

The
LEGEND
of
PEDESTRIO



ABNER SERD

THE LEGEND OF PEDESTRIO

Abner Serd

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A Note on Style

When it is simply a matter of identifying a speaker, a comma is used after said... to introduce a quotation. Such usage is more traditional than logical...

THE CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE (17TH ED), 13.14

The Legend of Pedestrio is a story told out loud, then written down in the form of a book. In general, the usual bookish style rules are followed — except when those rules change the way a line is supposed to sound.

In oral storytelling, *I said* isn't just a stage direction — it's a part of the narration. The spoken line: *I said "stop breaking the rules!"* is meant to flow naturally, without a break or pause. A comma would interrupt that flow. And since the quotation is not syntactically independent, there is no need to capitalize the first letter of the quote.

Every line in this book has a sound to it, and I've tried to punctuate each line accordingly. Sometimes that means removing a comma. Other times it means inserting one to suggest a pause. Some readers may find these style choices distracting, but here's the good news: the audiobook contains no unusual punctuation whatsoever. If you close your eyes and listen, you can almost see the commas falling into place...

For my folks,

who tracked me down the very first day

of my first-ever thousand-mile trek...

and brought me the sack lunch

I'd accidentally left on the counter.



P R O L O G U E :

The Truth of the World

THERE are those who believe the world and everything in it grew from a single seed. This seed originated in the core of a distant planet (let's call that planet the Cosmic Apple). When the Cosmic Apple ripened, the seed was scooped out and cast into space, where it began to germinate. Meanwhile, the Apple — having served her purpose — soon withered and decayed.

Now, like all planet seeds, the Earth was self-watering and self-fertilizing. For a million years, the tiny grain of a planet drifted through the cosmos, acquiring girth, and gravity, and atmosphere.

Then it blossomed!

Rivers and mountains formed. Plants and animals appeared. Life beget life all over the place! And slowly, ever so slowly, the Earth developed into a mature, fully-grown planet with seeds of her own.

Some believe the cycle is nearly complete. The Earth is ripe, they say. The time of the Great Scooping is at hand. Now, the Scooping... well, I won't trouble you with the details, on account of that might spark panic, but I'll tell you this: the Scooping will involve massive earthquakes and devastating atmospheric conditions. It'll be a cataclysm powerful enough to roil the stomach of every living being on the planet, including oak trees — and you know how hard it is to roil *their* stomachs. If you believe the single-seed theory, you'd best eat nothing but unbuttered toast from here on out.

'Course, not everyone does believe it. Many wise and learned scholars insist that the Earth is not a fruit. Nor is it a vegetable. It is, in point of fact, an egg.



The truth is this: the world and everything in it did indeed sprout from a single seed. That's true — and this is also true: the world was hatched by an interstellar dopplerix (you know what a dopplerix is, don't you? It's a very large, elongated space bird with a blue beak and a red tail). And while we're at it, you know what else is true? The world was conjured into being by a powerful magician known as the Great Whizbang. The world was blasted out of a black hole like pumice from a volcano. The world was folded into existence when the universe — by accident or design — creased itself in space and time. Yes indeed, and you can tell your friends: we live on an origami planet.

The truth is this: the world has always been here. The world *will* always be here. The world was never here at all.

The world only exists as long as you and I believe in it. You and I exist because the world believes in us. The world has pockets containing many other worlds. Somewhere in this world is an ancient tree whose roots are the only things holding the world together.

The world is a dream, given form and substance by a confederation of supernatural Beings. These Beings are all around us — They just don't like to show Themselves. The world as we know it, in whole or in part, can be undreamed at any time.

The truth is this: the world is far larger than any of us could ever possibly imagine. It contains many layers of meaning, and many equally valid stories. Within those stories are an infinite number of whole truths and half-truths and metatruths and quasi-truths, and only six outright lies.

Do you know what the six lies are? No? Me neither — I mean... not all of them. They change, you know, from time to time. Some

of them are pretty closely guarded secrets. Some are too big to tell, and some are too small to be heard. I don't believe there's a soul on this planet at any given moment who knows all six of them. Apart from The Cozener, of course.

I could tell you one, though. Would you like to hear one of the six outright lies?

All right, here goes: you won't find a single one of the other five lies anywhere in this book. You won't find a single one of them even mentioned. Not even in passing. Not even in the footnotes.

Especially not in the footnotes.



C H A P T E R 1 :
So There I Was...

So there I was: running for my life from a pack of vicious wild chooks, dodging and diving through the trees, leading them on a wild, frenetic chase halfway across the Wandering Hills, when somebody stole my hat.

I figured it was a low-reaching jack pine, larking about at my expense. I nearly stopped. I did take a moment to marvel at this atypical behavior — it's rare to catch a pine tree in a playful mood. When I find one with a sense of humor, I like to give it a pat on the bark and few words of encouragement — followed by a polite request for the return of my hat. But seeing as how I was only a slip and a stumble away from being shredded into jerky, I thought it best not to tarry.

I broke left. The chooks flew after me, squawking like the hinges on a boxful of bitter ends. I leaped across a swollen stream and zigzagged through the wood. The birds couldn't keep up. Chooks don't fly that well, and these ones had no end of trouble changing direction. They kept crashing into trees, which only got more of their feathers up.

But wild chooks are a lot smarter than any ordinary, domesticated variety of chook. I suspected they were herding me.

One of them flanked me from the left. I zagged right, and darn near ran into another one. The second one raked the air with angry talons. I ducked just in time.

Two more chooks dove at me, beak first. I dodged between a pair of pines. The pines just stood there, looking mournful. I slid down a needle-covered slope, rolled under a fallen log — and accidentally flushed a sharp-tongued grouse out of hiding.

All four chooks flew off, screeching, in pursuit of the startled grouse. The grouse gave back as good as it got, decibel-wise. It fussed and squabbled until the whole ruction flew out of earshot. As for me, I climbed back up the slope and hightailed it to town just as fast as my feet could go.

In all the excitement, I sort of forgot about my hat. It wasn't until the next morning, when I walked in the door at Elmer's Café, that I remembered it.

C H A P T E R 2 :

*A Gentleman of
Undiscovered Talent*

Now, before I get too far along in this narrative, it might be best if I explain the difference between your world and my world.

There is no difference.

It's the same world, and it's no surprise if the particulars vary. After all, you and I are following different paths. Of *course* the scenery doesn't match.

And who am I? Well, you might call me a Gentleman of Undiscovered Talent. A spinner of yarns. A presenter of tales. A raconteur. A fabulist. A storyteller. Until now, my efforts may have escaped your notice, but I will not remain undiscovered for long. Someday I'll find a story with legs, and when I do, I mean to ride that beast all the way to Glory. Till then, I find ways to make myself useful.

On mornings when I get up early enough, I supervise the sunrise. In the spring, I perform quality control on the budding trees, ensuring that each individual specimen has been assigned the correct form of leaf. It's embarrassing to see an oak tree sprouting maple leaves. You'd be surprised how often I catch them doing it. And of course, every fall, I stand guard against the devious machinations of the Guy in Charge of Winter, who always endeavors to shake loose the first flurry of snowflakes well before the rest of us are ready.

Because of these duties, I spend a lot of my time out on Wild Side — those uncivilized regions out beyond the edge of town.

I keep no house. I prefer to sleep on the ground, under an open sky, where I can see the stars. Such arrangements are few and far between, here on Town Side — but you can still find such a camp, if you know where to look.

For instance, the night after the wild chook attack, I stayed atop a little one-story gift shop where my friend Bill O'Sale sells made-ins.¹ The building is conveniently located and has a flat roof. As long as you stay low, you can't be seen from down below — and on a clear night, you can see the handful of stars that poke through the glare of the city lights.

A retail establishment rooftop is one of the few places in town where you can be reasonably sure nobody's gonna stumble across your slumbering bones in the middle of the night. But you can't sleep in at a camp like that; you've got to get up early enough to stow your gear and climb down without being spotted. All of which is to say that I didn't have a chance to get myself all spruced up before I walked into Elmer's Café that morning.

Elmer was shaving a potato onto the grill to make hash browns. He took one look at me and said "what happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You look like you just crawled out from under a log."

I glanced at my reflection in the left-hand wall. That's the south wall. The mirrored surface is pasted all over with cartoons and comic strips and pictures of incongruous congruous, and the glass is stained and spotted from Elmer's occasional habit of throwing food at his customers. It took some head-bobbing, but eventually I caught a glimpse of myself through the various layers of dirt and decoration.

Sure enough, I still had twigs in my hair and a bit of moss sprouting out of my collar. I said "yeah, well, there's a reason for that. It so happens I was inspecting them."

¹ A made-in is a local souvenir manufactured somewhere else, usually stamped on the bottom so you know where it really comes from. For example, a knickknack with your city crest on it might say Made In Schmaydin, even though Schmaydin is a million miles away.

Doc said “inspecting what? Rotten logs?”

Doc usually sits up at the north end of the counter. There are no booths nor tables at Elmer’s Café — just nine swivel stools and a countertop. The north end is warmer in the wintertime, seeing as how it’s closer to the grill and further away from the door. But you have to be a trifle more careful if you choose to sit at that end, on account of the way Elmer likes to flail about with the spatula.

I said “technically, I’m supposed to inspect them before they become logs. It’s just easier when they’re lying on the ground.”

Stanley Oliver Terrick occupied the number four stool, just to the right of the cutout — a removable piece of countertop that provides access to Elmer’s side of the counter. He said “if a tree is already lying on the ground, isn’t that a sign it’s probably going to fail the inspection?”

“You’re probly right,” I said. “But we still have to go through the motions, anyway. May I have a dumpster, please?”²

Right about then, the café door opened and Rosetta Stone walked in. She said “hi Abner! Where’s your hat?”

“It’s in the shop,” I said. “They’re checking it for leaks.”

“Leaks?” Rosetta took a seat between Stanley and Doc.

“Yes, I keep running out of ideas. Hat must have sprung a leak, somehow.”

Doc said “maybe it’s your head.”

I said “my hat is easier to fix.”

Stanley laughed. I don’t know why.

I suppose I could have just told Rosetta about the jack pine with the sense of humor. But then I would have had to tell everybody why I was in such a scurry that I left my hat behind, and frankly, I didn’t think they’d understand.

Most folks only know about the relatively tame varieties of chook. They don’t know about the wild ones — the marauders — the

² A dumpster is a kind of an omelet made of everything Elmer can find in the refrigerator, except meat. They’re not as bad as they sound — and they’re a lot cheaper than a landfill, which is everything plus the meat.

chooks who hunt in packs. Wild chooks are closely related to the cockatrice, and some of them even breathe fire! But if I tried to explain all that to the folks down at Elmer's... well, I reckon they just wouldn't be able to move past the part where I got chased halfway across the territory by an angry chicken.

I'd never hear the end of that. Doc still calls me "whale snot" from the time I got stuck in a whale's blowhole. But that's another story.

Elmer filled the tea kettle and put it on the front burner. He did that without being asked. He knows Rosetta doesn't drink coffee.

He said "what's going on, Ro?"

She said "I think I've found another signal."

Rosetta is a translator of global communications — and when I say global, I don't mean communications from *around* the world; I mean communications *from* the world.

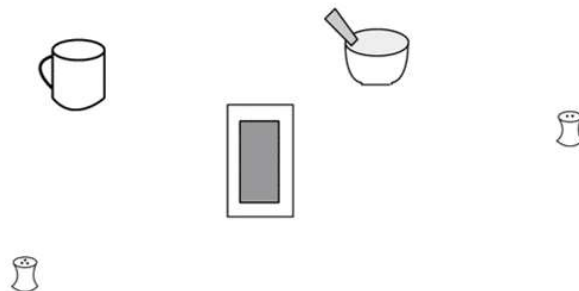
She finds messages written into the landscape. She studies weather patterns as if they were handwritten documents. Rosetta believes something Out There is trying to talk to us, and if we want to talk back, we need to learn to read the signals.

Elmer said "what does it say?"

"I don't know yet. I'm still working on the translation."

I said "what's the signal?"

Rosetta took the sugar bowl, the salt and pepper shakers, the napkin dispenser, and Stanley's coffee mug, and arranged them on the countertop. She said "it's a pattern that looks like this:"



She said “this pattern was made using five bits of a stone called milky quartz. I found them stuck in a bed of gypsum out by Nothing Flat. Must have been there for a million years.”

Elmer said “I didn’t do it.”

Rosetta gave him one of those looks. You know, the kind you could use to pry the lid off a can of won’t. Elmer turned around and busied himself scraping the grill.

I said “so you reckon that pattern is supposed to mean something?”

“Of course it means something,” Rosetta said. “All signals mean something. The trick is figuring out what.”

Stanley gazed at the pattern thoughtfully. “Well, it’s obviously a shopping list. Somebody’s neolithic reminder to pick up five quarts of milk and some... what do they make out of gypsum?”

Elmer said “drywall, I think.”

I said “did they even have drywall a million years ago?”

Perhaps I should have told you about the sign up on the wall, above the cash register. It says “Beware of Sharp Turns.” It’s not a road sign; it’s a dialogue warning.

Discussions down at Elmer’s Café have been known to veer off in unexpected directions so suddenly, your head feels like it’s been spun around in a maelstrom, then dropped off a cliff. If you commence to feeling dizzy, it’s best to step back.

Doc stepped back by hiding himself behind a wall of newspaper.

Rosetta said “the type of rock doesn’t matter. What matters is the arrangement. I’ve seen this particular pattern before — ”

Elmer said “it looks kind of like a snake wearing a party hat.”

Stanley said “maybe it’s his birthday.”

Doc couldn’t help himself. He put the paper down and scowled. “It’s just a random scatter plot, that’s all.”

Rosetta said “it’s not random. Those rocks were placed in that precise pattern.”

“A million years ago?”

“Well, I’ve got an alibi,” said Elmer. “Want to hear it?”

“No,” said Rosetta. “Is that tea water hot yet?”

I said “if Elmer didn’t do it, then who did?”

Elmer said “my money is on the snake.”

S. O. Terrick said “if it *was* his birthday, then maybe this is some kind of prehistoric birthday card.”

Rosetta leaned forward and set her elbows on the countertop. “I’m pretty sure that’s not a snake.”

“Could be a worm,” said Elmer.

Stanley shook his head. “Worms don’t wear party hats.”

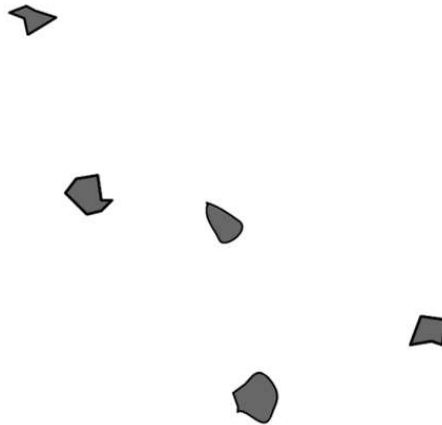
“You’re right,” said Elmer. “That settles it, then. It’s gotta be a snake.”

INTERLOQUE:
A Signature, of Sorts

ON the remote, rocky shore of Lake Vastwater, a solitary figure sits just beyond reach of the lapping waves, facing west. The setting sun touches the horizon; the surface of the lake glows red, like a pool of magma.

The figure leans back, propping himself up on one elbow. He watches quietly as the sun disappears, dragging its colors behind it. He watches as the sky turns purple and shadows creep out from behind every rock and boulder. Idly, he picks up a fragment of greenstone. He places it just so. Then he reaches for another fragment.

As the last light of day melts away, the figure stands and stretches. He takes one last look at his surroundings, then turns and disappears into the shadows. Behind him, he leaves a signature, of sorts — an obscure pattern of stones, just at the water's edge:



CHAPTER 3 :

Vern Acular

WELL, I didn't want to get into any more chook fights, but I did need to get my hat back. A good hat is hard to find. A good hat does so much more than keep the rain and sun from getting in your eyes. A good hat's got a wide brim that keeps your ears and the back of your neck from getting sunburned. It stays on your head in blustery weather. It's got ventilation, so as not to cook your brain on hot days. And it's rugged enough to handle just about any adventure. A hat like that is a treasure worth fighting for — so as soon as I finished my breakfast, I headed out the Yonder Track in the direction of the Wandering Hills.

According to local legend, the Wandering Hills aren't from around here. The way I heard it, they wandered into the territory about a million years ago,³ and finding no native hills between Jagged Creek and the coast, they settled down on what used to be level ground and raised a few bumps of their own. I don't give the story a whole lot of credence — although, come to think on it, that could explain the presence of some rather unusual plant and animal species. The mocking tree, for instance, is a species of woody plant that isn't found anywhere else west of the Great Empty Desert. Its leaves mimic the appearance of other trees' leaves, only the shapes and colors are wildly distorted. It's almost as if mocking trees are deliberately satirizing their neighbors. There is no apparent evolutionary reason for such behavior. Some folks say, if we only knew where the Wandering Hills came from,

³ Not the first time I've told you something happened a million years ago. Won't be the last, either. You gotta understand, I'm a storyteller — not a paleontologist. Point is, it happened a really long time ago.

we might learn a lot more about the environmental conditions that drove mocking trees to become so mean.

I had just about reached the grove where my hat disappeared when I spotted my friend Vern Acular moving carefully through the woods with his eyes fixed on the ground.

I said “hey, Vern. Whatcha doing?”

“Tracking.”

Vern is the best tracker I know. He once found a set of dinosaur footprints and followed them all the way to the meteor crater. I’ve seen him track a deer so close, the deer thought it had two shadows. “I can see that. You’re not tracking chooks, are you?”

“No.”

“Good. I didn’t want to find them again, anyway.”

Vern didn’t have anything more to say, so I hung back and watched him work.

I wasn’t surprised to run into Vern. He pretty much grew up in the outback. His family lived in the last house on the far edge of town. His backyard had no fence around it, and Vern would just walk out the back door and sometimes not come home again for days. As he got older, days turned into weeks, then a month or more, and finally one day he simply never came back a-tall. He’s wandered the length and breadth of Wild Side, and I’ve crossed paths with him in any number of unlikely places. But tell you true, I’d probly never catch a glimpse of him if he didn’t know me from back when. Vern’s a mite shy around folks he doesn’t know.

He wasn’t wearing a jacket — although I’ll wager he had one stashed somewhere. The seed moon wouldn’t be full for another week. Some north-facing patches of ground hadn’t even thawed out yet. The early spring weather may have lost some of its bite, but it still had a few teeth left.

He wore a pair of moccasins that he made himself and a boiled-wool overshirt that looked homespun. Probly traded for it, somewhere out in the Wild. His only visible store-bought possessions were his belt knife and his plenty-pocketed cargo

shorts. The shorts were threadbare and thorn-snagged. I guessed he was about due for a trip to the outfitters — but knowing Vern, he'd put it off as long as he could. I can't imagine where he gets the money to buy anything ready-made.

'Course, it's none of my business.

I said to Vern, I said "what are you tracking?"

"The wind."

"Why? What did it do?"

Seconds ticked by. I shifted my stance. Vern's eyes stayed on the ground. "Hmm?"

Vern suffers from a terrible affliction called Undivided Attention Syndrome. When he focuses on something, it's hard to tear him away. I've been trying to help him through it. Problem is, I keep getting distracted.

I tried again. "What are you going to do with it when you catch it?"

He looked up. "What?"

"You're not trophy hunting, are you?"

"No..."

Vern sounded like he was having trouble catching up with the conversation. He doesn't get much practice talking to people. I decided to be blunt.

"You're not gonna cut off the headwinds and mount them on your wall, are you?"

"No," he said, "of course not. I'm just practicing. I don't want my skills to get rusty."

I said "how do you track the wind? Does it leave footprints?"

Vern looked relieved to be getting back to level ground. "No, but you can see telltales, if you know what you're looking for. Like over there, for instance."

I looked where he was pointing. "Vern, that's a leaf."

"I know that."

"It's probly been lying there since last fall."

“Not in that particular spot,” he said. “Last week it was over there, next to that rock.”

I marveled out loud at Vern’s power of recollection.

“Not recollection, observation. The rock would have blocked any breeze coming from that direction, not to mention most of the sunlight. You see how that leaf shows less sign of deterioration than all the others?”

Vern could have been a schoolteacher, if you could ever get him inside a classroom. He’ll wax pedantic when the mood takes him.

“So you’re tracking the wind that blew through these parts about a week ago?”

“Oh no,” he said. “I’m tracking the cross-breeze that blew through just yesterday.”

“What cross-breeze?”

“The one that knocked a week’s worth of dust off that leaf.”

He got down on all fours, with his nose an inch away from an old, brown sourbark leaf. “Looks like a light gust — not strong enough to pick up the leaf itself, but it sure did leave an obvious trail of dust particles. You see? They’ve all been scattered off in that direction.”

Vern took off again, scanning the ground for motes of dust as if they were bread crumbs. I tagged along. “Say, you haven’t seen my hat by any chance, have you?”

“No. Where did you leave it?”

“I didn’t leave it anywhere. I was running from a pack of chooks, and a jack pine snatched it off my head.”

Vern said “good for Jack!”

Vern shares my opinion that the entire arboreal community would be better off if pine trees would just lighten up a bit. So you’re a pine tree. No point in brooding about it. World’s gonna turn, so you might as well cut loose every once and again.

“Yes, good for Jack,” I said. “It was a merry prank, but now I need my hat back. Geez, I hope the chooks didn’t run off with it.”

“Why would the chooks run off with your hat?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Bait for a trap?”

Vern allowed as how that could be a possibility. “If you see it lying around somewhere, don’t just rush over and grab it,” he advised.



It didn’t take long to find the spot where I’d slid down the bank. From there, I backtracked all the way to the grove where my hat got snatched.

Only it wasn’t there. I examined every inch of ground. I glared at the trees. For a brief moment, I thought about chopping off limbs until somebody talked.

I know. It’s a vile thought. I can’t believe I thought it. For a moment, I considered scolding myself. I thought of long, heavy words to describe my perfidy. Then a soft, ominous clucking filtered down through the treetops and landed in my ears.

That’s when it suddenly occurred to me that I’d neglected to tell Vern how much I admired his tracking abilities.

It further occurred to me that I should go and find him, and tell him, and that I should do it right now.

And so, without further deliberation, I departed from the grove at best possible speed and set off in search of Vern.

CHAPTER 4 :

How to Spook a Chook

“THEY won’t attack us if we stick together,” I said. “Right?”
“They might. If they think they can overpower us. Are you sure you want to walk behind me like that?”

I had been letting Vern take the lead as we hiked back to the chookery. “Well, I figured you should go first, since you know so much more than I do about these things.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” he said. “But I do know they like to pick off the stragglers.”

“On second thought, maybe I’d better show you the way.”

“Too late. We’re here.”

The clucking had grown louder. The chooks were getting restless. I scanned the treetops, but couldn’t spot any roosts. “What do we do?”

Vern said “can you fly?”

I thought about it. “Not very well.”

“That’s too bad. If you could fly, we could pretend we’re flying foxes, and go up there and chase them away.”

“Can *you* fly?”

“No, but one flying fox always has to stay on the ground, in case the chooks try to escape on foot.”

“Nice of you to volunteer.”

A staccato burst of clucks rained down from the treetops. The sound made my scalp itch. I rubbed the back of my neck as the other chooks joined the chorus. Vern said “quick, kneel down and pull your jacket up over your head.”

He dropped to his knees. His head and hands disappeared inside his overshirt, like a turtle vanishing into his shell. I followed suit, just as the first chook came flapping down to earth.

Vern made ghost sounds. So did I, waving my arms around for good measure. “WoooOOOooohhh! WooOOOOOOooohhh!!!”

The chook chucked in surprise.

Still on our knees, we shambled and lurched in her direction. “WoooOOOOOOooo!!!”

The chook gobbled frantically and flew out of there so fast, half her feathers couldn’t keep up. Squawks of alarm and frantic wingbeats resounded through the canopy as the other chooks hied after her. In seconds, the forest was quiet again.

I peeked out through the neck of my jacket. Vern was calmly stuffing chook feathers into a gunnysack. “What just happened?”

“Chooks are afraid of ghosts,” he said. “Especially short, headless ones. Must trigger some sort of genetic memory.”

“How long till they come back?”

“Hard to say,” he said, tying the gunnysack to his belt. “Too bad we didn’t have a chopping block in the background. That would have really spooked them.”

“Maybe next time. Do we need to get out of here, or can I look around for my hat?”

“Oh, the lead chook won’t be back for at least an hour, is my guess. But I doubt she’ll be leader much longer.”

“Why is that?”

“Chooks don’t respect a warhawk who turns chicken all the time. They think it’s a negative stereotype. First one back wins the pack — that’s the general rule.”

“Well, I’d best get busy, then.” I started shinnying up the nearest pine tree.

Vern said “where are you going?”

“I figure they must have stashed my hat in one of the roosts.”

He watched me grab a branch and hoist myself up. “I admire your determination.”

“I like that hat,” I said, reaching for the next branch.

“Obviously. But it’s not up there.”

I peered down at him. “How do you know?”

“Come down and look over here.”

Vern directed my attention to a tiny tuft of brown fur that was caught on a low-hanging pine bough. I said “what’s that?”

“I reckon it’s hornswoggle hair.”

“Hmm.” I examined the tuft of hair with interest. I’ve never seen a slick-fingered hornswoggle, though Vern swears they’re pretty common. Also, they’re very good at blending in.

Vern’s eyes swept the ground. “Looks like you ran right under him. I bet he grabbed your hat while you were distracted.”

“That sneak! Where did he go?”

“Took off that way.”

“Can you track him?”

“Oh, sure,” said Vern. “That part’s easy. The hard part is getting your hat back.”