

## CHAPTER ONE: OPEN FOR BUSINESS?

Yeah, well, it's me again. By this time I'm sure you know that it means we'll be hanging out for a while. But, first things first.

Back when the Ultimate Bike Path wound up **closed for repairs**—though not before nearly lopping off my head, not to mention various and sundry other parts of my anatomy—the Old Guy and his Study Group cronies estimated that it might take two or three months to “fix” the blasted thing. Guess what, it turned out to be nearly *nine months* to do the job, which didn't surprise me in the least. Those were some serious “anomalies,” as the Old Guy was wont to call them. Myself, I preferred “malfunctions.”

But I didn't exactly find myself pining away in frustration to get back on the *mbuva lun gallee*. Near-death experiences will do that to a person, ya know? And I do have a life away from all of that craziness. Also, as I might've mentioned before, I had to ponder if I really wanted to go back into the cosmic tunnel anytime soon. I mean, the statement that malfunctions and anomalies on the Ultimate Bike Path only occurred every 473.6 years had been thrown out the window, am I right?

So, after riding away from that gaggle of Old Guys at the bottom of the Stuart Mesa hill on that fateful day, I re-entered the world of those living normal lives—though always wondering just exactly what “normal” is. Oh, there were ups and downs...mostly the former, but a bit of the latter.

For example, this one started as an “up” but kind of went straight downhill in short order. Remember when my first horror novel, *Kindergarten Zombies*, got optioned for a movie by a streaming service? And then that company went under? Well, the studio exec who loved the novel moved on to another streaming service, a bigger and better one, whose name I won't mention.

So yeah, this studio exec contacted my agent, Izzy McCarthy, and said that he was working on having the book optioned by his new company. Izzy, who has a deep, abiding love of his percentage, sounded guardedly excited when he gave me the news. I got pumped up too...perhaps a bit more than **guardedly**.

But alas, **wha' happen?** Well, what *did* happen has since become a benchmark joke throughout the streaming service industry, I'm sure. The powers-that-be of the company, a mite turned off by a story in which five- and six-year-old kids suck out the brains of teachers, parents, and fellow students, sent the studio exec a five-word note, an oft-quoted statement by the Palmer character in John Carpenter's *The Thing*: **“You gotta be fucking kidding!”**

Last I heard, that studio exec has undertaken a brand-new career in the food services industry at the In-N-Out Burger in Burbank.

And coincident with this, my publisher, despite the decent sales on *Kindergarten Zombies* and *Kindergarten Zombies II: On to the First Grade*, caved in to the thousands (tens of thousands?) of angry letters, emails, and texts from parents of kindergartners and first-graders (and many other grades) bitching about the series, and canceled it. Hang on to those first editions, folks...they could be your retirement nest egg.

Anyway, going back to what has worked for quite a long time, I began writing the tenth book in my long-running series, *Wood Worms of Quazzak*. That should make a limited but passionate fan base ecstatic. I'll have it finished in short order. Izzy McCarthy will be overjoyed to receive the “same old crap.”

So what else happened since we last hung out? You won't believe this one: via email Holly and I got an invitation from the local senior center to once again try our hand (foot?) at line dancing! Remember Henrietta Mumphrey, that ninety-six-year-old dancing stud, who I inadvertently drop-kicked across the floor when my spastic feet got tangled up? Turned out the nice lady felt badly about my banishment and petitioned the coordinator to give me another chance. The woman agreed, with one stipulation: that Holly and I do our thing in the hallway by ourselves, not on the dance floor with all the others. We politely declined the invitation.

We also rode our bikes a bunch of times, even going as far north as Laguna Beach on a few occasions. That, of course, took us through Camp Pendleton, but strangely enough we somehow managed to avoid running into all of those Oceanside seniors. Except for this one time...

Maybe it was because we had hit the road earlier than usual. A third of the way up the nasty Stuart Mesa hill we came upon about a dozen of them, all huffing and puffing and wondering if anyone had thought to bring the nitroglycerin pills. Once past them, we came upon the inevitable front-runners. You guessed it: Dottie and Carl.

Surprisingly, Carl trailed his missus by about ten yards. He was probably admiring her butt. He nodded at me—guess he'd forgotten his threat to blow me away—then ogled Holly, still a knockout for a young fart, and his tongue nearly slithered its way out of his mouth.

Looking at me Carl said, "Wow, how'd an ugly pug like you land such a hot babe? Hey, wanna come back to the abode with us and do a little wife-swapping?"

I couldn't see Holly's reaction as she went a bit faster, pulling up next to Dottie, who said, "Don't listen to him, dear, my asshole hubby of forty-seven years couldn't get a rise out of his johnson if Nicole Kidman sat on his face."

This time Holly shot off like the proverbial bat out of hell. I took up the pursuit, though not before I received the usual bump-and-grind and a wink from Dottie. Who were these people? I mean, *Who were these people?*

In spite of all my cycling and walking and such, I swear Holly was in better shape than me. It took a few minutes of gasping and moaning before I spotted her up ahead, nearly at the top of the hill. She had gotten off her bike and now stood in the turkey mullein a yard off the road, hands on her knees as she bent over like a pretzel. Concerned, I ditched the Nishiki and hurried to her.

Guess what, her face glowed a bright red as she laughed her ass off, totally unable to control herself. Relieved, I also cracked up as I handed her a couple tissues to help with her booger problem.

"I...I thought you...made up those people in your books," she managed to wheeze before finally regaining some semblance of control. "Hey, maybe most of your adventures *are* real!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Maybe you *have* shtupped half the females in the galaxy."

Uh-oh, damage control. "No way, my love, I just borrowed those two, uh, *colorful* folks. I mean, stuff like that just can't happen, am I right?"

"Yeah, I guess. Okay, I'm good. Let's get moving before they catch up."

*Which won't happen for a while*, I thought. Anyway, I dodged that bullet. We got back on our bikes and aimed them northward. A minute or so later we passed the lone eucalyptus, which I glanced at with what I'd refer to as mixed feelings.

Oh, one other thing I should mention. Happened about a month ago. Our daughter, Jacqueline—you know, the rocket scientist—came home from Berkeley on break, and this time she brought her boyfriend, Taylor Butterwood. Holly had met him before, but I hadn't. Having run into his likely great-whatever grandson Melvin in Galaxyland so long ago—my great-great-whatever grandson—I prepared myself as best I could. I mean, this wasn't a coincidence, right? There couldn't be that many Butterwoods around.

So guess what, Taylor looked a hell of a lot like Melvin, who—if you recall—looked a hell of a lot like me. Jeez, was Jacqueline going to marry her dad, or what!

"Funny you should pick an unusual name like Butterwood for one of your characters, Mr. Miller," Taylor had said as we shook hands. "Uh, are you okay?"

I quickly covered up a loud gasp by summoning a gag reflex, claiming that some nachos I'd been munching on had gone down the wrong way or something. Still, my two women eyed me dubiously, especially my dear bride. If Dottie and Carl were real, maybe Melvin Butterwood, and Atoris the Evil, and Don Quixote, and—*oy!*—Hormona the Vulvan and Sharra of Amazina were not figments of my warped imagination after all.

Anyway, I survived that encounter, and I came away liking Taylor, who was a close match to Jacqueline in the gray matter department. (Another intellectual seagull.) I guess Holly and I are destined to have some bright descendants.

Okay, let us get to the heart of the matter. A few months after my last ill-fated excursion on the *mbuva lun gallee*, I received my first bit of correspondence from the Old Guy in the form of two steamy words on my bathroom mirror: **not yet**. Took me a moment to grasp it. Like I said, after what happened the last time, I was *not* waiting impatiently to get back on the road again. The updates continued, at least one a month, the same two words each time. I didn't respond; frankly, I just blew them off.

Then, about three weeks ago, the message changed: **getting close...still in?** Oh boy, *was* I still in? For a writer, I found myself at a loss for words. I fingered **we'll see** on the mirror and left it at that. How's that for being wishy-washy? At least the Old Guy didn't question it.

Now, despite the barrage of messages for the past few months I didn't get annoyed by them, because this time, unlike nearly three decades ago, I knew that the Old Guy continued to stay on top of the situation. For one thing, I still had the Bukko, safely tucked away in my sock drawer. They had recalled it back then. I'm not sure about the Vurdabrok gear on my old Nishiki, and given the more recent state of the Ultimate Bike Path I wasn't about to test it, even if I could.

Then, there was the Universal Translator. A few weeks after the shutdown of the *mbuva lun gallee* I realized that I'd not felt a twinge in my neck and figured they hadn't removed it. I decided to test it out and tuned in to a soap opera on Telemundo. Yep, still worked fine. (*Lo siento mucho, María, no sabía que la mujer con la que te engañé era tu nieta.*)

Then, a couple of days ago, I did feel that twinge (more like excruciating pain) as the UT17 was zapped from my neck. And about twenty seconds later I felt another twinge (yep, more pain) as the UT18 (I guess) was inserted. Definitely getting close. I'm just glad Holly wasn't around. She would've rushed me to Urgent Care.

Finally, this is what happened last night. Remember the actual note that the Old Guy sent me after the twenty-seven-year hiatus? Well, that's kind of what I'd been expecting. But no-oo, just like all the updates his message appeared on my bathroom mirror right before bedtime.

**Jack:**  
**Starting Point**  
**9:30 a.m. tomorrow**  
**O.G.**

I'm just glad Holly seldom if ever comes into my bathroom. Something about a "lingering stench," which in truth I've never really noticed before.

Anyway, will I be meeting my favorite alien out by the lone eucalyptus on Camp Pendleton? Yeah, I guess so. Does that mean I'll be back on the Ultimate Bike Path again? I can't answer that question just yet, not until I've heard what he has to say. Given my mixed feelings, it's going to take a whole lot of convincing to make me believe that the cosmic tunnel is safely **open for business**.

For now, I'm just going to sleep on it.