged me so much the camera thought Methuselah was trying to gain access. I considered combing my hair, having a shave, and trying again, but it was easier just to use the password.



Now that it is open, I may try to reprogram the computer's facial recognition feature using a combination of these images.

I will let you know how it goes....

It could be that the computer just wasn't ready to wake up and face the day. I regularly subject it to news headlines in the morning. The laptop can be forgiven if it didn't want to see this:

Never in my lifetime could I have imagined a President of the United States inciting the likes of these freaks to storm the Capitol and beat a police officer to death with a fire extinguisher. It could not happen – and yet it has.

MAGA moron on the right wore an identification badge around his neck, so he was easy to track down. I don't know Methuselah's story (on the left), but I am 100% certain he has no idea the meaning of the flag he is holding. The most disturbing freak is the one in the middle. I am not sure what the horns and the face paint symbolize; neither does he, I speculate. Middle Freak has been arrested for his actions. His mommy visited him in jail - she reported that Freak was not being properly fed – the warden doesn't offer organic vegetarian meals! I have no words for this....



America needs to reprogram its computer to recognize what it has become in January 2021.

Unfortunately, this



is...

... the New Face of America.

# Worthless Spirit

January 2021

Whitburn, Scotland

January 25<sup>th</sup> is Robbie Burns Day, but you won't catch me celebrating. In fact, if I had my way, I'd dig the son-of-a-bitch up and give him a well-deserved thrashing.

In a bizarre twist of genealogical fate, we Paton's are connected to Scotland's most famous son. In 1785, Robert Burns fathered an illegitimate child with Elizabeth Paton, his mother's servant.

It doesn't bother me that Burns had a tryst with one of my ancestors. It doesn't even trouble me that Elizabeth Paton bore the bastard child of that union. What infuriates me is that Burns had the audacity to write a lewd poem about raping our ancestor.

*Twae ae night lately, in my fun,  
I gaed a rovin' wi' the gun,  
An' brought a paitrick to the grun'-  
A bonie hen;  
And, as the twilight was begun,  
Thought nane wad ken.*

Burns writes to a friend about "bringing young Elizabeth Paton (a Patrick hen) to the ground with his phallic "gun". Burns didn't think anyone would notice because it was dark".

*The poor, wee thing was little hurt;  
I straikeit it a wee for sport,  
Ne'er thinkin they wad fash me for't;  
But, Deil-ma-care!  
Somebody tells the poacher-court  
The hale affair.*

Elizabeth was not hurt – *much*. Burns didn't think anyone would care, but somebody reported the "hale affair".

*So gat the whistle o' my goat,  
An' pay't the fee.*



*Paton Descendants, in Scotland 2019*



Burns went to court and was fined a guinea. Which he resented.

*As soon's the clockin-time is by,  
An' the wee pouts begun to cry,  
Lord, I'se hae sporting by an' by  
For my gowd guinea,  
Tho' I should herd the buckskin kye  
For't in Virginia.*

Burns vowed, "As soon as the child was born, he was going to go "sporting" again and get his money's worth! Even if it meant he would be banished to Virginia to herd black people".

Burns softened a little when "*Dear Bought Bess*" was born.

*Welcome! lily bonie, sweet, wee dochter,  
Tho' ye come here a wee unsought for,  
And tho' your comin' I hae fought for,  
Baith kirk and queir;  
Yet, by my faith, ye're no unwrought for  
That I shall swear!...  
Lord grant that thou may ay inherit  
Thy mither's person, grace, an' merit,  
An' thy poor, worthless daddie's spirit,  
Without his failins,...*



I am grateful that generations of Paton's inherited Bess' "*person, grace and merit*" and not Robbie Burns'...

*... worthless spirit.*

Two Paton descendants having way too much fun in a Glasgow Pub, 2019.



Adam (left) and Aaron (right).

# Two Pinches of Salt

January 2021

Dunfermline, Fife, Scotland

*Ach! Two pinches of salt in wee Jamie's porridge? Such extravagance I have never seen!*

We of Scottish ancestry have a reputation for penny-pinching. Frugality was born of necessity on Scotland's rugged shores; it is entwined in the Scottish identity.

Scot's prudent money management has been eternalized in well-worn humour.

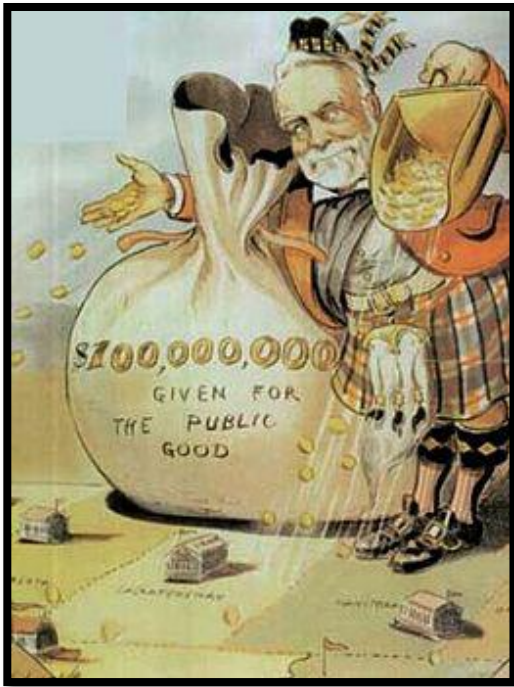
*A visitor to an Aberdeen bar was surprised to find the beer only two pence a pint. The barman explained that it was a promotional price, to mark the centenary of the pub opening. The visitor noticed, however, that the bar was empty. "Are the regular customers not enjoying the special prices?" he asked. To which the barman replied, "They're waiting for Happy Hour".*



Despite less than favourable economic conditions, Scotland has prospered in banking. The Bank of Scotland has enjoyed continuous profitability since its formation in 1695, managed by successive fiscally prudent Scots.

*Letter to the editor of the *Edinburgh Evening News* from the Chairman of the Bank of Scotland: "If you print any more jokes about miserly Scotsmen, I shall stop borrowing your paper."*

My Dad would often recite the line at the top of the page, about the extravagance of *two pinches of salt*, while we ate our breakfast porridge. We recognized it as humour, but there was an authentic undercurrent in his allusion to fiscal prudence. No Paton in history ever spent more than necessary - on anything.



The Scottish trait of responsible money management has produced a disproportionate number of bankers and business leaders. Andrew Carnegie, once the richest man on earth, was born in Dunfermline, Scotland.

Carnegie was one of the most active philanthropists in history. He donated more than \$76 billion to education and science during his lifetime. Carnegie amassed enormous wealth but died penniless:

“... the man who dies thus rich, dies disgraced”.  
- Andrew Carnegie

So much for the stingy Scot.

The pennies we **pinch on salt** we donate to charity.

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There are plenty of jokes about miserly Scots and bankers but jokes about philanthropists are hard to find. This is the best I can do:



***‘Why don’t oysters give to charity?  
Because they’re shellfish.’***

- Jay Leno

Three Scottish gentlemen having tea.  
Jim, Adrian, and Earl Paton



# Big Mac Wrapper

January 2021

Belt Line Calgary

*Q: What do a magpie and a pregnant woman have in common?*

Sounds like the start of a lame *Dad joke*, right? It isn't, there is a connection.

I had an hour and a half to kill in Calgary today while Bear visited the dentist. I found a parking spot adjacent a back alley in the belt line district and watched the bustle of city life as I waited. Being a country bumpkin, I find it interesting to observe city folks going about their lives.

Urban dwellers have everything at their fingertips, shops, restaurants, and entertainment. They never have very far to go, yet they are always in a hurry. Trendy clothes and funky haircuts paraded past my windshield in a constant blur. There were more dogs than I expected, each of them having trained their owner to dutifully collect poop in green bags. I especially enjoyed watching cars not designed to move in snow, trying to navigate Himalayan drifts on side streets.



*Photograph courtesy Gervais Goodman*

As fascinating as it all was, I was starting to get a little bored. Then Magpie came into my life. Another urban cowboy, somebody I could relate to.

He glided into the alley beside me and started looking for lunch. He would take a few steps, *yak-yak-yak*, then cock his head sideways (like Bear does when she is trying on new clothes in the mirror – apparently Magpies and Bears see better when they look at things from a 30-degree angle). It worked! Magpie found something of interest in a snowbank beside a dumpster. He had come

dressed for fine dining, tuxedo with tails and a black bib, but Magpie was overdressed for the meal he chose - a discarded fast-food wrapper.

Magpie finished his meal, *yak- yak-yakked*, and flew off to the next dumpster.

I lost sight of him and decided that I had had enough of watching townies. I plugged “*magpie*” into Wikipedia on my phone to see if I could learn something.

I was not disappointed.

The bird was once called a *Pica*, Old English for *Pie*. Somehow the name Maggie was attached and shortened as *magpie*.

But how does this relate to a pregnant woman?

There is an eating disorder called *Pica*, where patients crave non-nutritive substances. It is particularly acute with pregnant women. The disorder was named *Pica* because magpies will eat almost anything.

***A: Some magpies, and some pregnant women, will eat a frozen discarded ...  
...Big Mac wrapper.***



*Photograph courtesy Gervais Goodman – Thanks Gervais!*

<https://youtu.be/z7o9-Anzrso>

*Magpie* – Ian Tyson

(Ian Tyson calls magpie “coyote of the sky”. Listen for a reference to *Pika* at the end.)

# Swallows on the Moon

January 2021

On the Moon

I still had some time to kill in *Magpie Alley*, so I turned my attention to swallows....

It was once thought that swallows spent the winter on the moon. They would disappear in the fall and no one knew where they had gone. Obviously, they had flown to the moon!



An alternate theory was that swallows hibernated in hollow trees, although no one had ever found one. Some naturalists thought that the birds might dive into ponds and overwinter in the mud, like frogs.

The inexplicable phenomenon of the disappearance and reappearance of swallows is the origin of much myth and mysticism.

Swallows are often used as a Christian allegory for souls. They are associated with death and the journey of the soul to a mysterious destination.

Swallows are also mentioned in the Quran. The birds protected Ka'ba in Mecca from the elephant army of Abraha, by dropping small clay stones on the approaching enemy.

Ancient sailors often had swallows tattooed on their chest or arms as a talisman. Swallows return to the same location every year, so they were an assurance that the sailor would return home safely. If a sailor were to die on the journey the swallow would carry his soul to heaven. Either way, a swallow tattoo provided comfort.

It wasn't until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that scientists began to understand migration as an explanation for the disappearance and reappearance of birds. Despite growing scientific understanding, swallows continue to hold a mythical aura to this day.



For centuries, swallows have nested on the walls of the Mission San Juan Capistrano in California. On St. Joseph's Day, March 19<sup>th</sup>, each year the mission celebrates the "*Miracle of the Swallows*" as the birds return from their winter home in Argentina, 6000 miles away.

In recent years, swallows returning to Capistrano had been declining in numbers. In 2010 the mission invited Dr. Charles R. Brown, a professor of biological sciences, to assess the situation. Dr. Brown has studied more than 200,000 cliff swallows in his academic lifetime. He is considered the world's leading swallow expert.



Brown determined that nesting habitat on the buildings had been altered and that development in the surrounding area was drawing the swallows elsewhere. At Brown's recommendation, the Mission erected swallow-friendly walls and green spaces. Brown provided the mission with recordings of happy birds, which are played at the Mission during the migration to attract swallows passing by. By 2018, swallows were returning to Capistrano in historic numbers.

The Mission San Juan Capistrano was so thankful to Dr. Brown they gave him a perpetual invitation to attend the annual swallow celebration. Like the birds he knows so well, Dr. Brown returns to Capistrano on March 19<sup>th</sup> every year.

The Mission continues to celebrate the "*miracle*" of the return of the swallows, but "*science*" may have played the greater role.



Minoan fresco of swallows at Akrotiri, c, 1500 BCE

Science has debunked much of the myth surrounding swallows (and all things), but it is still fun to believe that there are ...

... **Swallows on the Moon.**

# Cabbages and Kings

January 2021  
The Covid Sea

I have some projects that need attention so this will be my last post for a while.

I appreciate you sailing along with me these past few months as we navigate the murky waters of the Covid Sea. Your company has been wind in my sails.

My Dad is embarking on a journey, the one we will all take someday, and I want to spend some time with him to learn the lessons he has yet to teach.

I also want to do some family history research on my maternal ancestor's side. There isn't a lot of documented pre-Canada history on the Wells/Fallows branch of the family, but I am going to spend some time tracing family roots in that direction.



Adrian, reading to Russell and Brad c. 1959



The curious three-legged vehicle in this photo is driven by a great-uncle. Two of the boys are ancestral relatives.

The picture was taken around 1900 at Hazelslack Tower Farm near Arnside, England. The dairy farm was owned by my maternal great grandmother. The tower and the farm still exist; I hope to track down some family history starting there.

I have also been toying with the idea of writing stories that are more than two pages long. I started down that road twenty years ago but gave it up for lack of time. Covid put an end to using *lack of time* as an excuse for anything, so I am determined to try again.

I have revisited some incomplete story notes and intend to polish them up. I will close this chapter of *New Normal* with one of those yarns. Let me know if you think it has potential to be carried in "*fine bookstores everywhere*".

There are so many topics we haven't had a chance to discuss yet. My great hope is that this pandemic will end soon, and we can have an in-person chat.

You choose the topic.....

*The time has come," the Walrus said,  
"To talk of many things:  
Of shoes--and ships--and sealing-wax--  
Of cabbages--and kings—*

Lewis Carroll from *The Walrus and the Carpenter*



..... To Be Continued





# Dead Ted's

Summer 1974

Arcola, Saskatchewan

## WARNING:

The story you are about to read is laced with profanity. It contains rude ethnic jokes, features alcohol abuse, smoking, illegal activity, and other reprehensible behavior. It was written a long time ago.

The story is almost 100% fiction, *almost*. I am not going to tell you which parts happened, and which did not.



There are a few other things you need to know before you read it:

- In 1974, the population of Arcola was about 500 – everybody knew everybody.
- None of the characters (other than Ted) are real, especially the “me” mentioned, and
- The bar in Arcola was once owned by a fellow named Ted Muldoon. Ted died, and the establishment is now known locally as ....

.... *Dead Ted's*.

# The Trans-Ukrainian Railroad

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July 1974

Arcola, Saskatchewan

“Wanna Bet?”

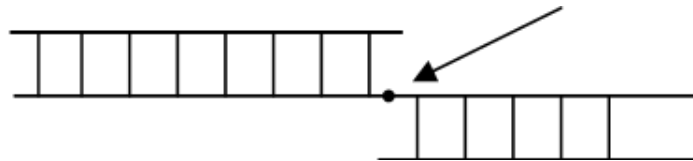
If I had a nickel for every catastrophe that started with those two words, I could pay off the national debt.

We were sitting at *Dead Ted's* overindulging on draft beer and pickled eggs. It was late, the tavern was empty, other than our table and Dusty the barmaid. “We” consisted of me, Spud Cooper, Tanner Moore, and Nester (Kubasa) Hrytziuk, Arcola’s token Ukrainian.



Tanner scratched something on a napkin with a pencil ....

“Hey Kubasa, guess what this is.”



“Busted ladder?”

“Nope, It’s the last spike on the Trans-Ukrainian Railroad!”

Three of the four of us found this funny. Kubasa took a lot of heat from the rest of us. Ukrainian jokes were in vogue in the ‘70’s and Kubasa was the only one we knew.

“I bet none of you jerks could drive a train”.

“And I s’pose you could”, Tanner slurred.

“Damn right I could!”

“You can hardly navigate that crap Ford parked out there. No way you could drive a train.”

## ***Wanna Bet?***

And there it was..... A challenge was on the table and it was up to the rest of us to pony up or let Kubasa win the contest. We looked at each other and gave non-verbal assent.

*“We’ve each got ten bucks that says you can’t”,* Spud accepted the bet on our collective behalf.

Dusty was about to turn the lights off anyway, as we got up and made our way to the door.



I stopped and bought a case of Labatt's Blue at the off-sale counter. I thought we might need refreshments if Kubasa was going to put on a show.

*“You Boys watch out for the cops.”* Dusty said, as she handed me my change.

*“Thanks, Dusty, we’re gonna take the train home.”* I responded, only half joking.

We didn't have far to go to find a train. *Dead Ted's* is on North Railway Avenue and the *Saskatchewan Wheat Pool* elevator is kitty-corner. There was a CPR locomotive beside the elevator pointed west, with two boxcars attached. Kubasa was already across the street looking up at the locomotive.

*“Do you suppose that idiot is actually going to try to start that thing?”* I asked Tanner as I caught up to him.

*“He couldn't get it going even if he was sober, and he's been pounding back draft like a dog eats leftovers.”*

There was an empty dray wagon parked by the train station. We dragged it closer, hopped on and watched Kubasa climb up the ladder on the side of the engine.

*“They probably keep it locked”* Spud said, but Kubasa's silhouette appeared in the window of the engineer's cab as the words left his mouth.



Kubasa tugged on the sliding window, popped his flush face out and gave us a wide grin, which exposed a gap where a tooth had been up until last hockey season.

*“Any of you dim bulbs got a match? It's dark in here.”*

I tossed him up a pack, but only after lighting a cigarette for myself. *“You better not set that thing on fire; it probably costs more than you make.”*



Tanner and Spud had cracked the *Blue* box open. Spud handed me a stubby bottle as I hopped back on the wagon.

*“Hey Kubasa, you want one for the road?”* Spud yelled, but Kubasa’s face had disappeared. Only a dim glow from the lit matches appeared in the window.

*“He’ll never get it started.”*

*“I think Kubasa’s Dad worked for the CPR once; maybe he knows more than we think.”*

*“Even if he could,”* Spud said, *“he’s not crazy, or drunk enough to actually do it.”*

A light came on in the cab and a gentle whirring sound with it. *“That is the glow plugs you are hearing Boys”,* Kubasa hollered from deep inside the cab, *“Get your money ready.”*



The confidence in Kubasa’s tone gave me an uneasy feeling that we might have pressed him too far. I was about to suggest that he come down and have a beer, but my voice and most of my other senses, were drowned out by the sound of 10,000 horse-power bursting to life.

Kubasa’s face was at the window again, grinning and yelling ***“All Aboard the Ukrainian Fuckin’ Railroad!”***

*“Christ Kubasa! Shut that thing down before somebody catches us.”* Spud yelled up at the cab, *“Let’s get out of here.”*

I’d have gladly given Kubasa my ten bucks, and kissed his ass to boot, if he would have turned the engine off and come down at that point, but he was having way too much fun. Kubasa had found a greasy striped engineer’s cap. He was standing at the window wearing it and pumping his fist in the air, yelling imperceptible babble over the ever-increasing whine of the generator.



*“Get out of there!”* Tanner yelled. *“You are going to get us all thrown in jail.”* Those of us on the ground started edging away from the locomotive.

*“OK”,* Kubasa said, *“I’ll shut it down – wait for me.”*

*“Hurry up damn it. What if the cops show up?”* I paused on the road to wait for him.

*"I can't turn it off!"* Kubasa's confident tone had changed to something just south of terror, *"Maybe this one....."*

*"This one"* turned out to be the mechanism that connected the 10,000 horses to the wheels. As Kubasa pulled whatever *"this one"* was, the engine grunted under load and the wheels of the train started to creep.

*"Jesus Christ! Somebody give me a hand here".*

*"You're the fucking Engineer, you stop it!"*

The train had only moved about ten feet, but it was clear that it was going much farther if our engineer didn't find the "stop" button soon. That thought was no sooner out of my head than Kubasa, still wearing the striped cap, came bailing off the engine like his tail was on fire.

*"What are you doing? Get back up there and stop that thing!"*

*"No way Man, I can't see, it's dark in there."*

The train was still just creeping, but it was now at the road crossing, two box cars dutifully following it to *God Knows Where*.

*"Let's get out of here."* I don't know who said it, any one or all of us might have.



We looked in all directions as we headed for Kubasa's Ford. The streets were empty. We sat in the car for a silent moment and watched as the locomotive and two box cars disappeared in the darkness to the west. Kubasa drove us home in silence; sober as church mice by the time we arrived.

## ARCOLA STAR STANDARD

The *Arcola Star Standard* headline the following week didn't surprise a few of us:

***"UNMANNED CPR ENGINE GOES TO STOUGHTON, BY ITSELF"***

# Part II: Silence is Golden

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July 1974

Arcola, Saskatchewan

*"I haven't seen you boys for a few days"* Dusty commented as she took our order. *"I thought maybe you had taken a train trip to the mountains or something"*.

*"No idea what you're talking about."* Tanner mumbled, without making eye contact.

*"Right! And Pigs can Fly."* Dusty gave us a knowing frown before she headed to the bar to get our beer.

*"You think she knows?"*

*"Of course she does, but Dusty's alright, she won't squeal on us."*

*"Maybe we should tip her more than the usual two bits."*

*"You Think?"*

We had laid low for the past few days and Kubasa was still holed up at home, waiting for the storm to pass.

According to *The Star Standard*, a CPR engine crept through Kisbey about 3:00am last Saturday. A railroad employee was awake at that hour and noticed the unscheduled train roll through the level crossing without a signal. He knew something was wrong and chased the creeping train to the next crossing. He managed to get it stopped before the engine ran into the back of another train parked at Stoughton.

There was no damage, and nobody got hurt, but the CPR and the RCMP were both mad as hell. They quizzed Dusty about who had been at the bar that night, but she could only remember some oil riggers from out of town.

Dusty noticed a significant increase in her tip income in the summer of 1974....

**...Her Silence was Golden.**

