

Make-Believe

By Michael Reaves

I AM A VERY LUCKY MAN.
The reason for my saying this is obvious:
I'm standing before you, accepting this
award for Outstanding Alumnus. But

the reason behind the reason is that I became what I wanted to be.

I'm lucky because, for as far back as I can remember, I've wanted to be a writer. Ever since I was a kid, five years old, sitting down in front of our new black-and-white TV to watch *The Adventures of Superman*. I was hooked the first time I saw George Reeves leap into the air and fly. Actually, he was lying on a board in front of a cyclorama screen with a wind machine blowing his hair and cape, but I didn't know that at the time, of course. I do remember wondering even back then, however, why he always leveled off at a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet even when he was just going a couple of city blocks away.

I'm not what you would call a mainstream writer. I have an unabashed preference for genre fiction — specifically, horror. And, like most horror writers, I've drawn most of my stories from childhood fears and experiences. I grew up in this town — you wouldn't think a place on the edge of

the desert would be particularly spooky or atmospheric, but you'd be wrong. The desert can be a terrifying place.

If you'll indulge me, I'd like to tell you about one of those childhood experiences. Oddly enough, I've never written about it, or even spoken of it, before now. I'm not sure why. Perhaps my reasons will become clear — to me as well as you — during the telling. After all, good fiction is supposed to illuminate as well as entertain, isn't it?

I was seven years old, and this took place in 1955. It is probably impossible to convey to you all how totally different a time it was. It was, first and foremost, a much simpler time. You all have console games that tremble on the edge of virtual reality; we had Winky Dink. You have cell phones that can video and text and Twitter; we had party lines. And, of course, you have computers capable of processing gigabytes that you can hold in one hand, and we had UNIVAC.

But it wasn't just the technology that was simpler. It was a more *trusting* time. Back then, parents thought nothing of letting their kids roam all over the neighborhood, as long as they were home in time for dinner. Somehow or other, adults back then were much better at protecting the young from fearful realities. It's true that we were aware of those realities — ever hear of "duck and cover"? But kids were allowed to be kids back then. They weren't exposed to the rampant cynicism and smut that you all imbibed along with your baby food. Don't get me started.

It was spring, I remember, around the end of April or the beginning of May — you'd think that, considering what happened, the date would be burned into my memory. It had to have been a Saturday, because school wasn't out yet. I was playing with a couple of friends — Tom Harper and Malcolm James. We'd gone up into the hills a few blocks from my house to play cowboys and Indians. We were armed and ready for trouble.

When I say "armed," I mean something different than what the word might connote today. I was carrying my trusty McRepeater Rifle, which made a very satisfactory bang when the wheel atop the stock was turned. Tom had a deadly Daisy 1101 Thunderbird, and in addition was packing twin cap pistols. And Malcolm...well, Malcolm was carrying his Johnny Eagle *Magumba* Big Game Rifle, which he'd insisted on bringing even though he had a perfectly good Fanner 50 cap gun back in his bedroom. Some people just won't get with the program.

We were hunting Indians, or, as we called them, "Injuns." The term "political correctness," let alone the concept, wasn't exactly widespread back then. It was the middle of the afternoon and, though it was early in the year, it was already hot enough to raise shimmers of heat waves from the dirt road. The hills were still green, but you could see that slowly the vegetation was dying. Another month, and brown would be the dominant color, announcing the beginning of the fire season.

For now, however, it was still pleasant, or as pleasant as those hills ever became. We were walking cautiously through the Badlands of our fantasy, alert for the slightest sound that might betray an Apache ambush. This was more difficult than it might seem, because every few minutes Malcolm would drop into a crouch and spin around, spraying the mesquite with imaginary bullets and going "*Kachow!! Kachow!!*" Tom Harper finally grew tired of this, and demanded to know how we were going to get the drop on the bad guys with Malcolm constantly announcing our presence to everyone in the county. To which Malcolm replied that it was only make believe, and that the most we might hope to flush from the underbrush was a rabbit or coyote.

We knew that, of course. We all knew that. It's important to keep this in mind.

"Knock it off," Tom finally said, exasperated, "or I'll drop-kick your ass into next week."

That got the desired result. Tom Harper's right leg ended in a stump just above the knee — legacy of a car accident. He wore a prosthetic, a hinged contraption made of wood, metal and plastic, and when he ran, he used a sort of half-skip in his locomotion which the rest of us found very amusing. We were careful not to show it, however, because Tom could turn that half-skip into a devastating kick that could easily deliver the recipient as far up the calendar as Tom wanted. Malcolm said nothing more that in any way damaged the fantasy *gemütlichkeit* we had constructed. And again, it's important to remember that we knew what we were doing.

Malcolm was going on eight, with a seborrheic head of densely black hair and horn-rimmed glasses the exact same shade. He was built like a concentration camp inmate, all sharp, acute angles, with an Adam's apple that leapt about like the bouncing ball in a Fleischer sing-along cartoon.

Not surprisingly, he had few friends. Tom had just turned eight; he was handsome, if somewhat bland in appearance, and looked like a future gridiron star — until he began to walk or run with that characteristic hitching limp. I remember once, when we were both younger and I was at his sixth birthday party, seeing his father's eyes fill with tears as he watched his son skip-run across the back yard.

We knew what we were doing. It was play, make-believe. Nothing more.

We were wandering along a dirt road, not far from the ranger station. The shadows were starting to grow longer, and the light more sanguine, as the sun neared the smoggy horizon. "We should maybe turn around," Malcolm said. "We're gettin' too near the cave."

There was no need to stipulate which cave. There was only one in the area — Arrowhead Cave, so named because of the dozens of chipped flint relics found there over the years. It was a tectonic cave, not one formed by gradual erosion. It had come into being thousands of years ago, when an earthquake had shattered a sandstone outcrop and deposited the fragments at the bottom of a ravine. Over the centuries talus and dirt had covered it, and eventually solidified into a roof. It hadn't been a particularly impressive cave, according to rumor, but it had served the local Indians well as shelter for centuries before the valley was settled. It was even less impressive now, after the tragedy of 1938, when four young boys — out, like us, for play — had become lost in the cave.

I never did learn the specifics of the story — when I was a child, the adults had been very tight-lipped about it, even almost two decades later. All I knew — all any kid knew — was that the four boys had died in Arrowhead Cave. A few days later the City Council, acting with an alacrity hard to believe for anyone familiar with local government, had authorized several construction workers to blow up the cave's entrance with dynamite, closing it for good.

Tom and I looked at each other after Malcolm's statement. Neither of us wanted to be thought cowardly. On the other hand, neither of us particularly wanted to get any closer to Arrowhead Cave, as it was supposedly haunted. There had been another minor temblor last week as well, and none of us relished the thought of being near the cave, or — worse — in it, should another quake hit.

As the three of us stood there, momentarily paralyzed by indecision, we — or I, at least — became aware of just how *quiet* it was. I know it's a cliché — I knew it even back then — to speak of an ominous, brooding silence holding dominion over the scene. How many times had I lain on the threadbare rug in our living room, chin cupped in my hands, staring at a black-and-white image of somebody wearing a pith helmet, standing in front of a sarcophagus and saying grimly, "It's quiet — *too* quiet"? Usually this particular trope was immediately followed by the hero being seized around the throat and throttled by an ancient hand wrapped in dry, dusty cerements.

Still, cliché or no, I could suddenly feel my heart pounding. The light had taken on a shimmering, glassine quality, and the air seemed *dead*. It was impossible to get a lungful, no matter how deeply I breathed. There was no nourishment to it.

It would be easy, I suppose, to speculate that we all passed through some sort of *transition* then — a portal to another reality, I guess you could call it. It's tempting to use such a device as an explanation of a sort for what we did next. But the truth, as it usually is, was much more banal. We did what we did because that's what kids did back then.

I started to say something, even though I was somehow convinced that the leaden air would not convey my words. Before I could try, however, a voice shouted, "*Hands up!*"

Now, this is the point. It was fantasy. Make-believe. And we *knew* that. But unless you can remember, *really* remember, those Bradbury days of childhood, the unspoken social norms that we all lived by then, the secret lives and inviolate rules that bound us as fully and completely as office politics and the laws of church and state circumscribed our parents' lives — well, then I have no real hope of making you understand why we did what we did. It wasn't even something we thought about — we just did it. They had the drop on us, after all. They'd caught us, fair and square.

So, all three of us dropped our toy guns and reached for the sky.

"They" were four boys our age, armed with toy guns like ours. They'd come up on us from behind and nailed us good. The tallest one, a kid my age, was wearing bib overalls over a flannel shirt. There seemed to be something odd about his weapon — a carbine, with no manufacturer's stamp apparent — but it was obviously a toy. He gestured with the barrel,

a peremptory jerk obviously intended to move us along, while the other three picked up our weapons.

"Let's go," he said. "Shag it."

Arms still upraised, we stumbled along down the road, our captors herding us toward an unknown destination.

Even though these lads represented "the Enemy" (Apaches, space aliens, Nazis, gangsters, the heathen Chinese or a hundred and one other incarnations of Bad Guys), there was nothing in our childhood rules of engagement that prohibited discourse. Consequently, Malcolm attempted conversation. "Where d'you guys go to school?" he asked. "I haven't seen you around — "

"Quiet," one of them, a tall fellow with hair as red as Malcolm's was black, and a face mottled with more freckles than the moon has craters, hissed. And yes, I know it's bad writing to use anything other than "said" — but you weren't there. Trust me; there was less humanity in that one word as spoken by him than there was in a snake's sibilance.

We marched on in silence. And I started to wonder just how they'd managed to catch us so thoroughly off-guard. We'd been standing on the crest of a small hill; if they'd come along the road from either direction we'd have seen them, and there was no way they could've climbed up the side, through the dry creosote, without making enough noise to wake the dead.

...to wake the dead... There are certain phrases that we use a thousand times without thinking, until one day you realize just how hideously appropriate they are.

We went around a bluff's shoulder, down a steep trail, and found ourselves in a high-walled ravine; almost a box canyon. A quarter of the way up the rear wall, at the top of a pile of talus, was what had once been the mouth of Arrowhead Cave. It was little more than a lacuna now, the dynamite having closed it off seventeen years ago. Two of our four captors urged us up the ten-foot slope.

"Hey, guys?" The nasal quality of Malcolm's voice was rising, a sure barometer of anxiety. "It's gettin' dark — my dad'll hide me if I miss dinner — "

"Zip it," one of them — short and rotund, with wire-rim specs — said. I got a good look at the clothes he was wearing as I passed him — knee

pants and suspenders, a sweater and a flat, button-down cap. There was definitely something anachronistic about the apparel, but what really caught my eye was the toy gun he was brandishing. It was unlike any kids' gun I'd ever seen, and after looking at it for a minute, I realized why. I didn't have the words to describe it at the time, but looking back on it, I realize it was made of stamped metal. It was black, with a red barrel, and on the butt was a stylized sketch of the Lone Ranger. A legend ran in curved script along the bottom of the image; I can't recall the exact phrase, but it was something about listening to Brace Beemer as the Lone Ranger, every Friday.

Why "listen"? Why not "watch"? And who was Brace Beemer? Everyone knew the Lone Ranger was played by Clayton Moore.

As big of a puzzle as that gun represented, however, the one held by the third boy was even more so. It, too, was made out of some material which I didn't immediately recognize. When I did realize what it was, it was enough to make me stop and stare, open-mouthed.

His gun was made of cardboard.

There was a slogan inscribed on the side of it, as well — I couldn't read all of it, because his hand partly obscured it. The part I could read proclaimed Geyser Flour to be "America's *top* self-rising flour!"

The boy saw me staring at his paper gun. "Shut yer bazoo, yegg," he instructed me, raising the toy as he did so.

And a strange feeling possessed me; I suppose it made sense in light of later developments, but at the time it was as inexplicable as it was overwhelming. I was, abruptly and totally, *terrified* of that ridiculous cardboard gun. So terrified that I felt in danger of soiling my corduroys.

He reached out and put a hand on my shoulder, pushing me up the slope, and his hand was *cold*. I could feel it through the fabric of my T-shirt.

As we climbed the steep slope, I watched both of my comrades, and knew they'd come to the same conclusion I had about our captors. Tom's face was set in the utter blankness of denial, his gaze as uncomprehending as that of an abused animal. Malcolm's was a hundred and eighty degrees opposite, full of growing realization and horror.

By the time the three of us had clambered up into the shallow remnant of the cave's former entrance, Malcolm had lost it. He was sobbing,

babbling incoherently, snot drooling from his nose. I wasn't doing much better myself, but I at least managed to keep a somewhat braver face on. Tom seemed outwardly calm also, but his face was the same sallow hue as that of his prosthetic's plastic skin.

We sat on the sandstone lip that hung above the declivity for what seemed like hours, but was in reality scarcely more than forty-five minutes; just long enough for the sun to disappear behind the western slope of the ravine. I watched our captors. I was only seven, and so I had no idea that all of them were dressed in Depression-era, poor white trash clothes, or that their toy weapons were relics of those same long-gone days. I only knew that there was something profoundly *wrong* about every aspect of them — even the way they moved, and sat, and talked amongst themselves.

I say they talked, but, even though I could clearly see them address each other, could even, until the light faded too much, see their lips moving, I heard nothing. It was deathly quiet in the ravine — even Malcolm's crying had, for a time, subsided — and I knew that sound rose with great clarity in still air. But it was like watching TV with the sound off.

"Gh-ghosts," Malcolm blubbered. "Th-they're *ghosts*. They were kuh-killed in the cave — "

"Bullshit," Tom muttered.

" — twenty years ago — "

"Stop it." Tom's voice was level and icy, but it was thin ice, covering black depths of hysteria. He stood and faced Malcolm.

Malcolm stood as well. "You *know* it's true! You nuh-know it's — "

"Shut up."

"Shouldn't've let 'em get us, should've *run*, now they're gonna — "

Tom hit him.

It was a short, hard jab, brought up from his waist into the pit of Malcolm's stomach, and it let the air out of him like a nail in a tire. He stared at Tom in utter shock, mouth gaping, making vaguely piscine sounds.

Then he turned, staggered toward the edge of the rocky shelf, and before either of us could try to stop him, he fell.

He rolled down the declivity a few feet before he managed to stop himself. Then he looked up, and Tom and I both heard his moan of terror when he saw the four boys — or whatever they were — surrounding him.

His face had been scratched during his fall, and a red streak of blood stood out vividly against his chalk-white skin.

"Please," I heard him say. "Please — I'm late for dinner — "

And they laughed.

I guess it was laughter, though it was the most mirthless, soulless sound I've ever heard. It was the sort of laughter something dead for a long time, long enough to completely forget any connection it had had with life, would make, if it were to somehow be amused.

They laughed, and they moved closer to him. Malcolm made a high, keening noise, a sound of utter despair.

Tom shouted, "You *bastards!* Leave him *alone!*" And he jumped off the ledge.

I don't know what he thought he could possibly do. I doubt he thought about it at all. He just went to Malcolm's rescue — or tried to. He might have been successful, somehow, if he'd had two good legs. I don't know if he forgot that one was artificial, or if he just didn't care.

It was a magnificent jump; it carried him to within five feet of them. He plowed into the loose stone and gravel, and his right leg buckled beneath him; he lost his balance and fell.

He struggled to stand, but before he could, the one with the cardboard gun looked up at him. He was grinning, and it might have just been a trick of the fading light, but for one awful instant it looked like the grin of a naked skull. He raised the gun and pointed it at Tom's chest.

And, softly, but somehow very clearly, I heard him say, "Bang."

That was all; just "Bang," in a quiet voice. There was no puff of smoke, no recoil from the paper muzzle.

But Tom's back erupted in a spray of blood.

He fell backward.

I screamed.

All four heads swiveled up toward me. Their eyes were like spiders' eyes: black and gleaming.

I knew that following Tom and Malcolm would only get me killed — or worse. There was only one other direction that I could go — back into the cave.

I'd seen before-and-after photos of Arrowhead Cave. The City Fathers had ordered it sealed off, and sealed off it had been, with a vengeance. What

had been a dark, mysterious opening into the underworld had been reduced to a pile of rubble, leaving an overhang barely a yard deep.

But there was no place else to hide. I pressed against the unyielding stone, feeling a distant wetness as my bladder let go. I could hear them scrabbling up the slope after me. I turned frantically from side to side, seeking an impossible escape —

And saw, six inches above my head, a lateral crack in the rock.

It was barely wider than my body, and beyond it was unrelieved blackness, yet to me it looked like the gates of Heaven. I jumped, grabbed the flat sandstone lip, pulled myself up and into it, kicking and squirming. There was barely enough room for me to wriggle between the two slabs of rock; I had to breathe shallowly to do so. But I kept crawling.

To this day I've no idea how that providential escape route came to be there. Perhaps it had been overlooked after the blast; perhaps it had been deemed too small to worry about. Or perhaps that temblor we'd had a week earlier had had something to do with opening it. All I know is that, after a lifetime of frantic crawling, I saw light up ahead.

I redoubled my efforts, scooted forward — and felt a cold hand close around my ankle.

I didn't have the breath to scream — it came out as a thin, mewling cry. Whichever one of those things had me began dragging me relentlessly back, down into the darkness. I felt my fingernails splinter on the rock. I kicked back frantically with my free leg, felt my shoe strike what had to be the head of the one that had grabbed me. I gritted my teeth, drew my leg up, and kicked backward with every bit of strength I had left.

His head *splintered*. I felt his skull cave in. But his grip did not slacken.

Sobbing obscenities, I swung my free leg against my other one, as hard as I could. Among the injuries that would be counted up later was a hairline fracture of my ankle — but at the time I felt nothing but a fierce joy when that cold grip loosened for a moment.

I lunged forward, panting, and came to the end of the passage, so abruptly that I tumbled out before I could stop myself. I caught a brief, dizzying glimpse of a hillside below me, scrub bushes barely illuminated by the crepuscular twilight — then I fell. Pain exploded in my head like a roman candle, and I must have passed out.

My last thought before I lost consciousness was: *They're still coming for me.*

AND NOW MOST OF YOU are wondering a few different things, I imagine — such as, *Why did he waste our time with this silliness?* or, *He's got quite an imagination,* or even, *Where are the men with white coats and butterfly nets?*

For those of you who wish to know the end of the story — I wish I could tell you. There was front-page material in the local paper the day after that day in 1955, documenting the discovery of Tom Harper's body near Arrowhead Cave. No bullet or gun was ever found, but something very powerful had punched a hole clean through him.

They never found Malcolm.

Me they found at the bottom of the next ravine over from Arrowhead Cave. I had a concussion, and was in a coma for nearly two weeks. When I finally came out of it, I told everyone who asked — and many did, believe me — that I remembered nothing. Which was the truth. My recollection of the events of that long-ago day has come back to me piecemeal, during the course of many a long and sleepless night. I stopped seeing therapists after one diagnosed me with PTSD, and wondered why a writer with no military history was so afflicted.

I suppose it's possible that I imagined the whole thing, in an attempt to supply a story that fit the necessary particulars. If it hadn't been for the finding of Tom's body, I would have no reason not to assume that wasn't true. Which, of course, asks the question: What could possibly have happened that was so horrible that I might have made up such a story to normalize the reality?

In any event, I must admit lying to you at the start of my speech. I said I had always known that I wanted to be a writer. That's not strictly true; until I was seven years old, I had no idea what I wanted to be. But after that night, there was no doubt in my mind.

It's how I deal with it.

So, in conclusion, to those of you out there who know without question what you want to be when you grow up, I say congratulations — and be careful what you wish for. †