

Prologue: Old Bob

My name isn't important, because I'm only here to function as your Intermediary Person.

I suppose that, if you want to avoid using all those eight syllables, you can refer to me as I.P. On the other hand, that sounds terrible, so forget I brought it up.

Having read stories like this before, you're more than likely familiar with those of my ilk. We pop up at the beginning, trapped forever within the Prologue—aside from an occasional appearance in the Epilogue—destined never to have a Chapter of our own. But in spite of this, the story can hardly get off the ground without us, because *we*—for whatever cosmic reason—have been chosen to relate the experiences of someone who is usually not in the immediate neighborhood at the time of the telling.

For example, a woman in Fargo is pouring Post Alpha-Bits cereal for her kids when the letters all start hopping out of the bowls to form words on the kitchen table. Reading them, the woman soon realizes she is receiving a message from someone who died on Earth a while back but has gone on to a rather busy Afterlife on the sixth planet of the Tarkanian system, eighty million light-years away, give or take a light-year. It becomes her job to report this to the world, which of course makes *her* the Intermediary Person.

Or how about the guy in Newark who can't get a date on Saturday night and is home playing *Tomb Raider*? All of a sudden Lara stops mucking around, turns toward the guy and, using her finger, goes against the program to write a bunch of stuff from someone who had once raised pistachios near Bakersfield but was now battling prehistoric reptiles in a parallel dimension, or Neanderthal types at the center of the Earth, or whatever. Right, another Intermediary Person is what our dateless guy has become.

If you want to get real technical about the telling of Bernie Smith's weird and fantastic adventures, I guess you would have to categorize me as the Intermediary Person to the Intermediary Person, because the *real* Intermediary Person here was Old Bob.

I suppose he had a last name, but I'll be darned if I ever heard it, not during the first eighteen years of my life that I'd lived entirely in Idyllwild, California or in the fifteen years since I'd gone off to college and career, returning every so often to my folks' place. To those of us who really liked him—and even to those who figured he was half a liter short of a two-liter bottle—he had always been Old Bob, and always would be.

Some say Old Bob lived there when the small town, way up in the San Jacinto Mountains, was established back in the late nineteenth century. Others believe he was around when the ancestors of the first Native Americans crossed over on the Asian land bridge. In any case, you get the picture.

The amiable Old Bob had always lived in a small, utilitarian wood-and-brick cabin about three miles from “downtown” Idyllwild. He did odd jobs around town—quite capably, I might add. But it was his tall tales that either endeared him to people or made them want to take off in the other direction when they saw him coming. To the men who bellied up to the local bars he spoke of beautiful, exotic women. To the ladies he described far-off lands of mystery and romance. To the kids, who got off on his stories more than anyone, he narrated fantastic adventures of treasure hunts, encounters with sea creatures, pirates, that sort of thing. And even though none of us were sure if he had *ever* seen the ocean in his life, we didn't care, because *wow*, could this old guy tell a story!

So, like him or not, Old Bob was as much a fixture in Idyllwild as the town totem pole,

which explained why his sudden change of personality made a lot of people there wonder what had bitten him in the butt.

My old boyhood buddy, Eli Greene, first told me about it when he called me at my Orange County condo. Eli was publisher, editor, and chief-everything-else of the *Idyllwild Screamer*. (*Published Once or Twice a Week...Usually. All the News that can Fit When we Don't Have Enough Ads.*) It surprised me to hear about it, because I'd been up a couple months ago and spent a little time with Old Bob, something I never missed out on, finding him the same as always. But now, according to Eli, he was seldom seen in town, and he hardly said a word when anyone did bump into him. The gnarly fellow even seemed to *look* older, which definitely sounded impossible, almost like he carried Tahquitz Rock around on his shoulders or something. Really out of character. So Eli, knowing how much I liked him and knowing that I was about due to come up and visit my folks, asked if I might check it out. Of course I agreed.

The next day, Friday, I left for Idyllwild after work. I got to the *Screamer's* office at sunset. Eli told me that he had seen Old Bob earlier in the day, and if anything he seemed even less like himself than before.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Just about bit my head off, I swear!" Eli said.

Well, despite being knocked down and dragged out from battling the freeways, I decided to go right over and see the old guy. I told Eli I would keep in touch then headed out of town to the turnoff for Old Bob's place, a narrow, graded road that could get real nasty in the winter. It crossed a meadow then wound between huge, ancient oaks and all kinds of conifers. The old man's cabin stood just beyond where these trees were densest. Not far, but from here the road was in bad shape *all* the time, so even with my four-wheel drive Ford Explorer it would still take a while to get there.

Guess what, half a mile away I ran out of gas. Brilliant. I figured I could count on Eli to bring a gallon out, so I'd at least be able to get back to town. Not that it made me any less of a schmuck.

I left the Jeep where it had died and started for the cabin. Not along the road, but rather up a slope through the woods, along an ancient deer trail that I knew so well I could've followed in the dark—a good thing, since it *was* dark. Before long I could see the glow from a window in the cabin between the boles. Whoa, how many times had I been here before?

But just before stepping out from the trees, I saw Old Bob. He sat cross-legged at the base of a boulder, fifty yards from his front door. Instead of popping out and calling to him—my first instinct—I decided to circle around under cover and get closer to him, because...something did not seem exactly right. I wasn't quite sure what it might be, not until I was about ten yards away.

Okay, here's what was happening: Old Bob's eyes were closed, his head tilted up at a sharp angle, like he was communing with his Maker or something. Across his legs sat a laptop computer, a *really* odd thing, because until now I'd always thought that those "newfangled typewriters" had confused the old guy. Anyway, he was inputting words at a speed that rivaled Data the android. I'm talking *fast*. And all the time he had this steel-jawed look of determination on his face.

While I watched, he kept at it for at least another twenty minutes. I'm telling you, he looked exhausted. Assuming this wasn't the first time he had done this, it probably accounted for his weird behavior in the past few weeks. I have to say one thing: whatever was going on, it had definitely piqued my curiosity.

Old Bob finally stopped his inputting. His eyes opened slowly, and for a while he stared at the starry night sky. Then, he spoke in a hollow, guttural voice that creeped me out:

"I...tell ya...Bernie...yer sorta getting' yourself into...a crock of...deep shit, don't ya think?"

Finished now, his head drooped; I thought he'd fallen asleep. Then, with a sigh, he tucked the laptop under his arm and stood up. I chose this time to step out from behind the trees, making some noise so I wouldn't scare the crap out of him. He stared at me dumbly at first, then opened his eyes wide and waved a gnarly finger in my direction.

"Hey boy, how long ya been there?" he asked.

"Long enough," I replied, not quite sure how he would react.

"Well, hot damn!" he exclaimed. "I sorta don't have to be the only one to deal with this no more!"

"Excuse me?"

He sighed. "Come on inside. I kin show you better there."

He led me into his neat little cabin. Previously, stepping into Old Bob's front room was like going through a time warp to the 1880s or something. But now, another computer (inexpensive but dependable Dell, I noticed) sat on his ancient rolltop desk. A Photosmart printer, too, with lots of printed pages on the floor below.

What the devil was going on here?

Old Bob was beat; yeah, not hard to tell. He managed to remove the disk from the laptop, slip it into the drive on the other computer and get the printer going before stretching out in his old La-Z-Boy. He raised that bent finger again and indicated the pages on the floor.

"Give it a read, boy," he said, kind of wheezily, "and see whatcha think." Then, he either fell asleep or went on to meet his spirit guide.

No, he was definitely sleeping, and after a minute of raspy breathing he rested more comfortably. I gathered up the bulk of the pages and sank down in another old armchair, one so soft that you could've been trapped in its folds forever. Soon I had read the first few pages, and despite my astonishment, I understood. The words, inputted by the old man, were not his own, but those of someone else.

This incredible narrative, which I, as your Intermediary Person (of an Intermediary Person), now reveal a bit hesitantly, had come from one who was somewhere...*across the abysmal void of endless space!*

No shit.

Chapter One: The Weird Light in the Cornfield

You might actually believe this, and then again, you might think it's a crock; doesn't matter to me one bit.

I don't have any reason to make up the stuff that happened to me in recent months, especially considering where I am at the moment. Nor did I do what a lot of you thought I did that night in Tasselville, when you saw me kicked off the world upon which I spent a rather forgettable first twenty-five years of life. Yeah, but I don't blame you anymore, despite the fact that I can't—*won't*—ever come back. Standing here upon this world, more miles from good ole Earth than even the most open-minded of you could comprehend, I say this without any qualms: yeah, I would *definitely* remain, because my destiny, karma, whatever you want to call it, is *here*, upon this nasty, moonless world called Persus.

My name is Bernie Smith; isn't that exciting? It would've been bad enough having to put up with all the B.S. jokes that kids with those initials usually get dumped on them. Uh-uh, because I had to have a German mother, and she just *had* to see the old family name carried on, so my whole moniker was Bernard Ungerplatz Smith, and just try to imagine surviving the formative years with *that* cross to bear—especially when all of those formative years were spent in the enlightened metropolis of Tasselville, Iowa. At least I was a big kid, hitting six-foot-one before my fifteenth birthday (haven't grown more than half an inch since), so I was able to minimize the grief by bloodying up a few noses. That didn't leave me the most popular kid in town, though.

My father ran out on my mother when I was little. An ex-military man, he became a mercenary in Rwanda or the Congo or some such place, and as far as I know, his skull made a nice pen and pencil holder in the hut of some cannibal chieftain. Mom was real neat, and she raised me as best she could, but life's a bitch sometimes, and she died when I was twelve, leaving me with little else than her great sense of humor, quite uncharacteristic of her German heritage. After that I lived with Mom's old unfunny spinster sister, Maude Ungerplatz, who is still alive today, which is pretty amazing, because back then she was at least one hundred and seven. Yeah, but strong as an ox. I can still feel the back of her hand across the back of my head.

I escaped Tasselville at the age of eighteen on a football scholarship to Iowa State, which plays in the same conference as Oklahoma, Kansas State, and Texas. Somehow I managed to get through four years, but with absolutely no ambition upon graduating, I wound up joining the army and trying to be all that I can be. I don't know, maybe it was in the blood. Anyway, that turned out to be a brief and unsuccessful venture.

It happened in boot camp. There was this *big* DI in charge of our platoon, a bad sonofabitch, and that's bad as in *bad*, not good. In addition to all the screaming and flailing and stuff that you would expect, this miserable redneck used to love to lay recruits out, especially those of the "wrong" color. One African American kid was hurled against the barracks wall, the blow knocking him out. I found out later that the kid might have suffered some brain damage. The DI wasn't even questioned.

A few days later the asshole was screaming at a kid from Chicago named Martinez for some really unimportant thing. Before long he started whacking the kid on the head, over and over. The rest of the guys just stood around with their fingers you-know-where, too scared to do anything. But I liked Martinez and I was getting real tired of this. I jumped the DI and kicked the

living crap out of him, which in and of itself would've gotten me in plenty of trouble. But the big man had to go and fall awkwardly on his right arm, which shattered some bones in it and left him with a permanent disability. Sorry, it didn't break me up in the least; but as you can guess, I went down for it.

I don't want to talk about the time I spent in the stockade; it was interminable, and it sucked, and... Enough said. Somehow I did survive it, and was let out; not too honorably, of course. Having never held my fellow beings in the highest regard anyway, you can imagine what I now thought about them in the wake of this "injustice," as I saw it.

So, what to do with the rest of my life. I started wandering around the eastern half of the country, mostly from one big or medium-sized city to another, where I could be anonymous. Two months here, five there, earning whatever I needed to get by. No friends, and just about nothing you could categorize as a relationship, even though I was hardly what you would call celibate. Attracting women wasn't that hard; most of them said I looked like Ray Liotta, the guy who played Shoeless Joe Jackson in *Field of Dreams* and that bad-assed gangster in *Goodfellas*. I don't know, maybe it was the places where I met these women, or maybe it was just my attitude. Whatever the case, I couldn't recall any one woman being in my life for more than a week, and I really didn't care.

My aunt, Maude Ungerplatz, had written me a lot during my time in the stockade, sent me homemade fruitcake, good stuff like that. She'd never had much money, and things were still rough for her, so I would send a few dollars every other month or so, let her know where I was. One thing she would always do was ask me when I was coming home. Things weren't so bad in Tasselville, she would say. You could get a job, Bernard, settle down, have a home again.

Yeah, right.

But you know, a small part of me (*real* small) wondered if maybe that wasn't what I wanted on this one Sunday afternoon as I rode the bus out of Peoria, Illinois after an unexciting six weeks there. All my worldly acquisitions of recent years—*all* of them—were in the big suitcase in the Greyhound's belly, and *that* was pretty sad, when you stopped to think about it. Everything else that had belonged to my mother or me was in Aunt Maude's attic. Well, at least that was *something*. If nothing else, maybe I could take it all with me.

Take it *where?* you ask. Well, I'd been east of the Mississippi all of my life, so the logical choice was *west*. I don't know; Colorado, maybe, or even all the way to California, where I could be gnarly and totally awesome and hang ten and wipe out and all that stuff they do out there.

But that was just more running, right? And while I made my plans to go west during those last two fun weeks in Peoria, that "small part" kept nagging me, saying that maybe Aunt Maude was right. Maybe I *could* go home again; maybe it would be all right. And even if that were a crock, I would at least have given it a try. I could then take what I wanted from the attic, sell off the rest, and head west with a few more bucks in my pocket. No harm no foul. So of course, the bus that left Peoria that Sunday afternoon pointed straight for Tasselville.

Oh boy, did that turn out to be an interesting decision.

Wait, first things first. There I was on Monday morning, walking along Field Avenue after spending a night in my old room on the second floor of Aunt Maude's house. (The *Star Wars* wallpaper with C3PO and R2D2 still hung in it.) I'd forgotten how insufferable Aunt Maude could be; now I remembered. Still, if I chose to stay here, it would be in a place of my own, so no problem.

But small towns have big ears (even if they're not surrounded by cornfields), and Tasselville proved no exception. Everyone there knew of my past indiscretion in the army, as

evidenced by the cold stares, muted whispers and waggy fingers aimed in my direction along Field Avenue. No one, I mean *no one* responded when I said hello.

Well, give me credit for persistence. I kept going around, looking for work, but you know what I found? All my “school chums” were now pillars of the community: store managers, farmers, warehouse supervisors, that sort of thing. Can you *imagine* the kind of crap they gave old Bernie Smith? I swear, it took a lot to keep from busting their faces, as I would have done—as I *had* done—years ago. Uh-uh, the assholes weren’t worth the effort.

The humiliating day finally ended with me getting another large ration from Aunt Maude. Okay, that put the final nail in the coffin. I packed up my suitcase and stormed out of the *Star Wars* room for what I knew would be the last time. Whatever bus was leaving Tasselville in the direction of the westering sun, I would be on it. California, here I come; yeah, I was sure of it now. L.A., or maybe San Diego.

As you can pretty much figure, not a whole lot of busses arrived in or departed Tasselville, Iowa on any given day. At the depot—located in front of Lester’s Truck Stop and Eatery on Highway 43—I learned that the last westward-bound bus of the day would be along at nine-thirty, its final destination Las Vegas. Yeah, that was great. I bought my ticket, ate one of Lester’s cholesterol-plate specials, threw my suitcase into a locker and went for a walk. With nearly three hours left, I was not of a mind to sit around.

Had I just kept my rear end firmly planted on the depot bench and read a book or something...

Highway 43 and Tasselville’s Main Street were one and the same, only a few cornfields and a City Limits sign separating them. By the time I reached the town crossroads, where Main and Field intersected, it was nearly seven-thirty; well past sunset, this being October. Most businesses were closed, and few people were around, which suited me just fine. Contrary to popular opinion, they do *not* roll the sidewalks up in small Midwest towns; but close enough.

Dekins Hardware stood on the northwest corner of Main Street and Field Avenue, the same location it had been in since Jesse James and his gang robbed banks in neighboring Minnesota. It had just closed, but old Ward Dekins was still there, counting the day’s receipts from his ancient cash register. While Dekins had never been a sweetheart of a guy, he ran a distant second to his asshole son, Junior. A year older than me, Junior Dekins had been a personal thorn in my butt all through my childhood years in Tasselville. Among other things he used to give me crap about my father leaving Mom and me to “go fight for some dumb-assed jungle niggers.” He had always been bigger than me, and until I turned twelve he could easily beat my pants off. It was only after I started whipping him that he went out of his way to avoid me, although he was never shy about feeding me a ration from the back of a passing pickup truck or whatever. The one constant factor: we hated each other’s guts.

Even so, you’d like to think that time could do a number on stuff. That’s what I hoped when I’d stopped in the store earlier, responding to a *Help Wanted* sign in the window. Yeah, right. Old Ward was semi-cordial, but fatso Junior was worse than ever before. He’d even shouted shit up the street after me when I’d left. Whoa, talk about restraint! Ignoring that redneck tub of goo might’ve been one of the hardest things I’d done in years.

I was thinking about starting back to the bus depot when I noticed something weird inside Dekins Hardware. Old Ward, who a moment before had been leaning over his receipts, now stood straight, his left hand held skyward, as if asking some greater power why business had been so crummy that day. His right hand was clutched to his chest, not a promising sign. He staggered around then pitched forward, his forehead striking a sharp edge of his hardwood

counter. Whatever else was wrong with him, he now had a nasty gash to go along with it.

By this time I had made it to the front door, which of course was locked. I looked around for help, but there wasn't a soul in sight. Okay, the man needed help, so I had no choice but to bust down the door, which was not as easy as it looked in the movies, and made a hell of a lot of noise. Once inside I hurried to him, in the process knocking over a display of hand tools, which made even more of a racket on the tile floor. The cut was bleeding when I reached him, but at least he still lived, so I laid him down on the floor as gently as possible. Yuck, I got blood on my hands and my clothes. His eyes were half-open, and I think he was aware of me, but all he could do was gasp. As bad as the cut was, it would have to wait, because this man needed CPR, and he needed it now!

But before I could start, the store lights suddenly came on. Junior Dekins, shotgun raised, emerged from a back room and took in the scene, wide-eyed. His usual dorky expression suddenly transformed into one of anger.

"You sumbitch!" he exclaimed. "You friggin' sumbitch!"

"Junior, listen to me—!" I began.

"Had to go 'n kill my old man, huh?" he roared.

"Junior, he's not dead!" I tried to tell the moron. "Will you help—?"

"*You kilt him!*" he cried.

"Junior, no, he's—!"

Oh shit, he pulled the trigger, but in his state his aim sucked, and the contents of about a dozen cans of Dutch Boy paint began spewing into the aisle. Before he could empty the second barrel I snatched a coil of garden hose from a display and threw it at him. Nope, didn't hit him, but at least it diverted his attention long enough to start a mad dash for the door. The pellets from the second barrel took out the whole plate glass window, which showered me with shards, but that was all. I burst out onto the Main Street, which had been deserted a few seconds earlier, but now of course had three or four people walking about—all of whom saw me emerge.

Hey, screw this! I turned on Field Avenue and headed north, toward the outskirts of town...three blocks away. From behind I could hear Junior Dekins's booming voice. A lot of other folks heard it too.

"*Murderer! Bernie Smith is a friggin' murderer!*"