

GNASH NOT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY CAN DO FOR YOU, BUT WHAT YOUR TEETH CAN DO FOR YOUR COUNTRY!

I became aware of a possible threat to our country's security when, during his annual dental checkup, I discovered that Chief Big Eagle had a message inscribed on one of his molars.

My first thought, in this age of post-war paranoia, was that Big Eagle was some kind of spy, and that his molar was packed with cyanide, so he could take the silent way out if he were captured and put under interrogation.

However, as the old Chief lay in the dentist's chair like a dead whale from the nearby ocean, I realized that there must be more to the matter than this movie-induced explanation.

Firstly, Big Eagle was not the kind of person that the enemy would recruit as a spy. Apart from being even older than me, he was fat, out of shape and forgetful. Definitely not the kind of guy you would entrust with secret information. In addition, his ability to make contacts must be seriously impaired by his physical shortcoming – of which I was now reminded and caused me to open the window. Namely, that he suffered from chronic flatulence.

Secondly, if some foreign power wished to nurture a spy, about the last place they would choose would be Rock Ridge. In the recent war, the half of our town which faced inward to the continent and its major cities had been wiped out. Luckily, the half which faced outward towards the ocean had survived unscathed. My clinic, with my living quarters above, was on the good side of the divide. As I opened the window to let out the cloying smell of the Chief's farts, I could see the blue glint of the sea in the distance. The blast which had removed the other half of our town had also removed the Government Laboratory, making what remained an innocuous collection of houses, with no strategic importance. Those of us who had survived the sudden white explosion in the night sometimes referred to our dismembered community as *Half Town*.

Thirdly, as to why I did not think Chief Big Eagle could be a spy, was the fact that Sheriff Bradley would know about it. Bradley was about my age, and in kinder times we would have been retired by now. As it was, we both laboured on, me keeping teeth in order and him keeping the law in order. Both of our families were gone. (By the way, just so you know: I HATE the Enemy for that; but as Bradley said: do not think about it, and keep going. Which is sometimes easier to say than do, however.) Sheriff Bradley and I have known each other since childhood. Nowadays, with only half the population to occupy us, we frequently find the

opportunity to meet on the deck that surrounds my place. There, usually in the evenings, we smoke and drink whiskey. Not too much of either, but I like the pungent smell of the one and the biting taste of the other. They act somehow like sanitizers for the senses... Anyway, the point is that Bradley would tell me if there was a spy in Half Town.

So, you can understand why I was puzzled by the inscription on Chief Big Eagle's molar.

As he lolled back in the horizontal chair – making its old structure creak – I inserted my dentist's eyeglass into his mouth in order to get a better look. Putting together the magnified words, I saw that the message read: *Danger. Only to be serviced by qualified personnel.*

DOD/2096/4-NEPT.

"They don't make numbers like that any more," I muttered in admiration.

"What are you talking about?" Big Eagle asked lazily. "Are my teeth okay or not?"

"Pretty good," I replied. "But you should cut out that pipe you smoke."

This was admittedly two-faced on my part, given that I smoked cigars most evenings; but the Chief literally stank of methane and marijuana.

"There's nothing else to do," replied the Chief, referring to his smoking.

This reply, delivered in a kind of matter-of-fact but forlorn tone, reminded me that the aboriginals had lost not only one civilization – by the advent of the white man – but also another, due to the recent race-inspired war. I declined to give further advice, and instead inquired casually "Have you had any work done on your teeth recently?"

"Yeah," answered Big Eagle. "I was back east for a conference of chiefs, and a guy in the city put in a new crown for me." He started to struggle out of the dentist's chair, looking slightly dazed after lying flat on his back for the period of the examination. "Isn't it any good?" And then, answering his own question: "It *should* be – he had me asleep for quite a while."

"Don't worry," I assured him. I had indeed noticed the crown, though it did not look particularly new, being stained already by tobacco juice. My mind was, of course, working on the likely scenario that the eastern dentist had done more than simply replace the top of a tooth. "Your teeth will last as long as you do."

The Chief cackled with laughter at this. We were both well along in age, and belonged to that cadre which took a perverse pride in outliving our contemporaries. Big Eagle paused in the doorway, already fishing in the pocket of his bead-decorated waistcoat for his stubby pipe. He also produced a deerskin pouch, from which he began to decant dark-brown strands of tobacco.

Apart from the red beads hemming his jacket, the man's dress, possessions and face all seemed to be washed with deep hues of mahogany.

Satisfied with the pipe's load of weed, he looked at it for a while from under tufted eyebrows. Finally, he said "It's a pity about the War, Doc."

I stared at him. This was a simple man, quietly overwhelmed by the recent disaster; but not knowing how to express his feelings about it. I was sure he was *not* – at least willingly – a spy.

"Yeah," I agreed, giving my opinion to the majority, who now saw the whole conflict as utterly stupid.

Chief Big Eagle shuffled out of the dental clinic, omitting to pay (as usual). For myself, I stood for a bit looking out at the horizon, noting that whitecaps were starting to appear on the usually flat blue of the ocean's surface. It occurred to me that I had not asked Big Eagle for the name of the dentist he had visited back east. But in the post-war environment, all inter-city travel was documented, so it would be relatively easy to find where the old man had been. Wondering if I was over-reacting, I ducked back into the shade of the clinic, having decided to call the Sheriff.

Brad – as he liked to be called – came over just before sunset. The clomp of his cowboy boots on the wood of the deck woke me from my after-dinner snooze. The screen of the television had gone blank, after the two hours' broadcast which post-war conditions allowed. Switching off the blind device, I picked out a cigar from my dwindling supply, and went outside.

Sheriff Bradley was already in the rocking chair, rolling himself one of the small but powerful cigarettes he favoured. I dropped into my easy chair, noting that while the air on the veranda was calm, the distant ocean was now in ruckus from a gathering storm.

Brad and I knew each other well enough that we did not need to exchange pointless comments about the weather. Right away, I told him about the message I had found inscribed on Chief Big Eagle's tooth. He listened well enough; but when I had finished, started to chuckle.

"What's the joke?" I growled.

"Nothin' much," was the reply. "Except, it's kinda funny you've lived all yer life as a dentist – perhaps the most boring profession a person can think on – and only now do you find yerself in the middle of a Terrorist Plot."

Miffed, I was quiet a while. But there was something in my friend's tone that caused me to jump to a conclusion. "So there *is* a plot?"

I suppose my voice must have implied scepticism, because Sheriff Bradley drew deeply on his cigarette before plunging into something akin to a lecture.

"Doc," he said by way of preamble, "you should get out more." Then after a pause: "There are always plots."

I looked at his face, wondering if he was serious, but found only sincerity. Brad has a tanned, lined face with straight blue eyes that make people inclined to trust him. His sun-bleached hair sticks up vertically, cut off level in a no-nonsense manner. Long association has taught me that the only sign of emotion he shows involves his Adam's apple – which jerks up and down inside the scraggly confines of his neck when he is excited. It was doing so now.

"We live in a time of change," he said. And then, realizing that this was trite, got more to the point: "There are three Indian reservations on the doorstep of Rock Ridge. The one headed by Big Eagle is quiet, and the Chief is a peaceable man. But even in *his* tribe, the youngsters have no affection for us whites. And then there is Crooked Leg, and his lot. The Chief there will listen to reason, and so far we've managed to keep him on-side about things like the water supply. But in *his* tribe, the young-bloods are challenging his authority, and there is trouble ahead."

I shifted uneasily in my chair. I was vaguely aware of what Bradley was discussing – especially the arguments about apportioning Half Town's water, which came from a spring near the top of the ridge, and ran downhill through the white community before wending its way through the Indian reservations on the plain below. However, since the local newspaper had ceased publication, I had not kept up on the issue, and was now disturbed to find that it had become a focus of argument.

"Then," continued Bradley, "we have Billy Bob. *He* hates the guts of the white folk, even though he is only a half-breed himself. But his young people call themselves *warriors*, and they're violent. I caught two of them trying to dynamite our water supply last month. *They're* still in jail."

He uttered the last sentence with a strange combination of satisfaction and worry – glad to be able to restrain the felons, but unsure how long he would be able to hold them.

“Huh!” I explained as Bradley fell silent. Things were worse than I had thought. In fact, I had not thought about things to any significant degree, I realized. I was still ruminating on the implications of the Sheriff’s speech when my attention was drawn back...

“...So,” Bradley was saying, “you’re next step is to get Chief Crooked Leg into your clinic, and see if he *also* has a terrorist tooth.”

“Yeah,” I replied absently. A waft of cold air – harbinger of the coming storm – knocked the ash off the end of my cigar, where it had grown over-long while my mind was elsewhere.

“Yeah,” I repeated. “I’ll do that.”

A definite breeze started to blow. Some of the cedar shingles had been removed from the roof of the clinic, by the suction which followed the explosion that had removed the other half of Rock Ridge. Now, the wind from the sea was probing the gaps, rattling the remaining pieces of wood with a sound of castanets.

Bradley stood up, the dusk shrouding his normally reassuring blue eyes. I had previously thought of him as a big man – with his Cuban-heeled boots and Stetson hat perched on top of his spiky hair – but now he seemed to have shrunk. I suddenly realized that it was only the shiny badge on his khaki shirt, backed up by the gun on his hip, which made the old man a figure of authority. And minus those symbols, he was no stronger than me.

“Bye, Doc.”

He gave me a light and perfunctory slap on the shoulder, where I sat in my easy chair with my dead cigar. Perhaps it was the wind, but I felt chilled.

Next morning, I called Chief Crooked Leg. My conversation with him was what they call “elliptical”. We both beat about the issue of his teeth for a while, before I prevailed by pointing out that he was entitled to a free checkup by virtue of his Indian status. Slightly puzzled, but willing to take advantage of anything that was free, he eventually agreed to come to the clinic at noon.

He arrived an hour late. I forbore to comment on this, and instead gave him a welcoming smile as I ushered him towards the dentist’s chair. Perhaps because he was small in stature, I came close to ruining the appointment by using the phrase I normally reserve for children.

“Let’s have a look at those toothy-pegs!”

Crooked Leg shot a suspicious look at me, obviously thinking I was trying to make fun of him. I saved the situation by switching to my professionally-concerned mode. “We sometimes take our teeth lightly, but we *have* to take them *seriously*, you know.”

My solicitous tone seemed to calm him, and he allowed me to lead him to the chair. Unlike Big Eagle, this new aboriginal chief was thin as a stick, and the chair did not complain as he lay down in it. He was wearing a traditional vest of woven goose-quill, which only partly concealed a scrawny chest. He also had an eagle feather in his hair, which I considered asking him to lay aside while the examination was in progress. However, I decided against this. Partly because of what Sheriff Bradley had told me the previous evening about the resurgent nationalism of the natives; and partly because the Chief’s head was covered by a thick, drawn-back ball of wooly hair, which was so thick with dust and other stuff that to disturb it might present an hygienic hazard.

The Chief’s eyes flitted about like those of a captured bird as I peered and prodded inside his mouth. His teeth were excellent. This was partly because of his age – he had only half the years of me – but also because the remnants of food between his molars showed a nutty, grain-filled diet.

And, Yes: the back molar on the left-hand side bore a message. This time, under the magnifying glass, I read: *Danger. Only to be serviced by qualified personnel. DOD/2097/5-NEPT.*

Noting that the words were the same as with Chief Big Eagle, but that the numbers were different, I committed the latter to memory. Anticipating a similar story from Chief Crooked Leg about a visit to an eastern dentist, I said casually: “Your teeth are really good. The few bits of work you’ve had done are really expert. The kind of thing you only get from a high-priced orthodontist back east.”

The response to this was surprising. The Chief sneered, and replied “I wouldn’t pay those carpet-baggers a penny. And anyway, the future of our people lies in the west.”

This appeared to disintegrate the idea of an eastern-based terrorist plot. However, the existence of *some* kind of conspiracy was kept alive by the next comment of my patient.

“I don’t go off the reservation much,” continued Chief Crooked Leg, scrambling out of the dentist’s chair and re-aligning the eagle’s feather in his hair. “I only go up the coast for our annual pow-wow, to Circle City.”

“Ah, yes,” I commented. I had not thought about Circle City for ages. Because, while it was the only sizeable community left standing west of the mountains after the War, it was too far north to exert much political power in Rock Ridge. Apparently, however, while Circle City exerted negligible influence on the local white population, it drew the attention of the aboriginals.

“When’s the next pow-wow?” I asked casually.

“In a week’s time,” replied Chief Crooked Leg. His ready answer made me think again – as I had with Chief Big Eagle – that if there were native spies, they were unknowing ones. Then my new patient added: “But you can’t come. It’s only for Indians.”

Wondering if that meant that the half-blooded Chief Billy Bob would be allowed to attend the pow-wow, I bid my visitor goodbye. I felt I had gained good information, and that I needed to talk again with Sheriff Bradley.

That evening, the storm which had been threatening seemed to be waiting. A steady but strong wind was blowing from the frothy ocean, but the glass panels along the clinic’s deck provided a prism of calm air. I put a thick-bottomed tumbler on the small table by the side of the rocking chair. Cracking open a new bottle of whiskey, I poured myself a generous measure and then put the rest within easy reach of my awaited guest.

I might have dozed of, but in any event I was brought back to my senses by the sound of a body relapsing into the rocking chair. It was Brad all right, but looking mightily worried.

“Hi,” I greeted. “What’s up?”

“The natives are revolting.”

“Oh, I don’t think they’re *that* bad,” I replied mischievously. “Some of them are quite decent.”

“No, no!” Sheriff Bradley exclaimed, “I *mean* that they’re...” He stopped, as he realized the joke.

Abruptly, he reached into the pocket of his beige jacket and pulled out a snub-nosed, blue-steeled revolver. “You might need this.”

I weighed the weapon in my hand, all thought of levity gone. “Things are getting serious, then?”

“Yeah,” confirmed Bradley. “You remember the two guys I locked up for trying to dynamite the town’s water supply?” He hurried on without waiting for a reply, his Adam’s apple working overtime. “Somebody sprang them last night. Demolished half the jail.”

“Wow!”

As if to confirm the worsening state of affairs between the aboriginal and white occupants of Rock Ridge, the strong wind moving up the slope carried to us a few beats of drum music.

“It’s like something from an old Tarzan movie,” I observed, pushing the gun under my chair, still unconvinced that there was a serious problem.

“Don’t joke, Doc.”

I studied the face of my old friend carefully in the gathering gloom. He looked tired. But despite the lines in his weathered face, his jaw still jutted forward in the no-crap manner that had won him constant re-election as upholder of the law in Rock Ridge. However, it suddenly dawned on me that most of the people who had voted for him were white. What about the natives?

“What do they want?” I asked.

Sheriff Bradley hunched his shoulders. “I don’t think they *know*.” He took a large swig of whiskey. “All they *know* is we had the War – which was none of their doing – and that things are worse now than they were before.”

“Ergo, they blame us?”

“Exactly,” confirmed Bradley. He took another mouthful of whiskey, which was unusual for him. He clearly needed to talk. “I don’t think the natives were ever really on our side, anyway. We fought a white-man’s War, and now they blame us for what it brought.”

“But we *won*,” I pointed out.

Brad looked at me for a while, before saying “*Did* we?” Then he flung an arm up, gesturing towards the ridge. Its ragged line cut across the view uphill of the clinic: stars above, and the lights of houses below. Uncomfortably, I realized that my own location was somewhere around the divide between the two civilizations – whites above and natives below. But my guest was continuing: “Do you know that after the War, because half of our town was wiped out, the natives actually *outnumber* the whites?”

I had not known this, but it did not surprise me. What did give me pause, as I thought about things, was that the same situation must exist in numerous other towns along the western edge of the continent. For the first time, I realized that in what we had traditionally regarded as our own country, the whites were outnumbered by the redskins. “Holy John Wayne,” I muttered.

“What?” Sheriff Bradley snapped, apparently irritated by my calm attitude. And then, passing over my comment: “Things are going to get worse before they get better.”

“That’s a cliché,” I observed.

Bradley, for the first time in our long friendship, glared at me.

I simply looked back at him, seeing here a sign on the white side of the same kind of short thinking which he deplored so much from the red side. However, we were both holding glasses of whiskey. And after a brief standoff, the absurdity of our conflict became obvious to both of us. He gave a short laugh, and I started to chuckle.

“Cheers,” he said.

“Buttocks up,” I responded.

After that, we proceeded to finish off the bottle. During this process, we were accompanied by the beat of drums from down the slope. I could not tell from which of the three Indian reservations the sounds came. The steady wind bore the insistent throb to us, where we sat like colonial potentates on our enclosed veranda. But the alcohol eventually thrust the threatening drums into the background of our psyches, and we exchanged views in a loose fashion on a number of things. He told me about the raid on the town’s jail, and I told him about the new message I had discovered on Chief Crooked Leg’s tooth.

“I don’t get this molasses about molars,” complained Brad. “A local revolt is one thing, but this tooth thing looks like some kind of state-wide plot.”

I shrugged, recalling the letters NEPT which I had found on the back teeth of both the band leaders I had examined. I had already formed the opinion that those letters were shorthand for the highly-explosive element neptunium, and was proposing to investigate this. It was with an attitude of small knowledge emphasized by much alcohol that I said: “Don’t worry, Brad. I’ll figure it out.”

CRASH!

One of the glass sheets surrounding the veranda shattered into fragments. Simultaneously, an ugly black hole appeared in the woodwork of the building.

“Goddamit!” Brad yelled. “They’re shooting at us!”

He surged to his feet, overturning the rocking chair. Fumbling for his gun, I realized that he made a clear target against the lights of the clinic, and dived for his legs. He came down with a tremendous crash, upsetting the whiskey bottle, which gurgled its last into the gaps between the porch’s planks.

For a while we lay on those planks, waiting for another shot. But none came. The only sound was a drunken laugh, fading into the night.

Peeking around the support, into the space where the glass had been, I could see a fire blazing at the bottom of the hill. Black figures danced across its red glow. The wind brought a faint sound of burning wood to my fear-astute ears.

“Wow!” I muttered, for the second time that day. “Things are really hotting up.”

Sheriff Bradley, dusting off shards of glass from his tunic, struggled to his feet. He gave me a look composed in equal parts of disdain and puzzlement, and stomped off into the night.

*

My research into neptunium eventually paid off. I learned that while the basic element is relatively benign, if loaded with extra neutrons it becomes extremely explosive. For example, it takes a backpack-full of plutonium to cause an atomic explosion; but a handful of neutron-enriched neptunium will do the same thing. As many folks know from the War, it does not need a flame or anything to cause a thermonuclear explosion. All that is necessary is enough radioactive material in a small enough space. Then the neutrons can wander around, and in next-to-no-time there is a chain reaction. It all happens so fast, it’s effectively an instantaneous blast.

There was, however, a basic problem which faced anybody wishing to cause a blowup whether with plutonium or neptunium: the necessary amount of the stuff had to be brought together, so starting the chain reaction which caused the explosion. How were the natives planning to get their neptunium together in the same place?

Well, you do not need to be Einstein to figure that out, do you?

It was shortly after *I* had figured things out that I was visited by a woman who claimed to be an agent of the (now almost defunct) Central Authority. She gave her name as Delilah Sampson, which I considered to be a poor excuse for a pseudonym.

Delilah, like her namesake, must at one time have been attractive. She still had well-formed legs, a trim waist and a perky bosom. But her face – while pretty – was marred by a patina of harshness. I thought: this person looks like a genuine female spy.

I offered her a glass of wine (I still had a half-bottle in the refrigerator, where it had languished since the War, in deference to the whiskey which my male friends preferred.) She agreed to a glass of water; but after a perfunctory sip, left the rest, as she settled into the rocking chair on the veranda. We exchanged some innocuous remarks, but I could see that she was feeling around in a conversational way, waiting to ask me something significant.

The only substantive point she made in her discursive remarks concerned the genetic division which had been caused by the War. She basically repeated the point made to me before by Sheriff Bradley: the War had preferentially exterminated the whites in their huddled cities, leaving the reds initially unscathed in their pastoral reservations. The result was that *they* were now in the majority, at least where the west was concerned.

I listened politely. She watched me carefully – I suppose predisposed (because of my skin) to believe I was on her side, but still unsure.

Finally, she looked pointedly at the bits of glass that still protruded from the wooden uprights of the porch, and then at the revolver which still lay under my chair. I had simply forgotten to take the latter indoors after my last evening with Brad. However, she seemed to read more meaning into the broken glass and the gun than did I. She said: “I’ve heard that you are having trouble with the natives.” Then after a pause: “We can help you with that.”

This is what she actually said, in plain words. However, if I was to repeat it, with the *tone* and *intention* included, it would read: “I’ve heard that you have been victimized by the stone-age scum. We can help you get rid of them.”

In a way, I admired her: she had said one thing and meant another. She was good at her job – in the same way as a realtor who sells a quaint cottage which is actually a dump.

I lay back in my chair, and grunted non-committedly.

“It’s happening all along the western coast,” she prodded. “We have to do something.”

I looked into her brown, gimlet eyes. One of the few advantages of being old is that expression does not come naturally to the tired muscles of the face. I think it was my poker expression which led her to believe that I was sympathetic to her cause.

“We need to stick together in these difficult times,” she said, rising from the rocking chair.

“Yes,” I replied facetiously, noting that she had not specified the “we” with whom I was expected to show solidarity. I was in fact just as inclined to side with the gun-happy redskins as I was with the acidly-superior whiteskins. However, I decided not to say anything, one way or the other. The result was that Delilah Sampson, when she left, had the wrong idea that she had gained my support – something which (like subscribing to a crummy magazine) I might come to regret.

“Goodbye for now,” was her parting comment. The tone implied that I might need the help of her and her friends sometime soon. Leaving, the threat of a mob of neo-nazis hung in her wake, like one of Chief Big Eagle’s farts.

The visit by this female representative of the Central Authority bothered me, because it confirmed that the trouble we were having in Rock Ridge with the Indians was only part of a bigger concern.

While we had only spent a relatively short time together, the woman’s gravitas afflicted me, like a weight on my back that could not be shed.

The question naturally occurred: how many natives up and down the coast had teeth packed with explosive neptunium?

I had stumbled onto the problem via Chief Big Eagle, and showed another case in Chief Crooked Leg. What about Billy Bob, the half-breed chief of the third local reserve? I could not – given his reputation – expect to examine his teeth for the same explosive substance. Nor was I interested in this. Because it would be naïve to think that only the Chiefs were involved. *Any* Indian who had visited a dentist in recent times might – unwittingly or otherwise – be carrying a small but dangerous dose of neptunium.

How widespread was the threat?

I spent several hours toying fruitlessly on this problem, until a new method occurred to me. Do you remember those kids’ games where there is a maze, and you are supposed to start at one of several points on the periphery and see which route leads to the centre? The trick to solving that game is not to start at the edge, but to begin at the centre and work outwards.

It took me only a few minutes, with this new approach, to work out how many neptunium-packed teeth would be needed to create a critical mass that could cause an atomic explosion.

The answer (depending on the neutron dose) was between 30 and 50.

Aha! Madame Curie move over. I now knew how many natives it would take (not to screw in a light-bulb as in the old joke) but to create a thermonuclear disaster.

Excited by my discovery, I called Sheriff Bradley. The channel was busy, but knowing thereby that he was in his office, I closed the clinic and headed up the hill.

The half of Rock Ridge which survived was dilapidated. Most of the houses were made of wood, but the forests which had stretched down the eastern side of the cordillera were gone – replaced by slopes of fused quartz. With no ready supply of timber, the town was slowly disintegrating. The roads, however, were in fairly good shape. This was simply because there were not many functioning cars left. An exception was the old all-wheel drive pickup truck which was parked outside the Sheriff's office. I sat for a spell on its tailgate, mopping the sweat from my forehead after the climb up the slope. From here, I could look westward, with a longer perspective than from my clinic. The three Indian reservations at the bottom of the incline fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, tacked onto the bottom of the rectangular pieces formed by the up/down and sideways streets of the white community. Smoke was rising from the longhouse on Chief Big Eagle's reservation, and the pungent smell as it was pushed up the hill by the wind told me that they were burning cow dung. Through the haze formed by the smouldering shit, I could make out far away the remains of the government dock. A few small fishing boats were clustered around it, kept idle by the rough sea. Even further away, the horizon was a dim line, separating the white-crested waves below from the scudding grey clouds above. The ocean, at least, had proven big enough to survive the War.

Stepping onto the worn porch of the Sheriff's office, I was surprised when the door opened and Delilah Sampson emerged.

The representative of the Central Authority recognized me immediately, with the assured look of somebody whose business it is to deal with people. "Good afternoon, Doctor."

"Hello, Miz Delilah," I replied smoothly, wondering if she had been giving Bradley the same spiel she had delivered to me. "Been cutting the Sheriff's hair?"

The woman's pretty but somehow hard face looked confused. Then, remembering the biblical story, she gave an insincere laugh. Without any further comment, she headed off downhill, swinging her hips.

I entered Bradley's office, and found him with his nose in some documents, scowling.

"Hi," he greeted, with a note of relief in his voice, as if he had been wary of another visitor from the government. Without preamble, he announced: "I don't like that woman."

"Hmm. She certainly doesn't have much sense of humour."

Bradley, it transpired, was pissed off with Delilah Sampson because she had attempted to pull rank on him, trying to get him to arrest the three Indian chiefs. "It's ridiculous!" he expostulated. "I can't throw people in jail without good reason."

"Of course not," I agreed. I did not know what kind of pressure the female agent had applied to the man, and it distressed me to see his frustration. "Did you tell her about the teeth?"

"No!" Sheriff Bradley exclaimed. But the harassed look on his face clearly told that he was worried about his omission. Feeling slightly guilty about adding to his burden of secret information, I proceeded to tell him about my research into neptunium. He listened carefully, the furrow between his blue eyes growing deeper as I outlined the potential problem.

"You see," I summarized, "it would only take thirty to fifty people, close together, to cause a thermonuclear explosion."

Bradley groaned. His eyes wandered unseeing over the documents on his desk, and I could see that he had been doing his homework, because a couple of them showed the telltale triple-triangle symbol that was shorthand for radiation danger.

There was a long silence, while we both thought hard about the bomb-stuff hidden in my patients' teeth and what it might imply. Like I said, Bradley and I have known each other for a long time. So it was not surprising that we came to the same conclusion. It was Brad who finally drew our suspicions together and put them into words.

"Doc," he said, "the Indians may be planning to use their pow-wow to blow up Circle City."

"Right," I concurred. I tried to sound somber, but to be honest I was feeling excited and ready for action. Dentistry may be a remunerative profession, but it is fundamentally a boring one. This was the most fun to come my way in a long time. However, my voice was serious when I said: "It's our job to save civilization."

Somewhat puzzled by my pomposity, Sheriff Bradley looked at me closely. Then he said: “Okay. I’ll pick you up at dawn tomorrow.”

The Sun was barely above the ridge behind town when Sheriff Bradley drew up outside the clinic next day. I was ready! What I needed for a few days was packed into one bulky bag, which I threw into the back of the truck. Approvingly, I noted that the vehicle was already loaded with extra fuel and various other things, including two boxes which by their dimensions I guessed to contain shotguns. The revolver which Brad had given me was stuck raffishly into my waistband.

Noticing this, my friend frowned – in the manner that a scoutmaster might use to admonish a cub – but said nothing. “Let’s go,” he growled.

My enthusiasm about our mission to save Humanity (or at least the citizens of Circle City) was doused in the middle of the morning. We had been speeding along the black-topped highway, when suddenly Brad stomped on the brakes, and the pickup slid to a halt.

There was no more road.

It stopped.

We both got out, and stood on each side of the car, our hands sheltering our eyes from the already-intense sunlight. Far away, on the flank of a ridge, the black ribbon of the highway resumed. But at our feet there was only sand.

“Goddammed War!” Bradley muttered.

I recalled reading how the low pressure following a bomb blast could literally suck geography into the air. As I stood there at the end of the highway, I could readily imagine how a long piece of it had been siphoned upwards, and then carried by the blast wave, to be dumped into the ocean – where it had no doubt astonished the fish.

I looked down at my feet. “Brad,” I pointed out, “there are tire tracks, going forward.”

We got back into the pickup, and Bradley eased it over the ragged lip of asphalt, onto the sand. Engaging the extra drive, he followed the tracks of whomever had gone before us. But as we crawled across that saharan landscape, Circle City seemed to be as remote as the Moon.

In the middle of the afternoon, the heat became so intense that the truck started to falter. We had negotiated several sections of black highway and yellow sand: the route resembled one of the lines on a kid’s map, made of short and long dashes. At this rate, it would take us ages to get to Circle City, and a sense of time-induced stress added to our worry about the truck.

The latter eventually expired on an uphill climb. We both got out, irritated and sweating. “It’s bloody hot!” I said, completely needlessly. A lizard skittered into the shadow cast by the stranded vehicle, seeking shelter. In the middle distance, the blacktop highway beckoned to us over the desert, flickering up and down in heat-induced chimeras.

Bradley squirted a small amount of water over his baking red face from a flask, and then offered it to me. “Be careful.”

I listened to his advice, husbanding the life-giving liquid before handing it back to him. The heat was terrific: it beat on me like a hammer, dulling my senses. Bradley, however, apparently retained more mental powers than me. Yelping as he burnt his fingers, he raised the hood of the pickup, and splashed some of our precious water onto the intake manifold. Cooled, the air flowing into the engine brought things back into the realm of normal engineering. The truck sputtered, then burst back into life.

“Yahoo!” I yelled.

Bradley shook his head. Only our long friendship kept him quiet. We pushed on.

Dusk came as a relief. I had taken over the driving in the late afternoon, while Bradley slumped in the passenger seat with closed eyes. I quickly came to appreciate his sacrifice: even with sunglasses, the glare of the desert was painful. It was especially bad in the spaces between the mountains. In the gaps, the energy from the bombs had spilled over, rushing down to the valleys and turning them to cinder. Nothing grew there – not even cactus – and I began to long for the sight of something green.

Darkness was settling when I spotted a tree sticking out of a collection of protective boulders. My eyes were smarting, and even though we were at that time on a section of sand rather than highway, I decided to call it quits for the day.

The sound of the engine died away between the boulders, dissipating itself into the scree. I opened the door of the truck, and was surprised to find myself wobbling. Dehydration, I thought, and took a long drink of water. Brad was asleep in the passenger seat, gently snoring. I left him to enjoy his snooze, and made camp.

Things change quickly in the desert, and as the Sun disappeared I found myself shivering. Luckily, the oak tree under which we had stopped had been bypassed by most other travelers, and it provided a bunch of fallen branches. By the time Brad woke up, with chattering teeth, I had a fire going and a dinner ready of beef and beans.

He looked surprisingly respectful. Like him earlier, I said nothing. But like him, I was worried: the pow-wow in Circle City was tomorrow, and we were only half-way there.

The stars came out, blazing. At last, I thought, no stupid human War can affect *them*. (I repeat: I HATE the War and those who started it.) Staring at the cold but virgin sky, I snuggled under my thick blanket. The fire gave a sputter, and collapsed into a pile of red embers.

“Doc,” said Brad out of the darkness.

“Yeah?”

“Are we doing the right thing?”

I thought a bit. Eventually, I replied: “Probably.”

Coffee next morning was an elixir. Bradley drank his first mug while still ensconced in the folds of his poncho. I drank mine staring into the red depths of our rekindled fire. Neither of us said it, but we both felt the urgency of the clock. We were not sure what was planned by the terrorists for the pow-wow in Circle City; but whatever it was, today was the day.

Brad finished his coffee and threw off his covering. He had been sleeping in his socks like an old soldier. Sitting on a boulder, he pulled on his boots, and then started stamping around the fire, flailing his arms against his body. “It’s cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey!”

I nodded. The cold and the hard ground had caused my hip joints to ache with a wearisome intensity, and I knew that my companion suffered from a bad back. Rummaging in my bag, I found a couple of pain-killers, one for me and one for him. As we swallowed our medicine with a second cup of coffee, I suddenly saw us for what we were: two old men, in the middle of nowhere, en route to a place only on the basis of a suspicion, and unclear as to what we would do even if our fears proved justified.

However, people do not normally go around with bomb stuff in their teeth, do they? At least, if it turned out that we were on a wild-goose chase, nobody would know about it except ourselves.

As we pulled out of the campsite, the grey light of the pre-dawn sky showed a collection of tracks in the sand. Most of them had been made by horses and burros. This made sense: a sure-footed animal would make almost as good time along this compromised road as could our ill-adapted vehicle. I presumed that Chiefs Big Eagle and Crooked Foot – and maybe Billy Bob also – were ahead of us. The pow-wow was an annual event, so they would know the route into

Circle City, as did the other chiefs from the reservations south of it. The fact that we had not seen another soul on the derelict highway meant that we were late.

Emerging onto black-top, I gunned the motor of the pickup truck as the Sun cleared the ridge on my right hand. We sped along a snakey section of the road, and emerged from behind a bluff to be reacquainted with the ocean. It filled a broad bay, twinkling blue in the morning light but white-flecked by the strong onshore wind. I have always liked the sea, and the vision lifted my spirits.

Sheriff Bradley, by contrast, slumped in the passenger seat, looking serious. It was obvious that he expected trouble: the two boxes in the back of the pickup had turned out to contain not shotguns, but those new-fangled laser rifles.

However, if the redskins were planning to blow up the whites, I could not see how a couple of old men with lasers could stop them.

Bradley, though, proved to be ahead of me in his thinking. As we approached Circle City, he began fiddling at ever shorter intervals with the truck's communication console. His first attempts picked up only a hum on the radio band and a zig-zag pattern on the video band. Then, brief snatches of conversation came in, but still with no picture. Finally, as I steered the vehicle around the bluff at the end of the big bay, we got a barrage of sound and a medley of images.

Ironically, the first communication we received where the sound and picture coincided was a commercial. It exhorted us to buy a certain brand of toothpaste, and I thought it to be particularly inane. ("Your smile can be as white as the sands of Los Alamos.") At this, Bradley laughed. Then he attempted to tune in to the office of the sheriff in Circle City. This, however, was unsuccessful. He settled for one of those newscasts which repeats itself indefinitely, but at least provides a snapshot of local events.

The part of the newscast which interested us was short but pithy. It was presented by a young and attractive yellow-haired woman, who had Delilah Sampson beat by a mile for character. What she said, together with the images, went like this:

Circle City is host today to the Pow-Wow of Chiefs (picture of about forty natives on horses and donkeys, riding incongruously down a street between highrise office blocks). *The chiefs are mainly from reservations on the west coast, but hope to send a message back to the government in the east* (image of bomb-damaged but still functioning Capitol building). *I talked*

earlier with a group of chiefs, to find out what their message might be (shot of half-a-dozen brown-faced and stern-looking Indians, all with eagle feathers in their hair). They told me that...

“Bradley!” I exclaimed, pointing to the chief at the back of the group. “Isn’t that Billy Bob?”

My friend bent forward to scrutinize the tiny image on the truck’s video screen. He sucked in his breath, and said with distaste “Yeah. That’s him, all right!”

The hostess of the newscast was saying: *The white citizens of Circle City I spoke with do not accept the claims of the chiefs (picture of the pretty girl in conversation with an animated grocer in front of a store, standing by a crate full of apples). The fact that the reds now outnumber the whites on the west coast does not – it seems – make our citizens ready to accept a change in power, and some even suggest that the natives have gone too far and should be punished (image of the grocer, now obviously enraged, drawing a hand across his throat in the well-known gesture). We can only hope that sanity prevails, and that some reasonable policy will emerge from the chiefs’ pow-wow (shot of the interior of a large building, apparently a sports arena, where hundreds of natives occupy the stands; while on the centre court a circle of about forty chiefs sit, pounding in unison on a vast drum). I now hand you back to the studio in Circle City.*

Sheriff Bradley let out a yell of frustration, and suddenly punched the truck’s dashboard with his fist. “Goddam it all!” he exclaimed. “We missed it!”

“Well,” I reasoned, trying to concentrate on the road and ignore this commotion from the passenger seat, “maybe they only just started.”

I squinted at the Sun through the pickup’s side window. It looked to be around lunch time; and whatever plot the aboriginals had against those of European descent, it might be planned for later rather than sooner. I thought Bradley was showing too much anger, and told him so: “There’s not much point flying off the proverbial handle, like a teenager on his first date who was hoping for a grope and finds he’s missed the show at the local movie-house.”

Bradley glared at me, and I immediately regretted what I had just said. However, I detest random violence, as he well knew. And on looking at the truck’s communication console, I saw that the blow from his fist had broken it. The blank grey screen of the video monitor stared back at us like the eye of a sadist. Brad looked suitably ashamed.

Thankfully for our friendship, something happened then which made us forget our argument and was much more serious: a gigantic hole appeared ahead.

In fact, it was not just a hole. It was a crater. A slag-sided excavation left by an atomic bomb.

We stepped out of the truck, and walked tentatively to the edge of this vast blemish in the Earth's crust. It was so deep that we trembled with vertigo. Far away, the early afternoon light reflected from a cluster of highrise offices: Circle City.

Neither of us said anything. We both knew that our trip was at an end.

But we were stubborn. A ragged track led away from the road, skirting the crater. It seemed to be headed for a nearby ridge, so we took a bottle of water and a pair of binoculars and headed out. As things happened, we could have dispensed with the water. For about half way to the peak, the storm – which had been threatening for a week – abruptly broke, wetting us to the skin. We slogged on. The rain commenced to run down the steep mountain side in rivulets, wiping out the marks of the burros and horses who had gone before. It stopped as suddenly as it had started, however. We emerged on top of the ridge to find a clear if remote view of Circle City.

I sheltered in the lee of a big boulder (the wind was still blowing strongly and coldly off the ocean), while Bradley examined the City through the binoculars. Apparently seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he slid down the gravelly slope and handed the glasses to me.

Sitting on the ridge, I focussed the instrument, and neat buildings came into crisp outline. Everything looked calm, though the resolution was not enough to show people, only structures. I identified the sports hall, where the chiefs' pow-wow was in progress. A dark smudge in front of it might have been a crowd of folk, but I was not sure.

I lowered the binoculars. This was lucky, because it saved my eyesight, as a bizarre series of events happened.

An intense white spot of light drew my attention back to the City. It shuddered, as if I was looking at a mirage.

Then the ground underneath me jumped. I looked around, thinking about earthquakes, and recalling with a flash that waves in rock travel faster than waves in air.

My ears popped as the pressure dropped, but by then I was already scrambling down the hillside. I banged into Bradley, and together we burrowed for cover under the big boulder.

The awful, deafening noise came next. It carried on for a long while. Accompanying it, the apparition of the mushroom cloud climbed steadily into the heavens...

*

Most people think it was the fault of the Indians trying to get at the white folk. However, given the presence of individuals like Delilah Sampson, I think it may have been the other way around. I do not care, anyhow. Sadly, Sheriff Bradley was shot a month after the destruction of Circle City. The whites in Rock Ridge made up for in ferocity what they lacked in numbers, and lynched Chief Billy Bob. Now I sit – alone – on the veranda of my clinic. On the border between two nations who hate each other: the whites up the hill and the reds down the hill. I repeat (for the third time): I hate war. It just does not *work*, does it?