

CHAPTER ONE: TIME FREAKING FLIES

Yeah, well, it's me again. I did tell you I'd be back, did I not? I just didn't think it would take nearly three decades!

So if you do the math, that makes me an old fart (actually, I prefer *young* fart) of sixty-something. Holy crap, how did *that* come about?!

When last we parted under the Santa Margarita River bridge, I figured that the next stretch of Reality Time would consume about half the summer. So, in the immortal words of the late, great Fred Willard, "*Wha' hoppen?!?*" Well, I shall fill you in.

And why have I chosen this particular time to hang with you again? I'll tell you that, too—later.

Okay, so after the rousing send-off from My Old Guy and all of the other Old Guys, and the good news from my agent, Izzy McCarthy, about getting to write a sequel to my literary gem, *Tree Men of Quazrak*, something weird happened. Actually, *three* weird somethings happened, each one worthy of being designated a **WTF Moment**.

WTF Moment #1: Each time I returned home after riding the *mbuva lun gallee* I'd hung the Bukko, my "emergency exit" amulet, on one of my many Don Quixote statues, a tall porcelain job sitting atop the coffee table in my living room. Sprawled on my couch and half-asleep I heard a noise, something like a steak sizzling on a grill, and when I opened my eyes I saw the Bukko winking out of existence. No shit, like Scotty or Chief O'Brien beamed it up! What was this about?

WTF Moment #2: A few minutes later, as I sat there wondering what had happened to the Old Guy's treasured talisman, I felt a twinge in the back of my neck. Hurt like hell for about seven-hundredths of a second. I didn't need a brain surgeon (neither Hubert, Horatio, nor Humphrey) to tell me that the UT7, my invaluable Universal Translator, had been zapped out of me! I was starting to get the message here.

WTF Moment #3: The *coup de grâce* occurred the next day after I picked up my Nishiki, nicely tuned and oiled, from the bike shop. Half knowing what to expect I drove up to Oceanside, rode out on Camp Pendleton, pedaled like hell up the Stuart Mesa hill (yep, Muriel and Walt, along with a pack of panting, grumbling seniors, slowww-ly walked alongside their bikes as they compared their Medicare coverage), and waited for a while at the Starting Point. Nope, no Old Guys here. Once the elder hostiles passed I hurtled down the hill and discovered that—I'm sure you figured it out by now—the **22nd gear was gone!**

Okay, enough drama for the time being. I petitioned the heavens a few times but the Old Guy wasn't home. Not even voicemail. So all the stuff that he and the other Old Guys said under the Santa Margarita River bridge, about a whole bunch more Old Guys in the audience the next time I hit the Ultimate Bike Path, was a crock. My exploring days appeared to be over.

So yeah, I was pissed off, but what the hell, I had other things to do, most of which involved Holly Dragonette. In twenty-five words or more—one loo-ong William Faulkner sentence—here is how all of that went down. I helped Holly move out from Iowa to Del Mar, and she started her job at a well-known life science company, and eventually we both heard the bells and whistles and Tchaikovsky and we moved in together, and a few years after that she received her PhD the same week we got married on a cliff overlooking the La Jolla shoreline, and by choice she took my name and became Dr. Holly Miller (how cool is that!), and a few years after that we had a daughter, and we named her Jacqueline after Holly's late beloved grandma, which I think finally endeared me to my dubious Middle America in-laws, and all these years later the three of us are just as happy as clams in wine sauce. Life turned out pretty good for ol' Jack.

But with all of those years in the rearview mirror, I'd be telling an untruth if I said that I didn't ever think about the Ultimate Bike Path, and all of those crazy gates that deposited me into some strange and wonderful—and dangerous—worlds. By the way, I never have told Holly about any of that—not directly, anyway. Yeah, she read the three books that I had written about my adventures along and off the *mbuva lun gallee*. Her response after finishing the first one: "You have one freaking wild and sick imagination, my love."

Thinking about Hormona the Vulvan, and Wistilla of Murlug, and Sharra the Slut, and a few others along the way, I decided that having Holly believe I made it all up was for the best, don't you?

Oh, and in addition to those three books I've had a long and busy writing career. After *Termite Terrors of Quazgak* got published, the series really took off. A hard-core cult following cemented its popularity, especially after these folks started doing cosplay at various science fiction conventions, many dressed as decaying trees with attitudes. Last week I sent off #9 in the series, *Leaf Ravagers of Quazgak*, to my long-in-tooth-but-still-robust agent, Izzy McCarthy. "Same old crap," he opined, sort of a tradition now, given that he loves those advances and royalties. He even swore that he actually read most of the books...at least part of the way through.

But in the midst of the forest I finally got to write my first horror novel, and wow, did that turn out great! *Kindergarten Zombies* garnered rave reviews—well, one anyway, from a newspaper guy in Pigslop, Nebraska. He especially liked the scene in which the five- and six-year-old zombies, having been infected by alien-implanted spoons in their paper juice boxes, chow down on their teacher, Mrs. Hotchkiss. The reviewer said that she reminded him of one of his grade-school teachers.

And after its release—drum roll here—*Kindergarten Zombies* was optioned for a movie! I got a humongous chunk of change for it, which helped Holly and me do an extensive remodel on our Del Mar home, with plenty left over. Who optioned it? One of those many streaming services, not one that you probably heard of, like Vudu, Fubo, or Hulu. No, this one was a startup called Dudu. Sadly, it went belly up four months after I signed, and the movie never got done...but I did get to keep the money.

The book also generated a cult following of some seriously weird weirdos. So last year I did a second one, *Kindergarten Zombies II: On to the First Grade*. The jury is still out on any additional sequels.

Just a couple more things before I tell you why we're hanging out again. Have I bragged about my girls yet? Holly is everything a guy could want in a spouse. Here's a cliché: she made ol' Jack a better person, for sure. Even though she doesn't have to work, she loves what she does and she's still with the same life science company where she started so long ago, only now she's one of the senior officers. As we "speak" she is at a conference up in San Francisco, after which she'll spend a few days with Jacqueline, who is attending Berkeley—on a free ride!

Yes, our daughter is brilliant. Growing up, she won her share of grade-school science competitions. I wonder where she gets that from. Remember ol' Jack and his 2.5% (downgraded from 3%) brain pitted against that intellectual seagull on the *mbuva lun gallee*? Uh-huh, Jacqueline is the seagull...only smarter, I swear! But she still loves her dad, mental midget though he may be.

And get this: for much of her junior year she's been in a serious relationship with a guy named Taylor—a fanfare here—*Butterwood*! Looks like Melvin Butterwood, the Administrator of Galaxyland, is definitely my great-whatever grandson.

A sad note to report: two years ago my mother, Mrs. Rose Miller Leventhal of Pompano Beach, Florida, moved on to wherever little old Jewish ladies go when there's no more chicken soup left in the tank. I do miss her. Five months earlier her husband, Tobias "Chainsaw" Leventhal, had given up the ghost. I guess she was lonely.

Okay, that's enough catching up for now. Here is the big news of the day: earlier tonight, while I was watching my Padres beat the shit out of the hated Dodgers, *the Bukko reappeared before my very eyes around the porcelain Don Quixote!* Scared the living crap out of me it did, necessitating a few imaginary puffs of air from an imaginary oxygen bottle.

A few seconds after that a sharp pain in my neck indicated that the UT-whatever had been reinserted. Just to make sure I switched the channel to *Telemundo*, my command of Spanish being limited to "Un margarita, por favor." Yep, I could understand every word they were saying. The Universal Translator had to be back for a reason. Could it be...?

Then, a note shimmered into existence just below the Bukko. I picked it up with a shaking hand (how's that for melodrama?) and read it:

Jack:
Starting Point
8 a.m. tomorrow
OG

Okay, no big deal. All this means is...**I'M GONNA RIDE THE ULTIMATE BIKE PATH AGAIN, AND YOU GUYS ARE COMING WITH ME!!!**