

THE BULLY

John Boston

Some people are just born assholes. From the moment they pop out their mothers, they are constantly making life miserable for those around them. Human kryptonite. Anti-social behavior, delusional, narcissistic. There is no shortage of words to describe their behavior and how difficult it can be to deal with them. Jerry Snodgrass wasn't born an asshole. He never thought of himself as one. He was easy to get along with, so long as you did exactly what you were told and never stepped out of line. Should you cross Mr. Snodgrass, well then.....*all bets were off.*

Jerry worked as the manager for an agricultural dealership. Tractors, sprayers, bailers. He worked on it and sold it. He started as a temp-hire right out of high school and worked his way up. He had put his time in and then some. He was friends with the owner's son in school. They were both on the football team together. The owner's son wanted nothing to do with the place. Jerry, on the other hand, loved it and by doing so, became like the owner's adopted son. This had caused some friction between him and the owner's other family members, but at the end of the day, the old man chose Jerry.

"Son, you can't ever let them think you're soft. Christ, the moment that happens, you may as well pack it in and forget about it. Respect is everything in this world. Lose respect, you ain't got shit." the old man once told him. Jerry took it to heart. He never let anyone underneath him get over on him. He started off a just happy-go-lucky farm kid, but that had changed over the years. He was not the same person he was twenty-two years ago when he walked through the doors looking for a job. He'd had several opportunities to leave over the years, but decided against it, even though it was for more money. Loyalty was all that mattered to the old man and the old man was pretty much all that mattered around here. If your schedule said to be here at eight A.M., by Jesus, you better be in the door by eight A.M. and ready to go. If you stopped to get a cup of coffee, Jerry wanted to know why. Most days, the coffee pot sat empty.

He had been much younger than his other co-workers, who never really gave him any respect. He was half their age or more. The old veterans had retired or moved on. Jerry was right there to fill in the gap. Yet, over time, he built up a solid reputation as a salesman. By the time the agricultural depression hit in 2011, he was in upper management. He had been selling during the boom years and was able to ride out the lows. They went through dozens of salespeople every year. No one was around for long. The low pay and having to deal with Jerry drove most right out the door. In Jerry's best years he was pulling in over a hundred thousand dollars a year. Last year, his top salesman made half of that. Agriculture in the Midwest had been hammered recently. Farms were going under at a lightning fast pace. Jerry had been forced to lay off staff. They had no secretary anymore and his parts and service department were down to a skeleton crew. One minute, he'd be answering the phone, the next, he'd be changing the tire on a tractor. There was still plenty of work, just not a lot of sales. Farmers were hanging onto what they had

and trying to squeeze just a few more years out of it until things got better.....if they ever got better.

Jerry was privy to the numbers and the numbers were not good. It was like a pressure cooker that just gets hotter and hotter until it exploded. The old man was now eighty-two. Most days he would just sit upstairs in his office and talk on the phone, or surf online. He'd almost seemed to be avoiding his workers. There wasn't much to say. Farming had always been a lot of work, for very little money. Once the subsidies ran out, the price support collapsed and the writing was on the wall.

"Jerry, can you come upstairs please?" said the old man into his radio.

Jerry left his office and headed upstairs. He still always knocked before he came in. Force of habit.

"Come on in, son."

Jerry opened the door and sat down in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

"What's up?"

"Got us a problem son. Have you seen the numbers this month?"

"Yeah....they're horrible."

"I know. We need a sales staff to sell this stuff, but we can't afford to pay them. We need to start making some serious sales."

"Who do you want me to cut some loose?"

"Well, it's not quite that simple. I got a certified letter from the state unemployment agency a few days ago. They are raising our unemployment insurance for our workers. They're doubling it! We fire anyone else and it's going to cost us even more. That's several thousand a year more we have to pay. It's kind of a no-win situation. We also have a hostile workplace lawsuit from that woman you fired last year. She says you verbally and sexually harassed her. That was my fault. The first woman I ever hire and she goes and pulls something like this. My lawyer says it might just be cheaper to settle and make her go away, rather than slug it out in court."

"See what bad employees do to us. They're like cancer. Just when you think you've gotten rid of it, it comes raging back, ready to do more damage.

"Jerry....look. You can't just go around firing people you don't like. You have to start thinking of yourself as more of a coach and less of a boss. You are the coach of the team. Win or lose, it's all up to you. Remember, no one likes a bully." said the old man

"I'm not going to pay someone for not doing anything either. Some days, I don't even think these guys are trying to make a sale," said Jerry.

"Jerry, I don't just hire anybody. Even old Fred, who should be put out to pasture, back in the '80s, he could sell bibles to the devil. I know I'm asking you to do the impossible here, but there is no other way. Remember, no screaming or cursing. You have to be polite but firm at all times."

"Right.....why do I feel like I'm applying for the position of Captain of the Titanic?"

"The Titanic sank. We won't." said the old man.

Jerry loved the old man, but he just was not being realistic about the company's financial situation. Things were going from bad to worse very quickly. His sales staff were duds. It was like they were just paying all of them to stand around and BS. He wasn't a bully, he just expected to do what they're paid to do. Why was that so hard for people to understand? Just when he thought the old man saw things the same way he did, he throws this at him. Nice guys don't stay in business for almost fifty years.

Eric was his name. He and Jerry could barely stand one another. Just when Jerry was going to fire him, he managed to pull in a huge sale. Last week he sold a brand new tractor at over a hundred thousand dollars. Jerry already had his dismissal letter typed up. Though they couldn't stand one another, Eric was his best performer, but that wasn't saying much. He texted every one of his sales staff and told them there was a mandatory meeting today at six PM. If you didn't make it, don't bother showing up tomorrow morning. Minutes later, Eric was at his office door.

"We're here for ten or eleven hours a day? Why can't we just hold the meeting then?" he asked

"I can't get everyone here until then. Shouldn't you be on the phone?"

"Who am I going to call? Besides, I gotta get ready for the convention next week. When are we leaving?"

Jerry knew this was not going to go over well. It might just be the opportunity he needed.

"We aren't going. We've been going to that trade show for the past five years and it hasn't done anything for our sales.

Eric just looked at him in disbelief.

"Not going? Are you nuts? I sold two tractors last year."

"Yes, you did, but no one else sold a damn thing. You guys are going to have to start pulling your weight around here. I had to let the bookkeeper go last week, so I have to do the books as well, so someone is going to have to work in the shop. I can't do it all."

"Come on Jerry, I just sell the damn things, I don't know how to fix them. If I'm not making sales, I'm losing money. This is all commission here."

"Well, that's how it is from now on. If you don't like it, you know where the door is," he said and went back to work on his computer.

"Can't you put Frank or Don in the parts department? It's not like they sell anything anyway."

"You are all going to take your turn. That way it's fair to everyone."

"Well, this really sucks Jerry. I'm losing money by not going to that trade show."

"Like I said, if you don't like it, you can always find another job."

"Why are you so anxious to see me leave?"

"I don't want anyone to leave, I just want you to sell some goddamn farm equipment," he growled.

"Right. I guess I'll see you tonight," he said and closed the door behind him.

Eric was a punk. When Jerry had his job, someone like Eric would have been cleaning the toilets every day, yet he was the best they could do. How the mighty have fallen. He kept hoping things would turn around, but each year just kept getting worse and worse. The farm recession had turned into a full-blown depression. No one was going to make a major purchase when they weren't sure they would be in business next year. Most farmers were old enough to be Jerry's father. In ten years, there wouldn't be many of them left. The world needs farmers, but nobody wants to pay for food. Jerry was caught in the middle. When he first started, they were selling tractors and harvesters monthly. Now, they were lucky to move once a year. It had to turn around. It had to. They just had to hold on a little while longer. He knew he had to can these guys, but he had to be smart about it. He figured, if he just leaned on them enough, they'd crack. They always did.

He began the meeting at six sharp. Everyone was there. He wasted no time in getting right to the point.

"Guys, our sales numbers are pathetic. We sold one tractor so far this entire year. In my last year as a sales manager, I personally sold eight. There's just no excuse for this. I'm putting you all on notice. Either your numbers improve or you're out the door."

Looking around the room, he could see this was not going over well. He was the only winner in a room full of losers and it was beginning to bother him.

"Jerry, our service department is busier now than it's ever been. We don't just sell new equipment, we sell parts too." said one salesman

"That's why we have a service department and mechanics. They take care of that stuff. You guys are supposed to be in the showroom with the new equipment."

"I spend half my day in the service department taking care of customers and most of my day is spent shipping parts all over the world." said another one.

"Are you guys not hearing what I'm saying? I know our service department is busy, but that's small potatoes compared to the money we make off the new equipment."

"Come on Jerry, the farm business is the worst I've ever seen it. No one in their right mind is going to buy a new tractor. The price of milk is the same now as it was in 1996. Soybean prices hit a record low last month. Nobody has any money. When you were selling, it was during the boom years. You comparing apples to oranges." said Fred.

"Fred, I can't believe I'm hearing this from you. You don't think I had some rough years when I was selling?"

"This has been a rough decade Jerry, not just a rough year. I'm hearing it's worse now than it was in the 1930's dust bowl." said another salesman.

Jerry was both sad and angry at the same time. He was hoping to light a fire under their asses, but it was hopeless. He was dealing with losers. Deadweight. He'd fire all of them if he could have.

"I was hoping we could reach some kind of understanding here, but I see I'm wasting my time with you guys. You just aren't salesmen. I guess great salesmen are just born with it. You guys just ain't got it."

"You want to fire us, Jerry, go head. This place is a sinking ship anyway," said Eric.

"Eric, if I could, I'd fire all of you, but the owner still thinks he actually make something out of you, so my hands are tied at the moment. Rest assured, I will be on you guys like white on rice from the moment you step in here until you punch out for the day. I've worked too hard to just let this place go to hell."

"Are we though Jerry?" asked Fred.

"I want all of you making cold calls tomorrow. I'll take care of the service department. I want all of you on the phones." said Jerry

"Cold calls? For farm equipment? Are you serious?" asked Fred

"Damn right I'm serious. You guys are going to start earning your paychecks around here, you're on my nickel now," he said

"Come on Jerry, be reasonable here. We're not selling timeshares here, we're selling hundred thousand dollar tractors," said Eric.

"Right now, we aren't selling anything." Said Jerry.

No one in the room even looked at him when they left. He was hoping one or more of them would just simply not show up tomorrow morning. The economy might be booming in the rest of the country, but in the midwest ag belt, it collapsed in 2011 and had yet to recover. Jobs that paid anything were hard to come by. Jobs that paid a livable wage were almost nonexistent. This was the only job for miles around. Getting rid of these guys wasn't going to be easy. Bad workers have a way of becoming almost like a staph infection. Once it sets in, it can be difficult to get rid

of. He was going to have to talk to the old man. Firing these guys might just be money well spent.

Jerry arrived late on purpose, just to see who was working when he arrived. All but one were there. He was going to fire him, but then he remembered he asked for the day off weeks ago and it was in the computer schedule, so that was out. He had to get the books ready to do payroll this morning. Last week, they were so tight, he wasn't sure he could make payroll. There was also the problem of several thousand dollars that had gone missing in the previous months. He thought at first he had made a mistake, but when he ran the program again, it was still there. Over three thousand dollars had been withdrawn in two installments. There were only a few people in the company who could have done that and Jerry was one of them. He hadn't taken the money so that only left the old man and the bookkeeper who he had canned last month. It had not gone over well. She had been with the company for over ten years. Nice lady, but dead weight. It was time to trim the fat.

His worst fears were confirmed. There was not enough money in the account to make payroll. Eric alone had over a thousand dollars coming to him from his sales last month. He knew he had to tell the old man and it wasn't going to be pretty. Jerry had failed just as badly as his salesman had. Once a business starts to lose money, it's like sinking in quicksand. The more you move and try to save yourself, the faster you sink. Just as quickly as you made the money, you can lose it and they were losing it rapidly. He went upstairs and knocked on the old man's door.

"Come on Jerry," he said from inside his office.

Jerry opened the door and slowly walked in. He had no idea what the old man did every day in his office. What does an eighty-something year old man do for eight hours a day? Yet, there he was, plugging away at something.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush sir. We can't make payroll this month."

The old man looked at him intensely. Jerry had never seen this look from him before.

"I see. Well, this is not good news."

Jerry said nothing and tried not to look away.

"How'd this happen, Jerry?"

"Our sales suck. We have losers on our staff. Oh and thirty three hundred dollars is missing from the account."

"Oh, that....I'm sorry, I should have told you. My idiot son fell behind on his child support payments that twat of an ex-wife of his. I told him not to marry that broad. That was me."

"Well, that's the reason. We could make it, but it would be tight. If I'd have known about it, I could have made arrangements....."

"Look, I was meaning to sell some of my junk anyway. I've got a dozen classic cars I keep in the barns. I'll send them to auction. We should be able to raise more than enough to keep us going. Where are we at with the sales staff?"

"I have to let some of them go. They know how to play the game. They're just waiting for me to scan them so they can collect unemployment."

"Remember Jerry, you're the coach, I'm the GM. Let me decide who we cut loose and who we don't. You have the tenacity of a pit bull, but you need to learn how to refine it. You're like a bull in a china shop."

"Yes sir," said Jerry meekly.

"Good. I trust you will take care of this situation. I might just have to go down there and show these guys what a real salesman looks like. Give them an example to look up to."

That was the last thing Jerry wanted. The old man meant well, but every time he tried to "help" he just made things ten times worse. Jerry wished he would just stay at home and work on his cars. He was not going to help matters here.

A year ago, Jerry had an offer from a big car dealership. They wanted him to join their sales team. The top salesman pulled in over two hundred thousand dollars last year. Jerry had seriously thought about jumping ship. Most of the dealership's salesmen were flunkies with no real sales experience. Jerry knew the owner of the dealership and he invited Jerry out to his ranch for an afternoon. He made Jerry a hell of an offer. He seriously considered it. He knew back then that the business was in trouble, he just didn't want to admit it to himself. Now, he had no choice. He just couldn't imagine telling the old man he was leaving. It would kill him. He had made his decision and now had to live with it. Looking back on it, he wondered if he made the right call. How much longer was the old man going to be around anyway? If he really cared about him, he would want what was best for him anyway. At some point, Jerry had to do what was best for him and that might mean jumping a sinking ship for safety.

His first order of the day was to go over every salesman's performance review. He needed to light a fire under their asses. Maybe have one of them go off on him. He read the state's definition of insubordination very carefully. If they were fired for insubordination and he could prove it, he was home free. He thought about secretly recording the conversation, but his state's laws to record someone without their consent. This was not going to be easy, but it had to be done. He needed to can two people this week.

His first victim was Fred, a sixty-something year old nobody who was just riding out this place until he could retire. He didn't want to hire him, but he was a friend of the old man, so he got overruled. He had been a farmer for years and sold out while the getting was good. He didn't need the money, he was just here for the benefits. Jerry wanted to get rid of him as soon as possible.

"Fred.....look. Nothing personal here. I'm sure you know that business has been in the toilet lately, we have to make some hard decisions as a company." began Jerry

Fred just nodded and smiled, thinking since he was being let go, he could collect unemployment. Money for nothing. The American dream comes true.

"We're going to have to take away health insurance for the salesmen. Your salary will now be commission only. To offset this, we are raising your commission rate to ten percent."

Fred looked none too happy. This was not what he wanted to hear.

"Jerry, my wife needs hundreds of dollars worth of medication every month and that's with our insurance. How the hell am I going to pay that with no medical insurance?" he said exasperated.

"Fred, it's the only way I can keep you on. I'm sorry. We barely had enough money to make payroll this month. We have to cut costs anywhere we can."

"But, you still have health insurance, right?"

"Fred, let's not go getting personal here."

"Jerry, health insurance is why I took this job and why I put up with your crap every day. It was a condition of employment. If you take that away, you're changing the conditions of my employment. That means I can walk away and collect unemployment. Not that it matters at this point. You might be responsible for the death of my wife, you son of a bitch!" he screamed at Jerry.

"Jesus, Fred, calm down. I'm trying to keep you on here so you can still make some money."

"I won't be back. You aren't going to get away with this."

"Fred, would you just sit down and relax?" said Jerry

"My wife used to babysit you when you were a baby and change your diaper. What a disappointment you turned out to be. I'll call the old man myself tonight." he said and stormed out the door.

Jerry sat back in his office chair and took a deep breath.

One down, one more to go. The coach has to bench his worst players. Fred wasn't so much of a player these days, he was more like the waterboy.

Though Eric was his top performer, he was also one giant pain in the ass for Jerry. Constantly bitching about everything. He was worse than a ten-year-old. His numbers were better than just about everyone else's, but Jerry really wanted him gone. The fact that he made Jerry look bad was reason enough to let him go. *This was Jerry's show, from start to finish.* Eric had forgotten that.

Eric almost seemed to know what was coming. Fred made so much drama when he left, he figured Eric knew why he was in here. He didn't even seem to care.

"Eric....not going to beat around the bush here. We cannot afford to pay your health insurance anymore. I'm sorry, we just flat out don't have the money."

"No problem, I have health insurance from the VA that's better than what you guys have."

Jerry was stunned.

"You were in the military?"

"Army. Spent eighteen months in Iraq. Got a Purple Heart when my convoy was attacked." he said.

"I didn't know you were in the Army."

"I put it on my application."

"I see. Well Eric,. I know we owe you some money from your big sale last month. We won't be able to pay it this week."

"Why not?"

"We don't have the money."

"Well, you better find it."

"We will get it to you as soon as we can."

"Wait...hold on. Last night you give us this big speech about how we all suck cause we aren't making any sales. When I do make a big sale, you can't pay me? You guys are a joke."

"We will pay you, we just can't pay you right now."

"Jerry, I want my money by Friday. I don't care about your bullshit story, just give me my money."

"We will, as soon as we have it," said Jerry, trying to control his anger.

"Friday, Jerry. I know you think I'm a little bitch, but I've done things, you can't even imagine, so get my fucking money or you're going to see me lose it," he said and walked out.

Jerry didn't even try and stop him. He called the old man and told him that Eric had to go. They can him now, they save themselves over a thousand dollars.

"Do it.....wait. He's our best salesman. You might want to hold off." said the old man.

Jerry called in his head mechanic in the office. Just in case things got hairy. He was a big dude. He also needed him to act as a witness and record what was said.

He called Eric at his desk and Eric stood in the doorway. He knew what was coming. He walked over to Jerry and stood right in front of his desk.

"Eric, your position with this company is terminated immediately. Please pack your things and leave," said Jerry

"Just give me my money and I'm gone."

"Your money will be mailed to you when we are able to do so."

Eric leaned in and looked right at Jerry.

"This is a small town you dumb fuck. I know where you live. You better watch your ass." he said and stormed out.

"You got all that?" he asked the mechanic.

"Yes. He threatened you. I heard it."

"Good. You might have to act as a witness."

He called the old man and gave him the news.

"Jerry, I thought I told you not to fire anybody. That's my job."

"I didn't fire anyone. He walked out on his own. Even threatened me before he left. I have a witness to everything he said."

"Please leave these things to me. The last thing we need is another lawsuit."

Hey, come on out to the house tonight. I've got a surprise for you."

"Sure. Can I stay for dinner?"

"I'd be offended if you didn't," he replied.

Jerry drove out to his farm that evening. You would never know this guy is a millionaire by the looks of the place. The farmhouse was almost falling down. He had several barns on the property in various states of decay. He and his wife met him at the front door.

They ate dinner and talked mostly about sports. Jerry knew that he and his sons were not exactly on speaking terms with one another. He never asked why, he just knew enough not to bring them up.

After dessert, the old man brought out his pipe and he and Jerry stepped outside.

"Come on, I want to show you something," he said and led Jerry into the barn.

He opened the doors and turned on the lights. Jerry had never been inside his barns before and was blown away at what he saw. He was staring at about a dozen classic cars from decades past. Everything from a Model A to an LS6 Chevelle. He couldn't believe it. It was as if he had just stepped into a classic car museum.

"Where did you get all these cars?"

"It's amazing what one can acquire in a lifetime. I got most of them back in the eighties when things got really bad. Took them as collateral or payment. I got a classic mustang in the other barn. Back before the internet, you put a for sale sign on it and hope it sold."

"Back when things were affordable."

"I'd just offer them half of what they were asking. Just wave some cash in front of them and they almost always bite. See, back in my day Jerry, only winners could afford nice things. Made people want to work hard. Save up for them. Nowadays, any asshole can walk into a dealership and drive away a car they have no business owning. It's heartbreaking to see what this country has become."

"What are you going to do with all of them?"

"I'd give them to my sons, who would only turn right around and sell them. I had a better idea, I'd like to give them away to the right person."

"Give them away? They must be worth a small fortune."

"The hell do I need money for at this point? I'm almost eighty-two years old. My shelf life is about up. I want you to pick one out. It's yours. Consider it a bonus for all the crap you've had to put up with lately."

"Weren't you going to sell them? Raise some money for the business?"

"Yeah. I don't know Jerry. I don't know how much longer we can keep losing money like this and still keep the doors open."

Jerry was taken aback by what he was hearing. Clearly, things were worse off than he had thought. Hearing the old man talk like this was very unnerving.

"Go ahead, they all run. Pick one out and drive it out of here. Got titles for all of them."

"I couldn't take one of your cars."

"Sure you can. Go on, take one."

Jerry walked around. The barn was connected to another barn via a walkway. He stepped through the door and then he saw it. A 1965 Mustang. It had been sitting for a while and needed restoration, but it was still the prettiest girl at the dance. He sat down inside and turned the key. It fired right up. The old man opened the bay doors.

"Damn, that one was my favorite. Great minds really do think alike," he said.

"Jerry, one more thing. Our hay business is supposed to begin next week. I don't have enough money to pay the crew. We won't be selling hay this year." he said.

Jerry knew right then and there, that the business was in big trouble. Their hay business was a nice shot of money every summer. They made a nice profit every year. His first summer at the dealership, he worked the hay fields. It was hot and brutal, but he gained a serious appreciation for what it took to produce hay.

"Okay, I'll call the boys and let them know in the morning," said Jerry.

"Thanks. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I've known most of those boys since they were teenagers." he said with tears in his eyes.

Jerry knew this wasn't just a bonus. It was an estate sale and he was the only bidder, at least for right now. The business was in big trouble. His only question right now was: what the hell was he going to do about it? Go down with the ship, or fight for a space on a lifeboat? Neither option was very appealing.

"I'll bring the title in the morning. She leaks a little oil, but other than that, she still drives as well as the day I bought her. Bought her from the Slaughter Family in town. The old man needed money for his daughter's wedding. That was back in 1974. Seems like only yesterday."

"I can't thank you enough. We'll get through this," said Jerry as he backed the car out of the barn.

The old man just smiled and waved at him as he pulled out of the barn and drove down the road with the old man in the passenger seat.

"Leave your car here, I'll bring it in tomorrow morning. I want you to get a feel for this old gal." said the old man.

"Thanks....it's been a tough couple of weeks, that's for sure."

"Gonna get even tougher I'm afraid. I need to know I can count on you to make some tough decisions."

"Of course," said Jerry.

"Good. I'll see you in the morning," he said and waved Jerry off.

Driving the old Mustang home, Jerry couldn't wonder why he had chosen right now to bribe him to stay. Things must be getting really bad. One of his major suppliers had called him yesterday and told him that they had not been paid. Normally, the old man paid the suppliers. Jerry apologized and said he would take care of it. There were only a few hundred dollars left in the general account. During the boom times, there were tens of thousands of dollars. Jerry could see the writing on the wall and it wasn't pretty. He was forty-one years old. This was supposed to be the prime of his working life and he was making less now than he did ten years ago. He wished he hadn't taken the car. The old man had never been this generous before. It made him wonder. *At what point was the old man going to realize this just isn't worth the money anymore? What did Jerry do if the business went under?* He had to think about himself. No one else was going to.

Over the next three weeks, things at the shop went from bad to worse. They lost their best mechanic, who worked for them for twelve years. He let another salesman go and they were now getting threatened by some of their vendors and suppliers. The old man had quit paying them. Jerry knew he should say something. One of them was owed over twelve hundred dollars. If they lost their suppliers, the business may as well shut down. Jerry was also informed by one of their big suppliers that the milk industry was in such bad shape in their area, that they were no longer going to be servicing the area. In the span of six months, the business had gone from stable to critical. Jerry was getting bombarded by phone calls from customers and other employees. Things were going from bad to worse very quickly.

Had he not have forgotten steak sauce one evening, his entire life might be different. He was waiting in line and the person in front of him was Paul Getty, owner and sales manager of the big car dealership in Fairview. He and Jerry had gone to school together. Paul had been trying to lure him away for years. The line was backed up ten customers deep.

"Hey Jerry, how the hell are ya?" asked Paul

"Not too bad, how bout yourself?"

"I sold three trucks today. Go figure: the farm business is in the toilet, but everyone still has money to go buy a new truck. Guess they figure if they're going to lose it all, they may as well enjoy it while they can."

"Business is doing well?"

"Best it has been in years. Don't know where they are getting the money, but even if they don't have it, our finance department makes it work. How bout you? How's the tractor business?"

"Pretty bad. Not sure how much longer we're going to be around."

"Fred Barnes came in the other day, telling anyone who would listen about how he was treated. He actually applied for a sales job. I politely told him to piss off."

"I like Fred, but we just couldn't afford to pay him when he isn't selling anything," said Jerry

"Yeah, these old-timers want to get paid to just sit around and bullshit all day, that's why no one wants to hire them. Things must be getting pretty bad there."

"Yeah, it's a sinking ship with no lifeboats at this point."

"Jerry, we could use a guy like you. I know your sales record and it speaks for itself. I got a bunch of dummies and farm boys working for me that screw-up everything they touch. I need a guy like you. If money is a problem, I'm sure we can work something out. Right now, we have an opening. It might not be there in a few weeks. Please, give me a call." he said and gave Jerry his business card."

Jerry felt like he was doing something wrong, just by taking it. He realized then, that this might be his best option at this point. The old man wasn't facing reality. They were losing money so

fast, at this rate, they would be facing bankruptcy in six months. Jerry did not want to be around for that. He had made some enemies over the years. Former employees he had to let go. They would just love to stop by and rub it in his face. Truth is, he had made a lot of enemies over the years. Maybe he had been too hard on some of them, he just had no time for losers. This was a business, it wasn't a social club. People nowadays just expect to be paid for nothing. Jerry would have none of it. A few years ago he and another employee had nearly come to blows when Jerry fired him. Jerry never forgot what he told him.

"You're nothing but a goddamn bully Jerry! You'll get what's coming to you, don't you worry. People like you always lose in the end."

At the time, he had just laughed it off, now, here he was, wondering if he was even going to have a job next week. It was like the guy had just read him his fortune.

Jerry agonized over it for the next few days. He talked it over with his girlfriend. They both decided he needed to do what was best for him, even if the old man didn't understand.

"This might be your only chance at a decent job." his girlfriend had told him. She was right. Jerry called Paul and told him he would take the job.

"Great! Come on down tomorrow and I'll introduce you to everyone. Have you told the old man yet?"

"I'm going to drive out to his house this afternoon and tell him personally. I think I owe him that much."

"Sure, look, when can you start?"

"As soon as possible. No point in staying there any longer. What's done is done."

"Great, then I'll see you Monday morning."

"See you then."

Jerry had a very difficult afternoon ahead of him. He also knew he had to give back the Mustang. He just didn't feel right driving it anymore. This was not going to be fun. *Not at all*. It was as if he was getting divorced all over again.

He drove over to the old man's farm and stopped at the dirt road that was his driveway. Getting divorced was going to be easier than this. He felt as if the last twenty-three years of his life were wasted. This was just business. The old man was going to have to understand that.

Hell, if I started to cost the old man money, he would have cut me loose in a second. He might play the victim here just cause he knows he's not paying me what I'm worth. No one else is going to work for as little as I'm being paid. Giving the Mustang back was going to be the easy part.

He drove up to the house. He was waiting for Jerry on his front steps. As soon as Jerry got out of the car, he knew the old guy smelled trouble.

"Hi.....can I talk to you?" he said dispensing the small talk. He figured it was easier just to rip the band-aid off and get it over with.

Jerry told him he was leaving. The old man said nothing and just stared at him. Jerry knew he was breaking the guy's heart, but at the end of the day, it boiled down to money. That's what makes the world go round. In Jerry's case, that was the whole world.

There was an awkward silence between the two men for a minute. Jerry made it clear he didn't feel right about keeping the car. The old man said nothing.

"Jerry.....every business has its rough patches, that's no reason to jump ship. We've been down this rabbit hole before, we'll bounce back. Do you want more money?"

"We owe thousands of dollars in back pay to employees. We can't even afford to pay our property taxes this month. I don't know how we're going to be able to stay in business. It's not just one thing, it's a bunch of things."

"I see. Well then, if your mind is made up, I guess we're done here," he said without looking at him.

"They want me to start on Monday. I'm sorry, but I won't be back in."

The old man just said nothing and stared off into space. Jerry didn't know exactly what to think. He seemed almost completely aloof to the amount of trouble the business was in. It was like he just knew that somehow, they were going to be fine. Either that or the old man was starting to lose it."

"I'd like very much for you to meet some people this weekend. I actually met them once in the summer of 59. Changed my life completely. I owe everything I am to them. Just do this as a favor to me."

"It's not going to change anything. I'm still leaving," said Jerry.

"Fine. Just listen to them. I don't want you just to hear them, listen to them."

"If that's what you want."

"Good," he said.

"I think you're going to like one another."

Jerry had a friend of his pick him up at the end of the old man's driveway. He gave him back the keys to the Mustang. He thanked his friend for the ride, but he wasn't really in a mood to talk. The old man was almost like a second father to him. Jerry's real father left the family when he was fourteen. He had only seen him a few times since. As far as Jerry was concerned, he died when he was fourteen. He wasn't sure the reality of what had just happened registered with the old man. It was as if his mind was someplace else. Jerry had to hope he wasn't starting to lose his marbles.

There was something that Jerry just didn't understand.

How in the hell could the same people visit him that had visited the old man in 1959? Didn't make much sense.

Jerry drove over to his friend's house for dinner. They stayed there for the entire evening. At around nine o'clock, they drove back to Jerry's house.

He dropped Jerry off and waved goodbye. Jerry had several beers and was looking forward to getting a good night's rest. He walked up to his steps and could see that the front door was slightly ajar. He ran back to his jeep and grabbed his pistol from underneath the driver's seat. He checked to make sure it was loaded and then stepped quietly into the house. He turned on all the lights, with his pistol ready. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. He checked every room and closet. He checked his garage. Nothing seemed out of place. If it was a robbery, they certainly didn't take much. The only place he hadn't checked was the cellar.

He turned on the lights at the base of the stairs and walked down. He turned the corner into the laundry room and that's when he saw it. It was the most surreal thing he had ever seen. Drawn in chalk on the cement wall was a little door. In front of it was a giant pentagram, with strange symbols and writing inside. There were five candles on each end of the star. There was also a small bowl of what looked like blood, right in the middle of the pentagram. Jerry couldn't believe what he was seeing. What in the hell was going on here? This was his goddamn house and someone had desecrated it. He kept the pistol with him and searched the rest of the cellar. Nothing else seemed out of the ordinary. Whoever had broken in here seemed only interested in this very unusual setup in his basement. As upset as Jerry was, he was also drunk and exhausted. He would have to wait until morning to call the police. He'd had several employees threaten him over the years, but he never thought they'd do something like this.

He lumbered back upstairs and laid down in his bed after taking his shoes off. He kept the pistol under his pillow. He was sound asleep within five minutes.

He woke up feeling completely refreshed the next morning. He had no hangover. He walked downstairs and turned on the coffee maker. He put his slippers on and went downstairs to have another look at that mess in his basement. He turned on the lights to the cellar on top of the stairs and for a second, he thought he saw something move, trying to avoid the light. He slammed the door shut and ran back to his bedroom and grabbed his pistol. He thought about calling 911, but what if there was nothing there? As strange as that setup was in his cellar, he had no proof that anyone had broken into his house. Someone had unlocked the door and let themselves in. He didn't want people to know what had happened. In a small town like this one, it would spread like wildfire.

Jerry could handle this on his own. He didn't need some punk kid to bail him out of trouble. He had his revolver if things got ugly.

He went back to the top of the stairs and opened the door. He stood at the top.

"Look, I've got a gun. Come out now and I'll let you walk out of here," he said. He heard no reply and started down the steps. He had his pistol in his hand and was ready for anything. He

turned on the light to the laundry room and he was amazed at what he saw. The little door that had been drawn on the wall was now a real door! It was cut right into the concrete slab of the wall. He moved closer and looked right at it. He could see it looked like a very long tunnel that just kept going. He was blown away. How long had he lived in this house and this secret passageway was here all the time?

He could also see the blood that was in the middle of the pentagram was now gone. The bowl was there, but the blood had been emptied. He knew he was not alone. This just didn't make any sense. If somebody wanted to take him out, why didn't they do it last night when he was drunk? Were they scared of the gun?

"If I find you, I'm going to empty this gun into you. Are you ready to die? Cause that's what's going to happen."

"Jerry.....would you like to play with us Jerry?" said a familiar voice from the darkness.

Jerry was now overcome with fear. Even with his loaded pistol, he knew he had to get the hell out of there.

"Okay, you asked for it," he said and turned the corner.

He turned and saw four little creatures, all covered in black robes, standing in front of the staircase. Jerry fired at one of them, striking it right in the chest and sending it backward. He fired at another one, hitting it as well. Before he knew it, he was surrounded by nearly a dozen of the little creatures. He tried to escape up the stairs, but they were on him in seconds. They might be small, but their strength was incredible. He couldn't break free of their hold. One of them pushed an old office chair and Jerry fell back into it. Two held his arms, while another one tied his hands behind his back. Within minutes, he was completely helpless, tied to an office chair. The thing he had shot got right back up and stood in front of him.

"That wasn't very nice Jerry. Do you know what happens to naughty boys? They have to play games with us. Do you want to play a game with us?" said the troll with the familiar voice.

"I know that voice. Who the hell are you?" he yelled

"Jerry....you've been a bad boy. You don't even recognize your own mother?" it said

"Huh?" asked Jerry in disbelief.

The troll took off its hood and Jerry recoiled at what he was looking at. It was his mother.....or some version of his mother. This thing had a hideous face that resembled his mother's. His mother died of lung cancer five years ago.

"I suppose grandma and grandpa are here too?" he asked shaking nervously.

"Right here, Jerry. My little Gerald." said another troll.

"What the hell do you want from me?" he asked

"We want to play a game with you, Jerry. You used to love playing games with us. Remember all those gin rummy games we used to play?" said one of the trolls.

"What game do you want to play?" he asked

"It's our favorite. It's called matches."

"Matches? The hell kind of game is that?"

One of the trolls came back with a five-gallon can of gasoline. He poured it all over Jerry, who tried furiously to escape, but it was no use. He couldn't move. The gasoline was beginning to burn. He could barely see. Then his mother came forward with a box of kitchen matches.

"Pick a number between one and ten my son."

"Whatever you are, you sure as hell are not my mother. My mother would never do this to me!" he screamed.

"Oh, but I am your mother Jerry. She is inside me now. I can feel her every thought. I can feel her heart beating next to mine. Pick a number Jerry, between one and ten."

"Four....alright....I pick number four."

"Very good my son."

The troll took out a match and struck it against the side of the box. It lit up. The troll then blew out the flame and threw the match into the gasoline. Jerry nearly had a heart attack but was relieved to see it did not ignite.

"One down, three to go," it said.

"Fuck you," he said defiantly.

The troll took out another match and lit it. It threw the match at Jerry. Fortunately, it did not cause the gasoline to ignite. Jerry had to stop and catch his breath. The gasoline was stinging his eyes. His entire world smelled like gasoline.

"Can I try?" asked one of the trolls.

"Come on Judd," it said.

A troll came forward and grabbed the box of matches. It started giggling and laughing, only it wasn't a normal laugh. Jerry had never heard anything so horrible in his life. It sounded like somebody on their deathbed trying to laugh with the last breath in their body.

"Judd....Jesus, is that you?" asked Jerry. Judd was his older cousin, who had been killed in a car accident when Jerry was only a child.

"Damn right, cousin. Sure is nice to see you again," it said.

"Judd....please, dear God, don't do this. I don't want to die." he said as he started sobbing.

Judd lit up the match and then blew it out. He tossed it at Jerry. It struck the side of the chair and then fell into a small puddle of gasoline. Jerry was now breathing heavily. He was trying to keep his sanity intact. He just had one more match to go. He could do this.

"It's not fair cousin. I was going places. I had a future. How come I died and some asshole like you gets to live out their life? Does that sound fair to you?" his cousin asked with the lit match in his hand.

"It's not really my decision to make Judd. We all just play the hand we get dealt," said Jerry sobbing.

"What a disappointment you turned out to be. No one is going to be there to greet you when you die. No one cares. You enjoy making everyone else's life miserable, cause you want them all to be as unhappy as you are." it said.

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm just trying to make a living like everyone else in this world. Somebody has to be in charge."

"Why does that somebody have to be you?"

"Cause no one else cares. They just want to fuck off all day and play video games. We live in a world full of losers!" he screamed.

"What has it ever gotten you? Being so mean to people? This little house hardly seems worth it. No one wants to be around you. You're going to die alone.....is that what you want?"

"Who cares. We all face death alone anyway. When my time is up, my time is up. Being surrounded by people isn't going to change that one bit."

"That's where you're wrong Jerry. That last minute of your life.....it's the most important minute of your whole life. If you are surrounded by loved ones, you will know you've done it right." said Judd

Jerry said nothing. The thing blew out the match and tossed it at Jerry. When Jerry opened his eyes again, the things were gone. He was somehow able to free one of his hands. He freed the rest of himself and collapsed on the cellar floor. He was sobbing now as he watched the trolls disappear back into the little doorway. The last one stopped and waved goodbye at him. Jerry gave it a half-hearted wave goodbye. It closed the door and it instantly became part of the wall again. The things were gone just as quickly as they had appeared. He stumbled back upstairs and turned on the shower. He spent nearly twenty minutes in there, sobbing and trying to wash the gasoline off of him. He was also trying to erase something else. Something that wouldn't be washed away so easily.

He stopped by the old man's house the next day. He really didn't know why, he had no reason to see the old man again. He had a thousand questions for the old man. Namely, just what the hell was those things that visited him the day before. How did he learn of their existence?

The old man greeted him at the front door. They said nothing for a minute.

"I'm glad to see you're still alive."

"Are you surprised?"

"No....some people don't make it out alive. Not you though, I knew you'd make it."

"What the hell was those things?"

"They are your family, Jerry. People who care about you," he said.

"Care about me? They sure do have a funny of showing it."

"So do you sometimes. Here, I want you to have this," he said and gave Jerry an envelope.

"What's this?"

"Consider it your severance pay. Most people would never have returned that car to me. I knew you were special the day I met you. I was right."

"You don't owe me anything."

"Of course I do. You helped make this company what it is. You wait and see, things will turn around and when they do, I want you back."

"We'll see about that."

"I got a few tricks up my sleeve. This old man ain't going down without a fight. I've worked too hard to just give it up at this point."

"I'd be disappointed in you if you just gave up."

"I'll be fighting until the day I leave this Earth and so will you. We each have our own crosses to bear, now don't we. Remember, you don't use that power lightly. That's some powerful, old-school magic right there. You don't ever use it to hurt people, only to help them. The ones that need the help the most. Don't forget that." he said.

Jerry shook his hand and walked away. He got back to his car and opened the envelope. It wasn't money or a check. It was detailed instruction on how to summon the same creatures that had visited him. Written underneath in big bold letters, it read:

ONLY USE IT ON THE ONES YOU TRULY LOVE