
Almost Always, Somebody Lost an Eye

This is the story of the Mountain-Tree. Two Gods were hanging out in the area we now call “Kansas.” Etchiti lay on his side in the grass, propped up on one elbow, for he was the God of Flat. He had much responsibility in Kansas, chasing away Gods of Rivers and Lakes that would dig valleys through his land, making deals with the Hill Gods to keep them at bay, and that funny adventure that involved blinding the Mountain God so he would never find the plains. But like I say, that’s another adventure, so we won’t go into it.

Dono sat nearby, twiddling his wet thumbs, for he was the God of Creeks. He and Etchiti had a working arrangement, because Dono’s creeks would not mar the flat landscape too badly, but they would nourish the grass, which would prevent soil from eroding. Dono benefitted by not having to battle the Gods of Rock and Hill and Mountain just to have a place for his creek to run.

Etchiti and Dono hung out often, for they were both laid-back fellows.

“Shall we wager?” Etchiti asked. Puzzles and mind-games and wagers were the only entertainment they could agree on, because Etchiti had an affinity for all things two-dimensional. You try playing cards or boardgames with the God of Flat!

“Okay,” said Dono.

“I bet I can grow a tree so tall that its leaves poke into the Heavens, roots so deep they curl into the Underworld, yet no mortal will ever notice my tree.”

Dono sighed. Another of Etchiti’s grandiose wagers. Every time he agreed to one of these schemes, a dozen mortals would end up crippled or insane or beheaded, daughters screwing fathers, cousins stabbing grandmothers. Almost always, somebody lost an eye.

“Too hard to prove,” Dono said. “How can you tell what a mortal notices or doesn’t notice? Plus it’s too easy for you to rig the

bet. You make the tree invisible or you kill all the mortals within five hundred leagues. It needs clear qualifications if you want to make this a fair wager."

"Such as?" Etchiti rolled on his back and stared at the Sun. Another one of those painful things you can get away with if you're a God.

Dono didn't want to suggest any real limits, he just wanted to put the kibosh on the whole idea. "I don't know. For one thing, I don't want to hang around here 'til Ragnarok waiting to see if you're right about this wager. I have things to do. I have to make sure my creeks flow around and through obstacles, because I'm sure as hell not going to give any more power to Relchberg, God of the Lakes, just because some humans want to damn up my creek. I gotta feed Betty the Delta Queen down at the end of the line, and there's the shipping contract with Gorell where I have to move one thousand cubic leagues of silt down from the hills before the next planetary alignment or else he'll cast me into the Abyss for what I did to his daughter-

"Fine, fine, a qualification for time then. Let it be five score centuries we'll watch this wager. If no humans notice within that time, then I win."

Dono splashed at a stag drinking from the creek. "Wait, five score? Okay, sure, but I still don't like that word 'notice.' Does that mean the same as looking at it, or does it mean they have to be aware of the tree in some way? I can just see you arguing that it doesn't count because the mortal let it go in his peripheral vision, so he didn't really take 'notice' of it."

Etchiti sat up, which is about as vertical as he ever got. "Touch, then. A human takes notice if he touches. No, no, a fool could stumble into the tree by chance. That would skew the wager toward you." Etchiti considered what it means to notice. It struck him within three years. "A song! When man truly notices a thing, he sings of it. If a man notices this tree enough to sing of it within five score centuries of its planting, it shall be my loss. The glory will be yours!"

"Screw that," said Dono. "The Greatest Glory coupled with a nickel won't buy you a cup of ambrosia. What is the meat of your wager?"

Etchiti sprawled forward on his belly, resting his chin on his hands. "If I win, you alter the flow of your creeks until the Delta Queen is brought upstream to me. Here she will be enthralled by the lush, simple land. Unable to resist my wide open spaces, she will surrender to me."

"Yeah, right. Wide open spaces means big sky country. She'll fall in love with the Sky Goddess instead of you. Anyway, what do I get out of this?"

"Why, I have much to offer! Awesome bounties shall be yours! Uhhh . . ." And here again Etchiti had to think, which allowed Dono

a decade to patrol his domain, clear out the beavers and rocks that obstructed some of his creeks, cause droughts for humans who attempted to misdirect them. "Here now! If you win, I shall call in my favors with the angels, that your creek may flow above the clouds, for I am in tight with the angels. Being positioned thus, you shall cause light rains, learn to control clouds and apprentice yourself to the Storm God. After he decides to fade away, or after his seventh son castrates or devours him, you shall be made God of the Storm."

Dono shook his head. "I really don't want to join the Majors just yet. All I really want-"

"If not power, then women. Angels, grass-nymphs, all the women of all the tribes who live on my lands. I shall hook you up."

"No."

"If not women, then men? Beasts?"

"I can get my own women! All I really want is to get Gorell off my back. If I win, then you use your connections or your power over Flatness to get me out of his silt transport contract. Maybe you can bend space, make the silt two-dimensional so I could easily move it all at once and be done with it. Or you could have your angel pals pick up loads of silt from my source upstream and scatter it lightly across your plains, just to disperse it. If I win, you have to help me dispose of his contract within two centuries."

"And if I win, you shall alter your creeks so that the Delta Queen is drawn to my territory. Agreed?"

Dono thought on the matter for seven months before barking, "Agreed!"

"I don't like the odds," Etchiti said. "You agreed too quickly."

Dono slapped his palms on the water surface, sending sprays that nearly emptied his creek bed.

Etchiti continued, "For what is a song? If a man speak all his words with lilting aspect, has he sung? I have known many men who mutter melodically over every matter, as though-"

"Four verses," Dono said, "a chorus repeated at least once, and a bridge. Any fewer verses, any lack of bridge, we will not judge it to be a song. This will tip the wager in your favor. We will tip the scales a pebble in my direction by demanding that the bridge may be hummed, and that there need not be any words in the bridge. If you do not agree to these terms, I'm going to start building a house of cards right here and now." Seeing a house of cards built was a torment to Etchiti, for he saw all the two-dimensional potential of the cards, and thought they were being abused by their use as three-dimensional building materials.

"Agreed," said Etchiti, and he shook hands with the Creek God. Then he burst into laughter and wiped his hand off on the grass. "I shall plant the seed and prepare a throne for my new mistress the Delta Queen."

Dono swam upstream, calling over his shoulder, "And I shall begin my school for wandering minstrels in the hills where you

may not touch them.”

“D’oh!” said Etchiti.

This part of the tale would explain how Etchiti called in his favors and set his plan in motion, by blessing a prairie dog with human intelligence, sending the creature on a mission to collect The Really Big Acorn from the ice-vaults of Tera the Ultimate Bitch, an eternally birthing dog-queen who was often confused with the Earth-Mother because it sounded like “terra,” but no relation to the One True Earth-Mother, who preferred to be called “Bertha” anyway. This One True Earth-Mother left a lot to be desired in the amicability department though, and often warred with Tera the Ultimate Bitch just because of the name-thing.

So anyhow, that’s a pretty cool story in and of itself, Jojo the prairie dog’s quest to gain The Really Big Acorn, and ballads about his triumph were sung for thousands of years afterward by the very same bards who Dono had tutored, so you can imagine how Dono felt about it all.

And then there’s all the stuff where Etchiti planted The Really Big Acorn in the middle of Kansas, then gave out a mighty call to Yeart, the centaur-hag who tended the Star Gardens. Upon gazing down, she saw that the God of Flat was pointing at something with both hands, and she had to pull her glasses down off the top of her head to see that he was guiding her gaze by thrusting both hands toward the Root of All Evil, his manroot! Outrageous, vile gestures to be making at the High Gardener of The Cosmos! So she dug both her arms into a mucky part of the Heavens, scooped out a load of holy fertilizer, and hurled it down toward Etchiti, a horrifying brown streak tumbling from the Heavens! The empty space where she had scooped it out can be recognized as, oh, I don’t know, let’s say the Horsehead Nebula.

Of course, this was all part of his plan. Etchiti side-stepped the bolt of dung, an easy feat for a god whose only cool talent is to make himself totally flat. Heavenly dung tore through the sod, halfway down to the Underworld, and all that holy fertilizer square on top of The Really Big Acorn. Etchiti could see a massive crater for only a moment before the ground shivered and his tree shot up from the bottom. Few leaves sprang out of the trembling mass as it grew sideways more than up, like an oak-skinned pyramid blooming out of the crater. Soon it eclipsed the edges of the crater, rolling across the prairie grass like floodwaters. The peak pushed into the clouds and easily pierced Heaven. Surely the roots had already covered the little distance between the bottom of the crater and the top floors of the Underworld.

Now Dono could see why this greatest of all trees would go unnoticed. Because its girth resembled nothing as much as a mountain. Enormous crags in the bark looked like fissures in rock. The comparatively tiny branches that flourished on the sides of the great trunk looked like nothing more than normal oaks sprouting

from a mountainside.

There was still a chance that graduates of Dono's Upstream Minstrel College would happen upon this tree and sing praises of what they thought to be a mountain. So Etchiti went through his usual machinations of seducing and dominating and badgering mortals into doing his dirty work. He conned this dimple-chinned hero named Rollo into tunnelling to the Underworld, breaking through the gates of the Alchemical Prison and removing The Chastity-Belt of Opiumta, who was later known as The Whore of Babylon, but who always defended herself by saying, "Marriage is the same as prostitution, 'cause you're really just trading a piece of ass for that long-term security, so at least I'm being honest about it." Rollo's ordeal of taking the belt from Opiumta had some cool moments, but it's a whole nother story, really, a bawdy tale that can only be told properly by an untouched old maid past the age of seventy.

That's where somebody had to lose an eye, because any mortals who set eyes upon Opiumta would succumb to a fatal itching, which made them scratch themselves to death. He could have tied a blindfold on himself or something, but that's just the kind of macho idiot Rollo was, and anyway, he was always into scarification and full-face tats and that modern primitive shtick, so plucking out his own eyeballs was just another little way for him to prove to the world how hardcore he was. You know the type.

If you're taking notes for a Lit paper, remember that eyeball popping counts the same as castration, because it involves removing two little spheres from the body. Be sure to really play it up when you get to that part. If you can work in the words "juxtaposition" or "dichotomy" somehow, that can't hurt either.

So Rollo scored the magical Chastity-Belt off Opiumta, emerged from the Underworld blind, but with a nice seeing-eye cerberus. Etchiti wrapped the nasty belt around the base of the mountain-tree, which gives you some idea of the more-than-Reubenesque proportions of Opiumta, and the true scope of Rollo's achievement, because he had to talk her out of it.

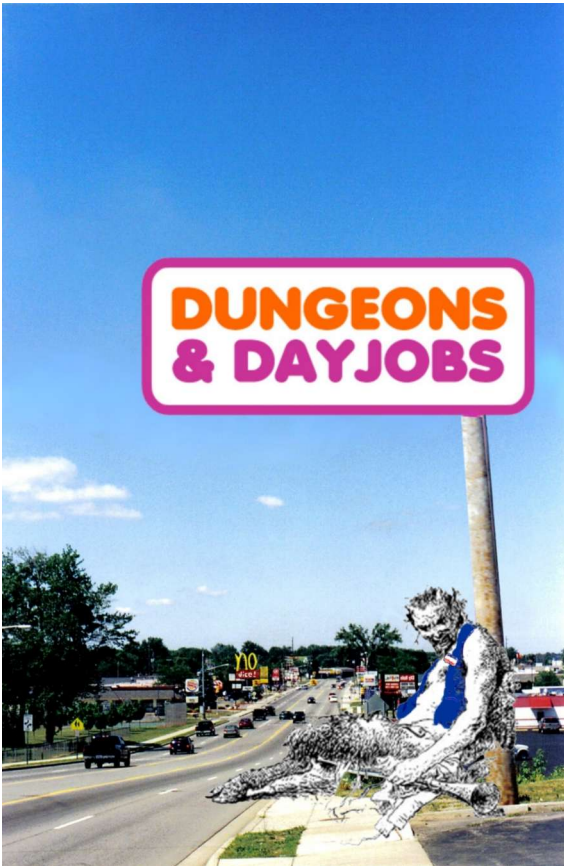
All of this within three years of planting the mountain-tree. Those first enrolled in Dono's bard college were barely finished with their junior year, and already Etchiti's plan was complete. Now all mortals who came within sight of the mountain-tree grew hazy from the magic poppies that sprouted from the unholy chastity belt, or maybe from the fumes of the belt itself. Those who persisted far enough to touch the mountain-tree lost all mental focus, and most became unable to speak. As they left the influence of Opiumta's belt, mortals lost all memory of contact with the mountain-tree. Hence, no songs were written.

Do you have the picture of it firmly in your mind now? An oaken wall rising from the middle of the flatlands, its peak lost in the clouds even on the clearest days, because the clouds are in your

own mind as you look. If you could burrow beneath the skin of the mountain-tree, you could follow the ant trails down along the roots to places where demons try to patch the root-holes in the roofs of their steaming ghetto.

Now put it out of your mind. Forget all of this tale except for the image of the mountain-tree, because it was window dressing for the story that follows.

The story continues in “Vampire in the Mountain-Tree,” which you can read in:



Skills and Experiences.

Check all that apply.

- Have you ever delivered meals to shut-in trolls & warlocks?
- Solved a lizard shaman's murder by details you noticed at the lizard orgy?
- Have you ever used an industrial mixer to prep pastry dough?
- Ever made one of those wagers with a deity where you just know a dozen mortals will end up insane or beheaded, daughters marrying fathers, cousins stabbing grandmothers, and almost always, somebody has to lose an eye?
- What if you could bend a paper-clip into a complex, spring-loaded pattern enabling it to walk across your desk, write reports for you, brew coffee and do your entire job for you? Explain: _____

Applicant's Statement

I certify that all statements in this application are true, and that my lack of experience in any of the above areas may be offset by studying the short stories, recipes and novella in my new associate training manual, *pictured at left*.

Signed: _____

Buy it at: www.lulu.com/content/182383

170 pages. 6x9 inch paperback.

View full table of contents on the next two pages.

Or read more stories & more awkward sales pitches like this one at Rob Northrup's website: evilbobdayjob.tripod.com

I. ATTACK MATRIX FOR FOOD PREP STAFF, GROCERY ASSOCIATES AND RETAIL GRUNTS

| Story Title | Page Level |
|--|-------------------|
| Trailer of the Temptress | 1 |
| Almost Always, Somebody Lost an Eye | 8 |
| Vampire in The Mountain-Tree | 14 |
| The Wire Tetragrammaton | 25 |
| Chicken Fried Love Interest with Cilantro and Asparagus | 33 |
| <hr/> | |
| My Terrifying, Dry Warrior | |
| Francis Gives Gus The Finger | 41 |
| Kidding the Buddha | 48 |
| Crushed Gus | 55 |
| Dry Ice | 59 |
| Live and Let Dry | 67 |
| <hr/> | |
| Godfella | 71 |
| My Time With The Capitalist Swine | 77 |
| Basqura's Homecoming | 83 |
| Basqura's Horror Story | 88 |
| Basqura's Mystery | 93 |
| <hr/> | |
| Suburban Lanes* | 97 |

* See p. ii for full contents of Suburban Lanes.

TABLES AND CHARTS

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| CONTENTS** | i |
| TABLES AND CHARTS | ii |
| SUBURBAN LANES, FULL CONTENTS | ii |

** Actual CONTENTS (pg. i) was intentionally mislabelled "ATTACK MATRIX FOR FOOD PREP STAFF, GROCERY ASSOCIATES AND RETAIL GRUNTS" to see if you could figure it out from the context.

II. SUBURBAN LANES, FULL CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| First Frame, Lane One | 97 |
| First Frame, Lane Two | 102 |
| First Frame, Lane Three | 107 |
| Second Frame, Lane Four | 109 |
| Second Frame, Lane Five | 118 |
| Second Frame, Lane One | 123 |
| Third Frame, Lane Six | 127 |
| Third Frame, Lane One | 136 |
| Fourth Frame, Lane One | 140 |
| Fourth Frame, Lane Three | 142 |
| Fifth Frame, Lane Three | 145 |
| Fifth Frame, Lane One | 147 |
| Sixth Frame | 155 |
| Seventh Frame | 159 |
| Eighth Frame | 161 |
| Ninth Frame | 165 |