**The Anniversary of Injun Joe’s Gold**

by Bill Judge

Squatting on my heels in the Riverside Cemetery, I gazed toward the Mississippi River on a cool October night. The mist rose over the still warm earth like a brigade of ghosts peeking over their tombstones. I used to sneak out and go there sometimes to think. You probably know Riverside too, the cemetery outside Hannibal, Missouri where maybe – I looked around once more to make sure – those Mark Twain characters are buried. The cemetery spread on top of a bluff above the black, swirling, deadly water that’s smothered the breath of many a man. I snapped my pocket LED flashlight on the head stones around me, checking out the company I kept. Dragging the last puff out of my filtered cigarette, I flicked the butt towards old Tom Johnson’s bones. That was the name on the marker. Died in 1870. Born 17 something. Darn. He might have known old George Washington. Father of the country. That was something to think about. I tapped another tube from my Marlboro hard box.

I knew I shouldn’t have been smoking them because of cancer and all, but the convenience store off Bird Street made the stealing too easy. Almost like they gave them to me. So I took them, and even nodded thanks with a smile on my face after I hustled on down the street.

Earlier in the night, Stella and fat Frank Meyers sat in their wooden slat house, watching the satellite TV that was paid for with the money that the state gave them to foster parent me. The only time they ever paid attention to me was when the state came to check up on “my welfare” and then they managed to put on a decent show. Nothing fancy. They just made sure I had something to eat and some clean clothes to wear during the state’s visit. To their eternal credit, they didn’t make me upchuck the decent meal after the state left and I could keep the new blue jeans and flannel shirt. Like I said, it weren’t nothing fancy.

I’ve been with them over three years. I remember thinking I might have almost another year with them, until I turned eighteen. It was a school night but it was not like I snuck out while they was sleeping, though I know that’s what I said, that I snuck out. They didn’t care if I left. And they really didn’t care if I came back. They would have liked that. As long as the po-po don’t find my body and the foster care check kept coming. Good to know I was worth something.

So there I sat, drawing on a smoke and feeling better than the dusty bones that lay beneath my feet. When I walked out of the house, I didn’t plan on staying out all night. I didn’t plan on skipping school but I guess those thoughts were somewhere in the back of my brain. Who was kidding who? I hated school. Even though I struggled, I figured I’d still get my diploma and try to get a job somewheres. I could tinker pretty good with engines. Leaning against a tall stone monument, I took a drag and turned my head.

I spied some car lights rolling slow beneath me along Bluff Street and idly wondered who the hell would drive down there at 2 o’clock in the morning. I toed some brown leaves off Rebecca Gaston’s grave and shot another look down at that road.

Undoubtedly, McAllister was asleep. That kind of bothered me. With a few acres, lined by trees, old man Mack had the only house down there and it was a big, grey Victorian that stood out like a castle on the cliff. He was plenty rich but he was no pain in the ass. You know how rich people can be to a shiftless corn country boy. If they looked any farther down their noses at me, their eyeballs would just slide on out and drop right down on my shoes. But Mack, he was alright. He’d grunt at me once in a while when I saw him in town. He even found odd jobs for me and paid me good money. I don’t know why. I don’t think he knew me any better than anybody else but he was decent to me.

Curiosity got the best of this cat and I slunk out of the cemetery with another cigarette in my mouth. The nicotine helped me stay awake. What had started as a mist became a fog as the air got colder and the river contributed to the moisture. It seemed to get thicker as I traipsed down the hill. Creeping in the trees along the edge of Bluff Street, I could see a car just off the road and pointed up towards the castle. I figured it was the same one and, if it hadn’t been so foggy, I’d a seen the tail pipe smoking. As it was, I could hear it when I got closer. Two men sat in the front seat and I could hear their muffled voices through the opened windows. Unable to tell what they was saying, I got as close as I could to them without being seen. The trees, the fog and the dead of night all helped with that.

Turning my head towards the McAllister place, I couldn’t see much. The trees obscured some of my view, but really it was the pea soup that made it tough to see anything but the outlines of the buildings. Like most country people, Mack had a huge steel shed that stored his tractor and his tools. He didn’t need a tractor but I guessed that he used it to bushwhack the weeds that could swallow a house whole if you’d let ‘em grow. From memory, I also knew he had a mother in law house but I doubted if he still had a mother in law. I knew his wife had died a few years back and Mack had to be in his late seventies.

 All that said, I couldn’t figure what the men could see that I couldn’t see. I held my breath and just tried to listen.

 “Don’t know.” That’s the first I heard.

 “We gonna sit here all night?” The guy nearest me asked with a grunt.

 “Don’t know.”

 “Ain’t nobody home.”

 “What do you mean, ain’t nobody home. You think McAllister is out dancing?” The driver scoffed.

 He was right about that. Mack didn’t dance. Nor did he go drinking. He was in there alright. Sleeping like most folks would have been.

 Click-click. That sound made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I knew what that was. The guy on the passenger side just cocked a pistol.

 “Let’s blast him.”

 “Will you just shut up. What the hell. Let’s just sit here and wait and see. Doesn’t hurt to wait a minute.”

 “You say that but I can’t see nothing.”

 “Yeah, you’re right about something for once. I’ll get us closer.” The driver shifted the gears and crunched up the gravel another hundred feet. Hunched over and stepping from tree to tree, I tried to follow without a sound. After I knew they had a gun, I had to play it safe. If they heard me, they’d probably shoot me.

 Almost for sure, if the passenger had a gun, the driver did too. I still wasn’t positive what they were there for though the gun had made that point moot. At least one guy wasn’t afraid to use it.

 “That’s better.”

 “Yeah,” the passenger agreed. “He as rich as they say?”

 “At least. They say he don’t keep no money in the bank. All rolled up under his bed.”

 “Oh yeah. Hum baby.”

 Now I knew that was bull because I’d seen old Mack go in and out of the F&M Bank on Fifth Street. I assumed he kept money in there but I dared not tell them guys that.

 I didn’t know what I could do. I ain’t ashamed to say that I started to get a panic in me. I couldn’t let them kill old man McAllister. But I couldn’t think how I could stop them. I didn’t have no gun and even if I did, I couldn’t shoot them cold blooded like. They might be killers but I wasn’t. I didn’t have time to run into town and get the police. Besides, they wouldn’t believe me. And if McAllister then ended up dead, I’d be the first suspect. I knew I had to do something.

 I was so close to them, I could smell the exhaust and then a thought hit me. Not sure why I would but I could mess their car up pretty good. I pulled a handkerchief out of my jeans’ pocket and stripped off one of my socks.

 Inching behind them, I managed to jam the wad into the tail pipe without them noticing. I figured it was just a matter of time before it would overheat that old, juiced up 94 Impala. After I got back into the trees, I realized the flaw in my thinking. Maybe I was hurting Mack’s chances more than helping if those thugs couldn’t drive off. They might just stay and shoot him up and steal his car. I thought about going back and pulling that sock out when the car doors opened. I pasted myself like a windblown leaf on the back of a big, black hickory tree.

 “Let’s go but keep it quiet.” The two copperheads slithered out of their car and pushed the doors closed without clicking the latches. Both were older and bigger than me.

 “Once inside, we can take care of business.”

 I held my breath as the passenger held his pistol up in the moonlight like a Wild West gunslinger.

Now what could I do? They were hell bent on killing Mack and I was helpless. I didn’t want to hear the shots that got him but I couldn’t get the courage to leave.

Courage? What courage? I remember the pit of my stomach curled up into itself and I felt like I was going to vomit. Like I was a mummy under a spell, I eased up to the tree line, dragging my feet and stubbing my toe on a hunk of rock. It almost tripped me but it also jerked my mind to thinking. I realized what I could do.

 I bent over and worked that rock out of the ground while those two boys very slowly closed in on the house. The piece of rock was a good size – almost as big as a baseball. Though I couldn’t see much, I stepped out of the woods and, like a centerfielder, I chucked that stone as hard as I could across the yard. After that everything happened at once.

 The rock smashed through McAllister’s picture window with as loud a shatter as I had ever heard.

 A split second later, I heard a “dang-gammit” just as I turned to run back into the woods.

 “Somebody’s out there!”

 I guessed they saw me.

 Bam, bam. Pistol shots rang out and I thought I heard a bullet shake the leaves of an oak tree just a few steps to my right. Being that close to getting shot by one of those slugs, I yanked off course and dodged left.

 A second later, I heard old Mack bark, “Who the hell’s there?” Two more pistol shots popped and they must have been aimed back at Mack because I heard glass break again.

 “Sum dad gum,” Mack growled so I knew he was alright. Ker-pow! That’s when I heard a bomb explode.

 “The old man’s got a cannon!”

 “Let’s get out of here!”

 “Oh no, our car’s dead.”

Maybe that wasn’t such a smart idea to overheat their getaway car because I knew that with Mack packing a shot gun, they’d a got away as fast as they could.

 I kept running and I knew they heard me. I didn’t care no more about the noise, I just crashed through the woods at break neck speed, too afraid to stop. Branches scratched and clawed at my face and hands. They followed me like a pair of hound dogs, baying like crazy. I guess they figured they had to run too and they may as well run after me.

Somehow they seemed to duck below the worst of the bramble. I wasn’t sure I could outrun them and, besides, they didn’t need to get right on top of me to shoot me. But I had a few good things going for me. They were surprised by me, didn’t know who I was and it was dark and foggy. Still, I needed a place to set down and hide.

 Climbing up the hillside, my foot wrenched into a hole and I fell face forward like a bale of hay. With the boys catching up, I crawled back towards the hole, hoping I could hide in the indentation. To my surprise, the hole turned out to be the entrance to a small cave and I wriggled my skinny little body in as fast as I could.

 Safe inside I heard, “Where’d he go?”

 “Don’t know.”

 “Hey, stop and listen.”

 “I don’t hear nothing.”

 “Maybe he made it to the top of the hill.”

 “Hey, you boys, you stop right there!”

 That was Mack, but he seemed too far away.

 “Come on, let’s follow that kid.”

 Pow! Mack’s cannon pounded the dirt right outside my hidey hole and I scooted further into the cave. Like a pair of bulldozers, those two bangers plowed up the rest of that hill. I didn’t expect old Mack to follow them. I was guessing but I thought he went back to his place and called the cops.

Me? I shuffled ahead in case those hoods came back. I was surprised that there was still more room in there but my hands didn’t touch a wall so I continued forward. Slow, but sure. It’s dangerous to scramble in a cave. There could be snakes or a sink where you could fall, break a leg and die still stuck between the rocks. I guess I was twenty feet in when I thought of my little flashlight. If I aimed it ahead, nobody would see the light out of the cave. And if I remembered right, the cave opening was actually pointed down into the hole in the ground. I chanced it and got the biggest surprise of my whole night.

That cavern had opened up into a throne room of stalagmites and stalactites. Just like Tom Sawyer and Injun Joe’s cave. It was beautiful.

Maybe it was the LED light but the creamy walls seemed to jitterbug with blue and white and it was just awesome. The dazzle caught the breath of me and then I saw something else sparkle. There was another opening to the left of the back wall. I walked over and shined the beam. It was just a little opening and, right at the entrance, what glittered was a gold coin. A coin that was just like Injun Joe’s gold a hundred years before.

And then there was another, and another, and another, always leading me further back into the cave and I followed like they were breadcrumbs tossed for a bird. On a ledge, in that way back part of the cave, sat several old canvas flour bags full of gold and silver coins. The implications struck me all at once like lightning. I was rich. Ryan Reynolds Hollywood hills rich.

Except I was also just smart enough to know that a minor can’t keep all that gold for hisself. The Meyers would want their cut and, once in their greedy hands, I’d be lucky to get a plug nickel.

I took nothing from that cave but a plan when I crawled out just before dawn. I went back to the Meyers. Next day, the news was all about how old man McAllister had scared off some gun spraying prowlers. Eventually the cops caught them because of their stranded car. The Meyers watched it all on their TV.

I laid low and behaved until my eighteenth birthday. The Meyers kicked me out just like I knew they would and shortly after, I shimmied into that cave and claimed all of old Injun Joe's treasure. I had plans.

©2014 Bill Judge