



SCOTT ROOKER

Master Of Time

All the kids thought that the heavy metal band Master of Time, was the name of a real guy. They were convinced that the singer looked like the drawings on all the posters, patches, t-shirts, and albums. They listened to all the lyrics, read all the liner notes, and scoured the artwork for cryptic messages. They drew the secret symbols in the margins of their schoolwork.

When Master Of Time came to town to promote their album, Todd and Ben rode their bikes all the way to the mall. They got in the back of the line at the record store. They waited. They had never been so excited. They were going to meet the Master Of Time, himself. Slowly, the line moved. It snaked around an aisle of cassette tapes. Then, they saw Master Of Time.

“Are you the Master Of Time?” asked Todd.

“Master Of Time is a band. I play bass in it,” said the balding, middle-aged man in denim.

“Oh,” said Todd, “Will you draw a Satan symbol on my hand?”

“Absolutely not,” he said, “First of all, I’m Episcopalian. Second of all, you shouldn’t write on your skin.”

Damn You Lansford Hastings

In a conference room in Independence, Missouri, eighty seven men, women, and children

gathered to watch a holographic projection of Lansford Hastings, broadcast from Mars. He wore a grey suit with a black turtleneck. He had dirty blonde hair and a tiny microphone headset.

“Good morning, Independence, Missouri! Today, is the beginning of a magnificent adventure. Today, is the beginning of a new prosperity. A new life awaits you all.”

With a wave of his hand, a holographic mars appeared.

“I want to tell you a little bit about your new home. This is where the future will be. Now. This is where we will manifest our destiny. Mars! This is man’s new

frontier. And, you will lead the way.”

He waved his hand again, pinching the mars graphic, making it smaller. Then he waved his hand, creating a little holographic earth.

“Let’s look at the voyage. You will launch from Independence, on the passenger shuttle Hope. As, it takes off, the rocket boosters will fall into the Atlantic. Then Hope will orbit the Earth, stabilize, and a secondary booster will set a course from Earth’s orbit to Mars. This leg of the trip usually takes one year. However, there is a quicker way. I have discovered a way to change the trajectory of the shuttle, and to reach Mars three months earlier. I am calling this route, ‘Hasting’s Cutoff’. I have made this voyage myself twice, before. I will periodically, be sending correspondence via hologram, at various points along the way. I look forward to welcoming you to this wondrous place. I can promise you that Mars is far more beautiful than you can possibly imagine. Thank you, and god-speed.”

Lansford Hastings hologram took a bow. Some of the settlers clapped. Babies cried. He looked up and smiled. “Thank you!” he said.

The next morning the shuttle Hope launched in perfect weather. It orbited Earth and began the long journey toward Mars. Months passed as the colonist adjusted

to life on the weightless ship.

The party was lead by two men. The first was George Hoch. The second was Jeff Crane . One day, while floating inside the main hull of the weightless cabin, one of Crane's children got ice-cream on the shirt of George Hoch. He grabbed the child, shook it by the neck. Jeff Crane unbuckled and floated to confront George Hoch. Hoch struck Crane, and was about to use a Taser, when Crane stabbed him through the heart, killing him.

The party met to decide the fate of Jeff Crane. It was decided he would be banished to an escape capsule. He was sent off into space, presumably to die, for the crime of murder. The shuttle continued towards Mars.

Near Hasting's Cutoff, they made precise adjustments to the ships navigation. Closer to Mars they could now receive Lansford Hastings holographic transmissions. With baited breath, the colonists awaited the transmission. No transmission came. The ship crept closer to the skin of Mars. They tried again, and again. They were drifting head-on into Mars' tiny moon, Phobos.

Since, they could not land the shuttle on the tiny moon, they abandoned it. The colonists rushed into the four escape capsules. They narrowly got off before the shuttle crashed into the moon beneath them. In the panic, they never had time to transfer fuel from the shuttle

to the escape capsules. As such, they were now helplessly trapped in the orbit of Phobos. They had no food, no communication, and had only enough fuel, to keep the cabins partially heated. They were starving, freezing, and lost. Over the next nine months, thirty six colonists perished. The living survived by consuming the flesh of the dead.

Miraculously, Jeff Crane, the man they had sent to die, had survived, made it to Mars, and brought a search party to rescue the colonists. When, the rescuers opened the escape capsules they were horrified by what they saw. Damn you Lansford Hastings.

*The Tunnel**Prologue: The Opera Singer*

Dr. Robert Hammond arrived home from the hospital just as the sun was fading into orange twilight. He got out of his work clothes and into his jogging clothes. He laced his running shoes and stretched his legs on the steps in his garage. He set out jogging down the street. He jogged down the hill and turned left into the Shelley Lake greenway trail. He made another left and ran towards Sanderson High School. His heart rate was pumping. As a physician he knew the importance of exercise. He loved to jog. He also loved to sing opera. The only time he could really sing opera was when he was cutting the grass, and even then the neighbors could still hear it.

He continued under North Hills Drive. The trail became more steep. The sky had grown darker now. It was darkest blue. He passed a woman speed walking on the right. The trail began to curve.

An owl flew out of the sky and landed with its talons in the doctor's scalp. The owl's wings flapped. The doctor crouched down, shocked. The doctor felt pure adrenaline. The owl flew off his head and onto the power lines which sagged above the trail. The doctor grabbed the keys from his short's pocket and clutched them between his knuckles, raising his fist to the owl. The owl turned its head around backwards to look at the doctor. "Come on!" said Dr. Hammond, "Come on, owl!" The owl flew off into the night.

The doctor turned and looked at the woman speed walker he had just passed. "Did you see that? Did you see that?" he said. "Did you see that?"

The woman had her hand over her mouth, covering her laughter. She was just about crying. She was trying hard not to let the man know she was laughing.

"Man!" he said putting his keys back in his pocket. He continued his jog. Dr. Hammond knew the woman was laughing at him. He didn't mind so much. He was just glad someone had witnessed what had happened. He figured it was less likely that he were insane, as long

as someone else had indeed seen what he had seen.

When he had completed his jog, he entered through the kitchen. He embraced his wife a little tighter than normal that night. She looked at him. “Honey, you’re bleeding!” she said. She touched his bald head. There were several scratches.

“Honey you’ll never guess what happened to me..” he said. He told her the story. She didn’t believe him. She was sure he was having an affair.

The Tunnel

Third grader Dave Downey walked to the edge of the woods. He went down the Shelley Lake greenway trail. He called out, “Bobo! Camille! Here kitty kitty! Here Kitty kitty!” The cat’s name was Camille. Her alias was Bobo. She did not come.

It was getting dark. He knew that the street lights would be on soon. He would have to go home and wash up for dinner. “Dave!” called the boys mother, “David Barnabas Downey!” She called him his full name when he was fixing for trouble. He hustled up the driveway. He ducked under her arm, and entered through the doorway into the kitchen.

Later after dinner, Dave stepped out into the garage. He called again, “Bobo! Camille! Here kitty kitty!!” He walked a little ways down the driveway enough to see the street. “Bobo!” It was not unusual for Bobo to disappear from time to time. She would often disappear for several days. As Dave Downey looked at the street light with the swarming moths, he couldn’t help but worry, and think how something felt different this time.

The next morning Dave Downey called again, “Bobo! Bobo!” all the way to the bus stop. There he greeted the congregation with one book bag strap on. He waved and said, “Has anyone seen Bobo around? She’s missing again.”

“Haven’t seen her!” said fifth grader Dave Powers. He had a cast on his arm with which he used to mainly terrorize the other kids.

“She disappears a lot,” said fourth grader Dave Tarbuck.

“Dog probably ate her,” said fourth grader Dave Benson.

For some reason the mothers of this generation had thought to name half of its male children David, or Dave, which they did. Therefore, nobody was ever called Dave. Instead, everybody went by there last names. A

good last name could make a man.

The boys spent their time spitting on the concrete. The girls wanted nothing at all to do with this. They sat off to the side. Presumably, the boys were a source of great embarrassment for the girls.

A small brown dog ran past. Then along came the great white dog Scamp in hot pursuit. This was a sight not uncommon. Scamp had fathered half the neighborhood dogs. Even those that supposedly weren't his progeny still bore striking resemblance. There was much speculation. The children loved Scamp.

There was an awful sound of breaks. The bus came to a stop. The children lined up. The bus doors opened and the children entered one by one. The bus driver was Tina. She was a formidable African-American woman.

It was believed that the back of the bus was cooler. This couldn't have been further from the truth. Still, the children clamored for the back. There, they could better elude the watchful eye of Tina.

After school, Downey ran home. In the kitchen he saw his mom. "Is Bobo back?"

"I haven't seen Camille," she said, "she'll be back."

"I know," he said.

That afternoon Downey searched everywhere he

could think of. He tried to retrace her steps. He walked the street curbs where she liked to travel. He went down along the Shelley Lake greenway trail. He pictured Bobo walking fast; following just behind somebody like she often did. The whole way he was calling, "Bobo! Camille! Here kitty kitty!" When he got to the edge of Shelley Lake he knew it was unlikely she had gone any further. Bobo did not like water. He turned back calling out all along.

"Lucy's disappeared," said Tarbuck the next day at the bus stop.

"Mr. Bojangles is gone too," said Benson.

"Did Bobo come back yet?" asked Powers.

"No," replied Downey. "That's three missing cat's."

He heard some crying from the girls on the curb. Jennifer, a second grader said, "we can't find my puppy Sunshine."

Sunshine was not a puppy. Sunshine was a fifteen year old Shih Tzu. That made her one hundred and five years old in dog years. She was blind, deaf, partially bald, and prone to infection.

"Wo. Three cat's and a dog now. Something is definitely happening," said Downey.

"What do you think it is?" asked Tarbuck.

There was a pause.

Powers struck a match. It burned out. He struck another match and lit a Virginia Slim Ultra-light One Hundreds cigarette. He pulled a hard drag. He had stolen the cigarette from Tarbuck's mother's purse. As he took another drag the others stepped back. They feared the smell of tobacco and sulfur.

"You know what I think?" said Powers. He flung his arm around the back of his head. He brought the cigarette in hand across his face. He left the cigarette in his lips, pulled the arm back, took a drag and met it on the other side.

"I think they were murdered by a dog, probably." He said. He handed the women's cigarette to Tarbuck. By now the girls were crying. Tarbuck took a drag and coughed, "but what dog would do this?"

"I bet it was a German shepherd?" said Benson. He had never seen a German shepherd but the name terrified him. Benson took a drag on the cigarette then handed it back to Powers who said, "Let's not jump to conclusions." He took another big drag, let out a cloud of smoke and said, "We will find out what happened."

He stomped the butt, and pulled out a metal canteen of cologne that had 'Camp Beverly Hills,' engraved on it. He doused his hands and rubbed it into his fingers.

He put a splotch on either side of his neck. He chewed two sticks of peppermint stick gum, and a jolly rancher. The others did the same. They all smelled like French whores.

Over the next two days, none of the children's pets were seen. In that time Power's cat Penelope went missing. Neighborhood mothers began to freak out. Adding to the situation was the discovery that afternoon of this dog collar.

Sunshine
(919)555-1826
6405 Lakerest Ct
Raleigh NC 27612

It was found at the bottom of a dry creek bed, near the sewage tunnel which ran beneath the Sanderson High School football field. The jogger who found it called the number. He in turn spoke to Jennifer's mother who began freaking out.

It was lonely at the bus stop the next few days as most of the parents took their children to school. The only ones left were Downey and Powers.

It was pretty quiet.

“What do you think is going on?” Downey asked.

Powers replied, “I don’t know.”

“Do you think, its a dog? Or a wild animal?” Downey asked.

Powers replied, “I don’t know.”

He looked up from the curb and said, “I think sometimes there are just forces acting upon us, which we may not be able to comprehend or fully understand.”

Downey asked, “Do you miss Penelope?”

Powers replied, “Yes I do. I love her.”

Powers was different when he was not surrounded by his minions. Here was a vulnerable and eloquent young man, who in two periods, would be slamming first graders into their lockers with his cast. The two sat in silence until the bus came. Downey wondered how Powers had broken his arm.

That weekend the paranoia reached a fever pitch. Benson’s mother reportedly saw two large dogs roaming the streets looking for prey in the middle of the night. They were off there leashes and free to roam. There was barking and growling, and rustling in the woods. This story became more credible as the rumor spread from house to house. By the time it got around the cull de sac it had become a cold hard fact.

There was a neighborhood meeting called at the pool. It was agreed that all dogs should be leashed, and those that weren’t would be turned over to animal control. This put a serious damper on the dating life of Scamp.

Another cat, Max went missing that Sunday morning. This seemed to suggest that the disappearances could be attributed to something other than an unchained dog. The mother’s broadened their net of suspects to include raccoons, foxes, or even coyotes. They included all of this in the fliers they put on every mailbox in the subdivision. These fliers even suggested the possibility of rabies. The flier went as follows:

May 2, 1989

Attention Neighbors,

Over the last week, at least 5 cats and 1 dog have gone missing in the Lake Park subdivision. Most of the disappearances have occurred in the vicinity of Lakerest Ct and Lakeway Dr. It is unknown whether an unleashed dog or pack of dogs is to blame. There is also the possibility that there could be a coyote, or a fox, or a raccoon. Any of these animals may be rabid and should be considered dangerous. If you see any suspicious animals please call Wake County Animal Control at (919)555-

9881. As a precaution it is recommended that all animals and children be kept in doors. We should all be extra vigilant until the source of the disappearances is uncovered.

Here is a list of the missing pets and telephone numbers:

Camille, alias Bobo: female tortoiseshell cat (919)555-4750.

Lucy: female orange cat (919)555-8880.

Mr. Bojangles: male grey striped cat (919)555-7269.

Penelope: female tabby cat (919) 555-8332

Max: male hairy grey cat (919) 555-8440

Sunshine: female shih-tzu dog (919)555-1826

Any information regarding the whereabouts of these pets would greatly be appreciated. If you have any questions or concerns please contact, Deborah Benson (919)555-7269. Thank you,

Deborah Benson

Lake Park Community Watch

Late that Monday afternoon Downey's father went out to get the mail. When he opened the mailbox he noticed the flier put there by Deborah Benson. He thought

it was something about joining the Lake Park Pool. He balled it up before any of his children could see it and make him feel guilty for not joining the pool. Downey's father always cited financial reasons for their not joining the pool. There was another reason, a secret. Downey's father couldn't swim.

"Dad, can we join the pool, this summer?" his daughter Tiffany asked as he sat down to sort the mail.

"You would never go." said Downey's father.

That Tuesday, at the bus stop it was again just Downey and Powers. It was silent.

Downey asked, "Bunn, how'd you break your arm?"

"Don't ever ask me that again." he said.

A Volvo station wagon drove up at a safe speed. In it were the other Dave's, and two Jennifer's. Benson and Tarbuck were in the very back of the station wagon in the seats which faced backwards. These seats were particularly coveted by pre-teen boys.

Downey and Powers scrambled up. The car slowed but did not stop. The driver, Deborah Benson was a devout follower of the Lake Park Swim Club. She knew that the Downeys did not belong to the pool. She thought this as she pulled her foot off the gas. For a moment she thought of bringing the car safely to a stop. Then she

saw Powers and she put her foot back on the gas and locked the doors. Deborah Benson was active member in the Lake Park Community Watch as well. She knew the reputation of Powers. She knew he smoked. As she drove towards the school she looked up in the rear view mirror at her little angels.

“Mommy,” her daughter said. “Where did Goldilocks go?”

“I don’t know, Jennifer.” She said.

The goldfish had gone missing overnight. Deborah Benson glanced at her son’s head in the way back of the station wagon. To keep his little sister from the pain of losing another pet, Benson had taken the dead goldfish. He didn’t know what to do with it. He brought it to school with him hoping to get rid of it at the right time.

Back at the bus stop, Downey said, “We’ve got to do something about the disappearances. The longer we wait the less likely that Bobo, Penelope, and the others will make it home.”

“I agree. But, we’ve got to do it on our own.” said Powers. “Without Animal Control, without the Lake Park Community Watch.”

“You’re right. We are the only ones that can bring them home.” said Downey.

“Alright, at school round up the other Daves, tell them to meet up at 3:30 pm at The Underground Fort,” said Powers. The bus took them to school.

At school, Downey set out to reunite the Daves. Downey’s first stop was Physical Education class. His class shared the carpeted multi-purpose room with Tarbuck’s fourth grade class. Physical Education was taught by Mrs. Adcock. She was an African-American woman who was very much into crystals. She believed that physical education was the hallmark of a young child’s development. She turned off the lights. The kids sat and watched a videocassette about exercise. At the back of the carpeted multi-purpose room Downey saw Tarbuck fidgeting with his grass stained Bo Jackson cross trainers.

Tarbuck was heavily invested in the baseball card market. Every penny he made cutting grass, he spent on baseball cards. He read Beckett Monthly like it was the Wall Street Journal. He was sure that one day baseball cards would make him rich. He cut half the lawns in Wake County, and bought a mint condition Upper Deck Ken Griffey Jr. Rookie Card.

Downey whispered, “psst. Tarbuck. Tarbuck. Meet us at The Underground Fort today at 3:30 pm.” Tarbuck nodded.

Downey's next stop was the media center. There was a brief window where his third grade class would share the media center with Benson's fourth grade class. As part of the curriculum, students in the fourth grade were indoctrinated with North Carolina history. The students were fascinated by the story of The Lost Colony. Benson sat at a table listening to a cassette tape and reading along in the picture book that accompanied it. He listened to the story of The Lost Colony everyday. He couldn't get enough of it. Downey sat down across from Benson. He spoke. Benson didn't notice. Downey paused the cassette tape. Benson took off the earphones.

"We're meeting at the Underground Fort at 3:30 pm to find the missing pets." said Downey. Benson nodded and pressed play again. He put the earphones around Downey's ears and shared with him the remarkable story of The Lost Colony.

They were actually listening to a cassette tape of Iron Maiden's Somewhere In Time. This was the type of music that meant you had a cool older brother. The lead singer belted out, "Caught somewhere in time-ime-ime! Caught somewhere in time..oh oh!"

Mrs. Mann the media center specialist smiled as she saw the boys share the headphones. She was glad the

boys were enjoying the curriculum. She opened her desk drawer. There beside a soft pack of Virginia Slim Ultra-Light One Hundreds was the dead body of a goldfish. She gasped and shut the drawer.

Mrs. Mann telephoned Mickey Fowler. In the mornings, Mickey Fowler was the school's crossing guard. The rest of the day he was school's maintenance man. The children loved him. In his some twenty-two years working in the school system he had seen a lot. The dead goldfish was something he hadn't seen. He disposed of the body.

The administration soon found out about Jennifer Benson's missing goldfish. The Assistant Principal called Dave Benson to her office. He told her the story about how he was protecting his sister, and that they had already lost their cat, Mr. Bojangles. Under the circumstances, he was let go. By the time the bell had rung at the end of the day, Benson had become a living legend.

Powers, Benson, Tarbuck, and Downey set off into the woods just before 3:30 pm. As each passed through the thicket they would carefully push aside the briars and thorns only to let them recoil and thwack the boy who followed them. This was the pecking order.

The four continued down the slope towards the lake.

They could still see the edge of the houses through the trees, but the rotten smell of the city sewers meant they had arrived. This was the woods. They ducked beneath the brier patches under the honey suckles.

Powers stopped and held his hand up. The others crouched. Looking down they saw what remained of a fort they had built. 'The Old Fort', was all pine straw and rotten logs. It was crude. Then the line moved on.

Powers stopped again. He pointed into the air. They looked up at the three two by fours nailed tentatively into the trees above. This was 'The Tree Fort'. They continued.

Then they came to a three and a half by four foot hole in the ground. It was roughly two to three feet deep. It was a cesspool filled with grey brackish water. This was 'The Underground Fort.' It was there first for-ay into trench warfare battlements. It smelled awful.

The Daves sat in a circle on the banks of 'The Underground Fort'. Powers spoke, "We're gonna find the missing pets ourselves. The longer we wait to act, the less likely it is that they'll make it home."

Tar buck said, "What about Animal Control or the Lake Park Community Watch. Shouldn't we let em' do their job?"

"We are the only ones that can do it!" Powers said.

"Now what we need is a plan!"

The boys had begun to get eaten by the mosquitos that festered in the hole they had dug.

"Now, what clues do we have?" asked Powers.

"Well what about Sunshine's dog collar?" suggested Benson.

"They found it by that tunnel that goes beneath the Sanderson High School football field, right?" said Downey.

"Maybe all the pets are trapped somewhere in the tunnel," said Benson.

"They could be in there," said Powers.

"Forget it," said Tar buck, "I ain't going in there."

"Why not?" asked Powers

"Come on. We've got to do this," said Benson.

"Yeah, It's worth a shot," said Downey.

"We can't turn back now, its too late." said Powers.

Looking down at their shoes the boys realized that they had already gone too far. Their Bo Jackson Cross Trainers and Michael Air Jordan's were already super muddy. If they went back now there mother's would simply freak. Now they had to find out what had happened to the pets they loved so much. They were already in trouble so they had nothing to lose.

They got up and walked along the dry creek bottom.

They followed the rocky path all the up the slope until its end. There it was. The concrete monolith had three facets and a coarse bottom. It was a foot thick on every side. From its widest point the walls stretched twenty feet. In its center was a dripping black orifice. This hole was four feet in diameter. Where it went was up to the imagination.

The Daves were standing roughly where the dog's collar had been found. They scampered up the concrete bottom which jutted from the creek bed. They peered off into the abyss. They smelled the cold dank sewer. It drew them into its mouth. They squatted at the edge of the tunnel. Powers was the furthest in. As his eyes adjusted he could just make out a faint glow deep within the hole.

"Ah ha." he said. "Everybody out!"

The boys filed out.

"Come with me," said Powers, "I want to show you something."

They were glad to be outside.

They went up the hill and followed the dirt path to the chain-link fence at the edge of the stadium. They were now above where the tunnel went.

Tarbuck said, "Did anyone bring a flashlight?"

"No."

"Well," said Tarbuck, "Shouldn't we do this with a flashlight?"

"No," said Powers, "We don't need one."

"What?" said Tarbuck, "There are rats in there. What if we're in there and somebody throws firecrackers at us?" said Tarbuck. "Or what if the city seals off the entrance while we are in there."

"Shut up," said Powers.

He slid between a slit that was cut in the fence. The others did the same. "Check this out," said Powers. They were on the track.

"Now the tunnel goes right along under here," said Powers as he traced a line with his cast. "We can assume it follows a straight line, like this." They crossed the track and hopped a smaller fence that surrounded the football field itself.

Just near the goal line, Powers pointed to the ground. "I could see this from inside the tunnel. Its a drain. There is one of these probably every hundred feet. Look, you can see another one just over there. Now, the dog collar was found in the crick just passed the tunnel entrance. That means Sunshine was somewhere between these drains and that tunnel entrance."

The boys stood, hopped the fence, slid back through the slit and made their way back to the tunnel opening.

Before anyone could chicken out Powers, leapt into the hole, then Benson, then Tarbuck, then Downey. Nobody could see a damn thing. They walked, hunched forward in total blackness. Water trickled.

Only Powers could see the faint light of the first drain. The others only felt. They felt the concave tunnel floor beneath their footfalls. They felt the low ceiling creep above. Their hands and fingers felt the coarse surfaces. What they couldn't feel their mind filled in with terrifying imagination. The quicker they got to the light the less tormented they would be by the darkness. Powers ran quickly to the light.

He whispered, "yes."

The others ran just as fast. Soon they were directly beneath the drain. Looking up, into the sun, the space looked like a magnificent cathedral. Along its walls was the illuminated graffiti of a generation of miscreants. Somebody had spray painted 'Iron Maiden.' They boys thought this was a sign. They wondered if their older brothers hadn't been there some time before.

They took turns climbing the metal ladder and sticking their fingers out of the drain. It was all so breathtaking they nearly forgot their task. They could see no clue so they convened to press on. They bid the light farewell, and set off once again, into blackness. Another

far off light was in the distance. They walked towards it. The darkness was colder now, knowing they were farther from the only way out they knew. Occasionally, they would stop and look back. But, the tunnel had turned and they could no longer see the way out.

Alas, they had made it the second drain. They sat on either side of the temple. This one was much like the first but it had far less graffiti. Less had made it this far. The words on these walls did not hold meaning to the boys. They searched for clues about the missing pets. There were only plastic bags and cigarette butts. There was a constant drip of water on the cavern floor. Their time in the second temple was brief. And, on they went.

The segmented tunnel was crooked. It wormed its way beneath the earth. The distance to the next light was greater than the last. The boys were now walking closer together holding on, clinching the backs of those in front. They pressed on. The tunnel was wetter now. A constant flow of water ran to escape the tunnel. It ran between their feet which crept higher up the tunnel walls.

The tunnel rose sharply. They had made it to the third temple. Here the presence of light was blinding. There was almost no graffiti in this temple. What little there was was totally indecipherable. The base of this

temple was much wider than the others. It was filled with water. They searched for clues. There was a water logged baseball and a ballpoint pen. They continued.

The tunnel crept right. Powers noticed for the first time, there was no light, no temple ahead. He hoped the others wouldn't see it. He thought back to the entrance to the tunnel. Was it just a memory? Onward they went trembling. Something ran across Benson's foot. He jolted and stepped in water up to his ankle. Something slithered passed Tarbuck's leg. He panicked and ran madly.

"Get a hold of yourself!" said Powers. In the darkness, their only reliable sense was touch. "Grab my hand," said Powers, "Let's go!" They went a little further.

"Now, you can feel the water flowing the other way," said Powers, "There is less of it. That means it's flowing out of here. If we continue we will find the way out." He stopped.

"What is it?" asked Benson.

"What's going on?" asked Downey

"The tunnel splits," said Powers.

"What?" the others replied.

"One tunnel goes to the left." Powers said, "One tunnel goes to the right."

"What are we gonna do?" asked Benson.

"I say we go to the right." said Powers "But we're

gonna have to duck. This tunnel is smaller."

"OK" they agreed. "We go to the right!" said Powers.

The diameter of this tunnel was about three and a half feet. The boys had to crouch much lower. They bumped their heads plenty. In this darkness their imaginations betrayed them. The walls were breathing. Their skin was crawling. Powers closed his eyes and his mind ran wild. He clenched his eyes as hard as he could, and then he saw purple phosphorescent flagellates swimming in his vision. He was relieved just to see something. With his eyes shut tight Powers simply felt the shape of the tunnel and continued on.

Then he saw it. In the center of his vision was a faint sliver of light. He kept his eyes open. He didn't blink. He didn't tell the others for a few seconds. Soon they all saw the light of salvation. They ran full throttle towards it. Powers hit his head and fell. Benson tripped over him, pulling Tarbuck down. Only little Downey did not fall. "Get up," he said.

"Go ahead. You lead the way, Downey." said Powers.

He walked fast. By the time the others had gotten up, Downey was at the edge of the light. "No!" cried Downey. "NO! Dammit!"

His hands grasped the metal bars which would prevent their escape. He flailed wildly to no avail. This end of the tunnel was square shaped and blocked by a rhu-barb bars. There was no way out but the way they came. By now they all stood with their arms hanging through the bars. They could see the back of the Sanderson High School parking lot. There was a lot of tall grass and trees. The sky was grey. There was a smell of rain in the air.

They looked down at their Nike's. They were ruined. They would all be in deep shit when they returned home. They held the bars, and looked down some more. There was a lot of debris and garbage washed up under the metal rods. They bent down and sifted through it. There were no clues.

"Looks like its going to rain, ya'll. Let's go back," said Powers.

The line turned back and went the way they came.

They were disappointed they had found nothing. Nevertheless, they were glad they knew where they were going this time. They traveled faster into darkness. They knew what to expect. Now they feared the water more than the mysterious darkness. They booked.

There was a distant rumble of thunder. They could smell the rain somewhere. By now they made it to the spot where the two tunnels went left and right. They

stopped as the tunnel widened.

"What about the other tunnel?" said Benson.

"Forget it." said Powers. "The rain is gonna to come."

By now the water flow had risen. There were a few far off thunder rolls. Then Downey heard something. He stopped and bent down. He heard something alive move towards him. It walked back and forth dipping in and out of the water running along the tunnel floor. There was a tremendous thunder clap.

The great rat ran straight into the ankle of the boy. The boy jumped and screamed. The rat went on. The other boys now had there legs high in the tunnel. They could hear the rat scurry in the water under them. The boys waited in silence. The rat continued along its path. When they could no longer here it Powers whispered, "We've got to get out of here before the water gets any higher. We've got to go fast. But we might see the rat again, OK. Keep an eye out for the rat."

They pressed on through the darkest part of the tunnel. Finally, they came to the third temple. They went around the pool of water pulling themselves up with the metal ladder steps. They didn't bother to look up. Water poured in from above. They continued.

The water was now up to their hi-tops. They hopped side to side along the tunnel sides. They could

feel the tunnel surface with their hands. It was oozing with life. Goo. Tarbuck made the mistake of thinking about water moccasins. Now it was all he could think of. He wasn't sure what they looked like, but it didn't matter. In the water there were thousands of them now.

"OK. I see the second temple." said Powers. They ran to it. When they got to it they didn't bother to stop. They were in a race against the water. They ran fast. The water rushed. They made it to the first temple. "Come on!" said Powers. "Look there is the end of it!!" They sprinted towards the light.

Now out of the black tunnel they felt like they had just walked out of a darkened movie theatre. Their pupils constricted. There was a shih-tzu dog staring straight at the concrete wall.

"That's Sunshine." said Benson. "I'm sure of it." He squatted beside it. The crusty yellowy eyes and prominent under bite were a dead giveaway. He scooped up the dog. It was soaked.

The boys were happy to have rescued Sunshine. Still it seemed like a consolation prize to them. There were still five missing cats out there and none of the boys were able to recover their own pets. They went along the greenway trail, then up through, and out of the woods.

They took Sunshine to little Jennifer. Benson set the

dog down on the stoop. Powers rang the doorbell. It was still pouring rain. The boys gathered close under the roof and gutter. Sunshine stared off into the aluminum siding next to the door. She was as confused and indifferent as ever, but she was home.

Jennifer's family was elated. They thanked the boys. They invited the boys in. There was a catch, though. "We all take our shoes off," said the father standing in his socks on the hardwood floors. The boys declined the invitation and went back towards the road.

The rain was subtle now. They couldn't tell if it was coming from the sky or from the trees.

"We did a good thing," Powers said in the street. "So what if we didn't find our cats. They'll probab.." he stopped.

"Car!" said Downey.

"Car!" said Benson. They got out of the road and into the wet grass. A Ford Taurus station wagon passed. They got back in the road. Powers continued, "They'll probably come back, sooner or later. We were..."

"Car!" said Downey.

"Car!" said Benson.

The mailman buzzed the cull de sac. He drove off. The boys walked back out into the steamy road.

Powers continued again, "That was fun. OK."

They walked home in their water logged Nikes.

At dinner that night Downey didn't say anything about the tunnel. He had hidden his muddy Bo Jackson cross trainers under his bed. He didn't know this, but that was the first place his mother would look for contraband. She knew all about the July 1979 Playboy.

After dinner, the dishwasher was loaded and set to regular wash. It hummed. Tiffany and Dave went up to their rooms. The telephone rang once, twice. On the third ring, Mr. Downey picked up. During this time of year, they were frequent calls about joining the Lake Park Swim Club. Mr. Downey wanted to be the first to answer. He was determined not to let his family ever join the pool. "This is Mr. Downey," he said. "Hello.." "Uh huh. Oh."

He listened to the voice. "That's fantastic," said Mr. Downey, "We will be right over to see.. Who might I ask, is this? Where are you?" The voice spoke but the answer was lost amid the noise of a deafening garbage disposal.

It was too late. The voice hung up.

"Honey, that was about Bobo. I think she's been found but I couldn't hear the last part cause you were running the disposal!"

By now Tiffany and Downey were in the kitchen.

They had heard about Bobo. Downey dialed *69 on the telephone.

It rang. He then heard a cheery robotic lady voice, say "The last number that called your line was (919)555-5335."

He hung up. He picked up the telephone and dialed the number.

It rang, once, twice, three, four times. On the fifth ring someone answered. There was a pause. "Hello..?" said a faint voice.

"Hello, did you just call here about a missing cat?" asked Downey.

"Yes, I believe I did!" said the voice.

"Who is this? Where are you? Tell us, so we can see if you've got Bobo." said Downey.

"This is Manny Perone! I'm over here at 6402 Lak-erest Dr! When are you coming?"

"That's next door," said Downey. "We will be right there, OK." He covered the mouthpiece of the telephone, and whispered, "Mom, call the others."

There was silence.

Manny Perone had hung up.

Tiffany and Downey sprang out the door.

Manny Perone was their next door neighbor. He was an elderly man who had once been the drummer in

a military band. His claim to fame was that he had automated a pickle factory. He was bound to a wheel chair and hadn't left the house in years. He was an inventor, an eccentric. His house was cluttered and musty.

The two children went to the front door. There was no door bell. There was some wires in a hole. They tapped on the glass door. "I don't think he uses this door." said Tiffany. They went around the side of the driveway. Here there was a metal gate. It was rusted. Downey lifted the latch and opened the gate. They approached side door to the house. There was a very large dog barking inside. The side door was already open. It was always open. There was a broken screen and another hand made gate. The large German shepherd smelled the children. It stopped barking. It sat down on the kitchen linoleum.

"Mr. Perone. We're here!" said Downey

"Hello!" said Tiffany.

They waited.

Manny Perone rolled up in his wheel chair. "Hey!!" He was wearing a white t-shirt with the arms cut off. He wore pants rolled up and his feet dangled off the wheel chair. "Come on in!!" he said.

The children fumbled with the gate hinge.

"No!!" said Manny Perone, "Like this!" It opened

instantly.

They were inside the house. "Its right over here!" said Manny Perone. He lead them through the narrow corridor between boxes of clutter. "Alright!" he rolled up to an old Hammond Organ. He flipped its switches. It came alive.

"OK! "Listen to This!" He played the most beautifully haunting music the children had ever heard. It sounded like a choir of ghosts. They weren't sure if it was circus gospel, or contemporary baseball funeral music.

Manny Perone toed the foot pedals. He played chords with his left hand and soloed with his right hand. What his arthritic fingers lacked in accuracy he more than made up for with shimmering vibrato.

Manny Perone played his song for over six minutes. When the last note tapered off, the children almost clapped.

"All the vibrato, works!! The foot pedals, the draw bars," said Manny Perone, "Everything works! Cept' this one Key! B flat!" He pushed it repeatedly. "Don't worry you'll never need that note!!"

He then proceeded to tell the children a totally inappropriate story about something that had happened to him during a drum solo when he was in the army.

“That was an amazing song Mr. Perone.” said Tiffany.”

“Yeah, Mr. Perone that was awesome,” said Downey, “So let me ask you, where is the cat?”

“What!!” Said Manny Perone

“I said, where is the cat?!”

“What?!!” said Manny Perone pointing at his ear.

“O! OK! ‘I said.’ Where is the Cat?!!!”

“Oh! The cats!!” said Manny Perone. “I thought you were here for the PIANO!! I put an ad in the paper!!”

Just then something moved in the corner of Tiffany’s eye. She turned and there was a grey striped cat cleaning its paw. “That’s Mr. Bojangles,” she said, “This one is Max!” A hairy grey cat rubbed against her leg.

“These cat’s just started showin’ up one day!” said Manny Perone. “They came in through the side door. I keep it open so the dog can come and go. They just showed up! First one, then two, then three, then four, then five! I’ve been feeding them tuna fish!! They love it!! I saw a note about missing cats. I thought it was something about joining the pool so I didn’t even look at it! Then I did! Yours was the first number on there! So here we are!! Are these your cats?!!! “

“One of em’ is,” said Dave Downey. “Can I use your telephone?”

“Sure. In the kitchen!!”

Dave Downey went in the kitchen. As he dialed he saw Bobo sitting on a chair under the kitchen table.

All of the missing cats were now found. Soon their owners came. There was great relief. It proved frustrating getting the cats though, as they didn’t seem to want to be rescued at all. There was no shortage of hiding places in the hoard. Eventually, all five cats were rounded up and taken home.

Everyone thanked Manny Perone for taking such good care of their cats. He was sad to see them go. They had had a ball, he thought.

Dave Downey carried Bobo back home. He had one hand firmly gripping her bottom, and the other holding her around the shoulder blades. He carried her over the choppy little grass line that separated the two yards. The family was now complete again. Dave Downey held Bobo tight after the ordeal, and kissed her on her forehead. Bobo hated this. As he let her go, she kicked him with her powerful hind legs. She left a tiny scratch on his arm. She ran off into the woods. She was home.

Epilogue

Over the next few years, Bobo and the other cats would be rescued many, many, more times from Manny Perone's house. The cats had quite simply acquired a taste for tuna. Manny Perone acted like these cats were a terrific burden upon him. "You better come get your cats!" he'd say over the telephone. He always sounded angry. Deep down though, he was really honored that the cats had chosen him.