



prophets

By Brennan Stasiewicz

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Fleamont's one of the dumbest towns ever. Nothing ever happens except when someone dies.

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ou can always follow a line, but only those who open their eyes can tie it in a knot."

Those decaying words, wafting from my grandfather's mouth like dust through sunlight, meant nothing to me. I had lost all interest in listening to the old oracle speak the ways of life. My mind was filled with the more important thoughts of a child: the everlasting questions, such as the size of Frankie Perbleman's giant horny toad, and the length of Grandpa's nose hairs. These were the only things encircling my brain, like one of those comic strip word balloons.

The thing that stuck most in my head, however, was about my friend Jim Charlton. Jim and I had been friends ever since we were pea high. Jim was a tall fellow, but not too overpowering. He kept a low profile, but his outside appearance left a long shadow. We often spent long summer nights, lying beneath the stars above the old schoolhouse, talking all deep and serious like we were two prophets from the Bible. It was there, during these night-long chats, that I really began to see inside Jim. Through these timeless moments of truth it became apparent to me that Jim's seemingly weak outside appearance was only skin-deep. If you could look inside Jim as I had, if you could have heard those bronzed words coming from his tight-lipped mouth, you'd be able to see the real Jim. The Jim who could steam his heart past any obstacle. The Jim who emptied his soul to me in sworn secrecy, above the schoolhouse shingles, beneath the innocent stars.

It was two days earlier that Jim had told me of his venture. I played along with him in this game, but to my discredit, I didn't really believe him. I mean, who in their right mind would ever believe that anyone could do what he was planning?

"Oh, go stick it in the mud," I said as I turned away in disbelief.

"No, Pud." Pud was the natural-sounding nickname that Jim had generously given me. "I swear it on the Bible—ain't nothin' gonna stop me from it."

Still refusing to turn and face him, I spoke from the side of my mouth, "Yeah, like I ain't never heard that from you before!" But then I realized that I never had heard Jim swear to something without doing it. Discreetly, I glanced back at him.

“Aww! Pud! You know I ain’t never lied about something like this, and to the contrary, I’m quite insulted!”

I could always tell when Jim was really upset because he’d try to talk like Mrs. Buecher, our English teacher, by using big, highfalutin’ words and phrases.

“I’m sorry, Jim,” I said, now that I saw the flaw in my thinking. “I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“Yeah, well, now you got me all flabbergasted!”

I looked back down to the ground, found the spot that I had been watching earlier, and forcefully cried, “Shucks! I just think you oughta think about it some more, that’s all.”

“Well, don’t you worry ’bout it, Pud. Now you know that I ain’t kiddin’. Just don’t tell no one!”

“Why?” I whined with a rolling frown.

“Just don’t. I’ll be the one who’ll tell the town, and I’ll do it on . . .” Jim stopped for a moment of thought, “Independence Day. Ju-lie the Fourth!”

The days passed by like a slug through warm beer. I had promised Jim that I would not mention his surprise to anyone, but the suspense and anticipation ate through me. It was Wednesday, two days before the Fourth of July. Mama let me sleep late because we were up till 1:00, playing a wild game of Scrabble. By the time I had dressed, cleaned, and eaten, it was a little past ten. As I looked out the window, I could just feel the thick heat float by the willow tree, to the front porch, and finally take rest over the overgrown bluegrass. I sat down on the old leather recliner in the den and enjoyed the climate. We were one of the first families in town to get an air conditioner. It was able to cool almost every room, but the one that it worked best on was the den. As I sat daydreaming about the beach and cool moun-



Jim’s inflating head was ballooning out all over the place . . . I sat back and watched him grow.



taintops, I sure wasn’t looking forward to the chores that were in store for me that day.

I dozed off for a second, but my flights through the Alps soon stopped when Mama entered my cooling cocoon. Before I could say a word, before Mama could say a word, I had the daily list in my face, extracting me from my state of repose. I rose from my cool throne

and headed for the reality of an early July day. I stepped out the door and off the front porch, right through that stream of thick, pea soup heat, and took immediate shelter under the willow tree. Hot July mornings are probably the worst times of the year. Not only do you have the sun leeching energy from your helpless body, but you practically have to paddle through the moist air. I stepped around the gardening my mom had set forth for me to do, and decided to visit Jimmy at the malt shop in the middle of town.

I lived in a small Midwestern town called Fleamont. It was probably one of the quietest and dullest towns there had ever been in Oklahoma. Everyone knew everyone, mostly because the population never had exceeded two hundred. Nothing new ever happened except when someone died. There was nothing special about the town, nothing extraordinary, except maybe Mt. Flea. Mt. Flea was not a mountain, but rather a mound. The town took pride in this four-hundred-foot mound because out on the Midwestern plains, there aren’t that many geographical formations.

I opened the door to Bubba’s Malt and Fine Ice Cream Shop and stepped in. Bubba, after visiting our place last summer, decided to invest in an air conditioner, too. As the dry, arctic air hit me, the change in temperature made my skin feel like it was going to crack. I staggered to the counter and practically passed out onto one of the red vinyl stools. Jim came up and asked like a polite malt boy if he could get me anything. But as soon as Bubba went in the back of the shop, he made me a free malt.

At first I was surprised by his gesture. “What in Sam Hill are you doing?” “Sam Hill” was a little something that I picked up from Pa. “If Bubba finds out, he’ll fire you in a second!” Bubba might not have graduated from high school, but he was one of the smoothest guys in town. Jack McGraw and Bubba Merris, they were the closest things we had to slick, smooth-talking greasers from the city.

Jim had a cool look on his face. “So let the old fart fire me. I’m quittin’ after today anyhow. Seeing as how I’m gonna be a star and everything.”

“A star? Why are you thinking ’bout being a star?”

“Well, Pud, the way I see it is that there ain’t no second best. You either win, or you lose. And I ain’t a loser—losers ain’t stars.”

This was only the second time I’d heard Jim talk like this, the first being five days earlier when he told me his plan. It wasn’t like him to be so grown-up about something. He always approached things in a serious manner, but this time it seemed like he wasn’t just a kid with a plan, but rather an adult. I wasn’t sure how to react to this new Jim, and it seemed that I never

would know how to.

One thing was for sure, though. Jim's inflating head was just ballooning out all over the place. Overwhelmed by this transformation in my friend, I just sat back and watched him grow. Besides, if Jim could pull this stunt off, all of Oklahoma would use his name as a household word.

The crowd was growing around the town square podium like bees around a hive, as all of Fleamont turned out for the Independence Day food and festivities. Jim had put his homemade billboard with the flashy lines, "The once-in-a-lifetime extravaganza affair," over the podium earlier in the day, but hadn't been seen since then. The sign caught the eye of a few townspeople, who in turn, spread the word to the others who were unaware. So, by about ten in the morning, most of Fleamont was waiting for his surprise.

Finally, at about 10:30, Jim came strutting down Main Street. He had this proud look in his eye, the kind of look the Cannonball Man had when the circus paraded through town. He was almost dressed like him, too. Jim wore painted red boots, green plaid slacks, a magenta shirt, and a black engineer's cap. I figured that he was just doing that to gain attention, and boy, was it working! Jim rose to the platform, waited through a few muffled laughs, and then began to speak.

"For the citizens of Fleamont . . . I, Jim Charlton,

"I, Jim Charlton, will perform one of the most perplexing feats known to man!"

will perform one of the most perplexing feats known to man. In fifteen minutes I will approach Mt. Flea, and before the dawn of tomorrow, I will have dug my way to the east side, being armed with nothing but a pick, a shovel, and my determination."

There was a moment of silence, which was met by a roaring laughter that spread like smallpox through the crowd. Jim stood there in silence, still with that self-assured, proud face, a face that reassured me that he would not back down from his plans.

"Go ahead and laugh," Jim said with a little smirk, "but I am going to do what I have said. Believe me or not—it will happen!"

So, with that, Jim jumped from the platform and

made his way to the small mountain. I was right behind, following the same path as he, but instead of a pick and shovel in my hand, I had a corndog and ice cream.

Jim had been working now for about four hours. A crowd had gathered around him like at one of those big press conferences, but now he had dug too far into the mass of Mt. Flea for the mob to follow. Picnic blan-

Jim's flashy threads that once reeked of splendor now reeked of intense physical labor.

kets and lawn chairs started to fill the area around the east and west side of Mt. Flea.

Gradually, all the festivities of the Fourth of July moved to the mountain. I was having a grand ol' time, but I felt somewhat bad for Jim. He had been working nonstop for ten hours, and by the looks of the black void, he had gone quite a distance. The fireworks took flight over the small pond and winked back at me. Everyone was happy, even Ethel Herfthon, the oldest widow in town. The only one who I could imagine wasn't, was Jim.

At about 10:00 that night, I entered the Jim-made cave with my kerosene lantern, and followed it until I reached him. There he was, working harder than a locomotive. The flashy threads that once reeked of splendor now reeked of intense physical labor. The sweat that rolled from his brow left dark stains on his magenta shirt. His face showed exhaustion and pain, and as I stared at him in awe, I noticed a hot stream of tears flowing from his eyes. I couldn't move or speak for a few minutes. The only thing I heard in the dark cave, besides the grumble of pick and shovel, was Jim's feeble voice saying, "I ain't stoppin'," over and over again. I'd never seen anyone work themselves to the point of crying, not even those guys on the chain gangs who work on the railroad. I know I will never forget his face and the way he was at that time for as long as I live.

"Hey, Jim. Come on, buddy. Let me give you a hand. Ain't no one gonna find out; everyone's all liquored up anyhow. Don't do this to yourself."

I offered a few times to help him, just for a little while, but he refused to have anyone do his work. So, slowly, I started back out of the tunnel.

The next few hours I sat alone at the base of Mt.

Flea beneath an old, decrepit-looking oak tree. I didn't talk or mingle with those who remained awake, drinking and throwing firecrackers at each other. Those who could not stay awake had drifted home in a tired and

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**Inside the dark cave,
Jim's feeble voice kept
saying, "I ain't stoppin'."**

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drunken stupor. For the most part, everyone had lost interest in Jim, and his promise to the town. Even so, I still believed in him. I believed that he could do anything he set his mind to, but by doing so, I also believed that he missed those times that form the sweet memories of childhood. Such memories as that strange July Fourth, and even memories like Stewy Chipowski's eighth birthday party. Everyone was at that little bash, everyone except Jim, who missed it because he was trying to beat the record for the most crawdads caught in one day. He was always consumed by one thing after another; unfortunately for him, one thing after another consumed him.

It was about 6:30, and the sun began to awaken from its bed of clouds over the horizon. The morning dew swept down the generous slopes of Mt. Flea and blew a cool kiss to my cheek. There wasn't any thick heat pouring from the sky, no rain or thunder, just the sound of pick and shovel. I jumped to my feet as my heart began to beat uncontrollably; the first rays of disappointment had not yet broken out of their cover. The wall of dirt and rock started to crumble along the most eastward side of the mountain—Jim was almost here!

Out of the depths of the mound, with one final blow of steel against stone, he came. His weak body turned toward me and gained an inch of posture as he smiled in pitiful appeasement. Then he dropped to the ground in exhaustion and remained there motionless. In that split second, the mad beat of my heart stopped. I felt my back slide down the smooth, rain-beaten trunk of the oak and come to rest on the cool earth. I lay there for a couple of minutes under the oak, and wept. I cried for many different reasons that day, but most of all for Jim: earlier that morning of July fifth, the sun had risen.

It wasn't until the eighth of July that Jim received what he had worked so hard for. At around 1:00, a man from the *Tulsa Tribunal* stopped by Jim's house for an

interview. I sat out on the porch listening to Jim recall everything, from his motives to the satisfaction gained from his—as the reporter put it—"battle against the odds." Most of what I heard Jim tell the reporter wasn't true, but this time I accepted his lies. By Thursday morning, most of Oklahoma had heard of "Jim Charlton's Feat Against The Odds," and Jim finally did become a star.

The fame and glory lasted a few weeks, with some parties and pies, but then it was over. Mt. Flea was the last time I ever saw Jim try to overcome his weaknesses. Mt. Flea was the first time he failed, and I guess this is what changed him. Over the next few years of high school, we both were a little more grown-up from that experience, but most noticeably, Jim. ★

Addicted (continued from page 24)

The young man shrugged, his loose shirt hanging off his frame like rolls of skin on a decrepit grandfather. The dust, colored by the hidden Indian clay, rose in tiny clouds from the weathered road as he kicked the ground with the toe of his boot.

He paused.

"I'll die when I'm good and ready," he said. Looking up, he focused on the approaching future until it stopped in front of him.

Swiftly, he reached up to his mouth, gently pulling the cigarette from his lips. Dropping his hand, he let go of the burning butt that had balanced so precariously between his slim, jaundiced fingers. With a heel, he crushed it into the dirt, leaving only a charred memory.

He began to board the third-rate bus when desperately, she reached to stop him.

"Call me when you get there?" she asked.

"Get where?" he answered.

She paused.

"Call me when you stop then," she recovered.

He nodded, shrugging her hand off his shoulder. He boarded the bus and she watched it disappear.

Slowly, she began shuffling home, kicking aimlessly at the grass lipping the road. The wind lapped her face rhythmically as she took a smokeless breath. She stared at the road ahead, cigarette butts scattered across the loose gravel, and ground them in with sagging steps.

—Una Kim,
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