

# Carving the Night-Dark Soil

By Greg Stolze

OCTOBER

Bernard Richardson took a deep breath and rolled a page into his typewriter. It was an old electric, he'd had it for years and the last time he'd gotten it repaired, it had cost more than he'd paid for it new.

He swallowed, even though there was nothing in his mouth. His mouth was dry. He centered the line and counted fourteen backspaces before he typed

*Carving the Night-Dark Soil*

He paused a moment, hit 'Return' twice, re-centered, and counted some more before typing

*A Novel by Bernard Richardson*

He frowned, wondering if 'novel' should be capitalized. Perhaps it sounded presumptuous. Carefully, he pulled the paper free and set it, face down, beside the machine. He could always change it later.

Another page went in, snowy blank, and he readied himself to begin.

He cracked his knuckles and poised them above the keys. He swallowed again, mouth still dry. He got up, went to the kitchen, thought about getting a beer or a glass of wine, decided on juice instead. He went to the bathroom, washed his hands, dried them more than was necessary, returned to his table and swallowed once more. His mouth was dry again.

He typed.

*Brendan Crabbe was a bear of a man, tall and bull-necked with a beetling brow. He always seemed smaller, so quiet was he, meek-faced with mousy hair cropped close with a bowl in the kitchen of his Nebraska farm, cheeks scraped daily by razor steel as a prologue to days of blistering heat, fast wind reddening, cold that chilled them taut and leather-hard. His great hands were ham-red, cured by working, by the tools of the land, wood and flesh shocked together by the force, the strength, as his arms like generals commanded them unwitting against the stern resistance of dirt, of old gnarled roots, of stones that needed prying and fenceposts that needed stumping, barbed wire that needed stringing as*

The phone rang and Bernard exhaled. He glanced at the caller ID and muttered, "Oh no."

It rang again. He made no move to pick it up. He bit his lower lip.

It rang.

"Ronald," he said as he picked it up, "Whatever it is, I'm not interested."

"Burns..."

"I write now, Ronald. I'm a writer. I'm writing my novel."

"Listen, Burns..."

"Remember? The novel about Protestant settlers in Nebraska? I'm finally writing it. It's going great."

"Can't you do it later?"

Bernard—"Burns" to his old co-workers—sighed hard.

The caller let the pause lie for a moment and said, "We worked together for close to twenty years and you never called me 'Ronald' before."

"You're not my chief any more."

"Burns, I need you."

"I'm a writer now."

"Burns, we've got a guy..."

"Oh, for the..."

"We've got a *guy*, Burns, we found him in an apartment all holed up, all he speaks is Pashto and you're the only guy in the district who speaks it too."

"I'm not the *only*..."

"You're the only one who can *interrogate* someone in Pashto and you know it, Burns, the clock is ticking! We were tracking stolen plastic explosives and there are at least two others still at large."

Burns sighed again.

"They took my thumb, Ronald," he said. "They cut off my *thumb*."

"You've got another thumb. You can still work the space bar. And this is just an interrogation, *please*."

"Ronald..."

"He had a map of area schools."

Burns gritted his teeth but he knew he'd do it and he was, somehow, relieved.

He picked up his old coat and tried hard to leave his gun behind but he knew. He locked the door and slouched down to his car with his loathed black steel companion riding comfortably under his armpit, again.

When he came back three hours later the crisis was averted and he had a fresh bruise on the side of his ribcage. He thought about writing again, but the fingers on his left hand were too swollen from pistol-whipping to work the crucial E, S and T keys.

# # #

## DECEMBER

Bernard blew on his fingers and cupped them around his hot coffee. He felt that he should be using this, somehow, *observing* the chill of his hands so that when he had to write about Brendan's hands being cold, that chill would creep off the page and feel authentic. Unfortunately, in his novel it was spring. He had just introduced Loretta, with whom Brendan was destined to have a rocky but ultimately fulfilling and uplifting marriage.

*Her hair like a daisy hillside caught his river-brown eye, hair shining and seeming sinful, seeming like temptation itself, wrong amidst the congregation. Everywhere else the eye might fall was faded gingham check, brown suitcoats brushed with care and worn gingerly to keep them from fraying and fading, kept right for the Sabbath. Everything was harsh used by Nebraska except that hair, bobbling along on top of her head three rows forward and a little to the right as she sang, sang, sang*

There was a series of hard thumps against Bernard's door and he didn't jerk upright or startle, but he came instantly alert and his body was turned towards the gun in its locked box, the box in a locked drawer, the drawer in his bedroom and the keys in his pockets. Bernard didn't feel fear or alarm or anger, his only experience was a cool calculation—how long would it take to get the weapon, chamber a round and arm it? It wasn't even 'wondering' in the ordinary sense, but a detached and utterly efficient evaluation of variables, a combat unconsciousness that had kept him alive...

"Bernard? Bernard I know you're in there! I can feel you in there!"

The words came a scant half-second after the last pound and immediately his mood shifted from alertness to resignation. It was Monique.

"Bernard?" She pronounced it the French way, "Behr-nahrd," she pronounced everything that way, she was from Quebec. For a moment he sat perfectly still and hoped he could wait her out.

"I know you're in there, Bernard! I heard you typing, typing away! Let me in!" The pounding resumed.

Monique was an underwear model, and a successful one. The first time Burns had seen her, she'd been on a shoot and he'd been trying to tell her to take the threats seriously, that the handwriting matched, that "Señor Risus," the man sending her disjointed letters about Hildegard of Bingen and Henry Darger, had

probably killed at least three women in four different states (an implausible and difficult feat made possible only by some sloppy zoning on the border between Iowa and Wisconsin).

Monique had looked at him and licked her lips and said, "You'd better stay close to me twenty-four seven, oui?"

Burns had immediately realized that she was crazy but, at the time, it had seemed like reckless, foxy, great-in-bed craziness. It was only later—after she'd decided against all advice to lure Señor Risus into a trap and he'd had to rescue her, half-frozen and terrified, from her hook in an Idaho meat locker—that he'd realized she was crazy, obsessive-compulsive bipolar stalker crazy.

He'd been a fool to have mad, tempestuous sex with her, he could see that now. Besides, once the serial killer was safely behind bars (and paralyzed from the shoulder blades down, to boot) they really had nothing in common.

"Bernard, I love you!"

Burns groaned, and hearing the sound she immediately redoubled her impacts on the door.

"Have you got another woman in there? Do you? I'll kill her!" She pronounced it 'keel.' "She will never love you as I do! Never!"

"Monique, it didn't work out," Bernard called. "Let it go. Find someone who can love you like you deserve... I can't do it. I'm not worth it!"

"Bernard, my love, my love! Why do you torture me so? Is this some sick game to you? Do you want me to beg?" Then, even through the door, he could sense her mood shifting. Over the four months they'd been together, he'd developed a sixth sense for it.

Like the vomit of a purging bulimic, her pride—indeed, egomania—came surging back, refluxing. "Do you? Do you want me to beg? Well screw you, Bernard! You think that just because... because..."

She was starting to cry. It wasn't subtle. Bernard sighed and looked around. Quietly, with slow and controlled steps, he stood and started making his way to his bedroom.

"Make love to me, Bernard! Make love to me now or lose me forever!"

"Oh, how I wish I could believe that," Bernard muttered as he knotted his bed sheets into a makeshift rope. He knew her too well. His only other options were to let her in or keep her locked out there, hollering, all night. He supposed he could call the cops, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to do it.

He put on his thickest coat and turned the thermostat all the way down before going out the window. He knew there'd be no way to close it behind him.

When he returned, guardedly, five hours later, his apartment was trashed. His expert eye reconstructed the scene in seconds—she'd left the building, seen the open window, and climbed up the makeshift rope in an act of nearly suicidal

obsession. His clothes were strewn about, with at least three shirts stolen from his laundry basket. The forty pages of *Carving the Night-Dark Soil* were scattered and torn. In his living room, amidst the wreckage of his TV, stereo and book collection, she'd written "Call me!" and her latest phone number, on the wall. It was in the same blood-red lipstick that she'd smeared on his work.

# # #

## FEBRUARY

Bernard's expression was neutral as he gazed down into his fruity, umbrella-decked drink. It had, he guessed, enough rum in it to stun a linebacker, but Bernard was barely affected by alcohol. The drink was expensive—everything here was—but he'd unmasked the truth about a drug-smuggling operation that had framed the resort owner as the mastermind, instead of the mysterious Ecuadoran "Commandante Nuerte" who was really responsible. Bernard frowned a bit thinking about Nuerte—he'd never caught the man. But that didn't matter now. Now, he was a writer.

He'd thought that finally accepting the grateful tropical billionaire's offer of a free stay at one of his resorts, far away from Monique and Ronald and the chill of his home, might help him create the fresh Nebraska spring that melted the stony hearts of two stern, proud Protestant settlers. But it wasn't helping. Everything here was so planned and smooth and decadent.

Everything was planned, except the deadly surprises.

Bernard shook his head. He wasn't here to think about deadly surprises. He was here to write, to be a writer. Here came the phone he'd requested, balanced on a tray by an obsequious waiter.

He dialed.

"Mmyeah?"

"Manny? It's Bernard."

"Huh?"

"Bernard Richardson? The..." Bernard coughed into his thumbless right hand and lowered his voice as he said, "The novelist?"

"Oh yeah yeah, you're doing the... the thing, right? The thing with the pilgrims."

"Protestants."

"Right."

"Protestant farmers in Nebraska."

Manny sighed.

"Right," he said. "The literary thing."

Manny Gittleberg was the genuine article: A published novelist. Bernard had come to hear him speak at a fiction seminar and had later run into him at a bookstore signing, completely by accident. Over the course of his career, Bernard had learned a lot of ways to get people to talk. In addition to just making them talk, he'd also developed the skills of getting them to want to talk, and with some guilt he'd plied those skills to get Manny's advice.

"Look, didja rethink the whole incest angle? I'm tellin'ya Bernie, you want a lit novel, you can't go wrong having your main chick remember that she was molested by her dad. Fire that off about two thirds in and the rest writes itself."

"I think I'm going a different direction with Loretta," Bernard said. Manny wrote under the pen name 'Dan Blaine.' His most highly recommended work was a paperback trilogy about chesty lesbian werewolves. It wasn't the sort of thing that usually interested Bernard, but he'd read the first one up to its twenty-first chapter, when Manny's howling inaccuracies in describing the use of plastic explosives had simply become too much.

Nevertheless, Manny had done two things that Bernard just could not. He had finished a novel—eight of them, in fact—and he had gotten them in print.

"I'm just... I'm having trouble getting a... I guess you'd call it a rhythm," Bernard said.

"Huh?"

"I mean, you write every day, right?"

"Yeah, when the baby's napping."

"Well, how do you do that?"

"Whaddaya mean, how do I...? I sit down and type, there's no mystery."

"But... how do you know what comes next?"

"I don't know. I don't need to know, I make it up, that's why it's called 'fiction'. C'mon Bernie, what's on your mind?"

Bernard looked at the matchbook on the table by his drink. "Well, this friend asked me to help him out with something..."

"Oh no," Manny said. "Here we go with the distractions. Look, you got to shut that shit down, my friend. Shut it down, like, double-quick, 'kay?"

"This friend of mine..."

"Let someone else help him, you got business to do. 'Cause Bernie? It's just a delaying tactic. Deep down, you know this. You're afraid. You're afraid to write, like we talked about, so you look for an excuse to not write and you know what? You start looking, you'll find one. You'll always find one. If I allowed myself to get distracted, hell, I'd never get anything done. There's always dishes to do, or laundry to fold or, or I don't know, I could power-scrub the back deck or something. But I don't let that stuff get to me. I have focus. Discipline. That's

worth more than 'vocabulary' or 'education' or 'talent' or 'having something to say'."

"Well, sure, I understand this, but I think this might be important..."

"Important? You're a writer. That's, y'know, you. What could be more important than that, than being what you are? I get my quota done, come hell or high water, because it matters. The discipline of writing matters. I can always find something 'important', I could find out what Shawn's doing in his bedroom all afternoon with the doors closed, I could find out who the guy is who keeps calling my wife's cell phone and hanging up when I answer, I could, hell, I could go to the doctor and get that thing on my spine looked at but before I do any of that crap I get the writing done. No excuses. No distractions. You want to be a writer you get the writing done. You understand me?"

"Yeah," Bernard muttered.

"Do you?"

"Yes." He said it louder, with more force.

"And yet, you're talking to me, right now, instead of writing. Aren't you?"

Bernard chuckled, but it was tinged with sadness. "You're right Manny. You're always right."

"That, my friend, is why I'm the published bigshot. Now go get that typewriter!"

Bernard said his goodbyes and hung up the phone.

He looked at the matchbook. There was writing on its blank white interior.

Burns, my cover's blown. Need help immediately. Can't go to my controller, there's a mole. Help me.

The guy who'd written that had a wife and three daughters. If Bernard had known the man was undercover at this resort, he never would have come.

In the past two months, he'd managed to write another eight pages.

He looked at the matches and wondered if he really was a writer after all.