

# RAIN

*a novel by*

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“Common sense is the monkey on Satan’s back.”

-Rev. Johnny Swaingo

## -PART I- Rocks

### *Look Out Below!*

Twin suns pierced the horizon as Eddie crawled slowly over the large bronze rocks of the canyon. The view was majestic, blue sky streaked with long pink scratches, like the precision cutting of a surgeon into a smurf. The large peaks of the mountains rose far into the distance, the sharp early light throwing long, stark shadows. Eddie was oblivious to the scenery; his goal was more mundane, staying alive.

Eddie hung suspended like a bug, several hundred feet in the air without so much as a string holding him where he was. His eyes were fixed on the large flat rock that lay only a few feet away now, jutting out from the sheer wall he was hanging on. His breath was labored from the long and difficult climb. His fingers dug into the small indentations for purpose. Each time he let go of the wall for another handhold he went through a brief moment where he was sure he would fall, twisting and banging against the rocks until his final splat on the canyon floor.

He whimpered quietly as his large rock gun, packed snugly in its case, shifted unexpectedly, making what was already difficult veer toward impossible. He held his breath as the case slid around his body on its strap, finally swinging to a stop at his side. The case was bulky and it made scaling the canyon wall more difficult than it already was, which was pretty damn hard. There was a time Eddie looked forward to this day. But he had to admit, now that he was doing it, he wasn't enjoying the experience the way that he thought he would. Thinking the view would offer some consolation Eddie shifted his sight to the grand mountains all around him. But looking only made him feel a sickening rush of vertigo. It was very stunning vertigo visually, but nauseating nonetheless.

He made his way carefully across the last few feet of cliff, inching along with a painful, deliberate slowness. He'd come much too far to fall. Eddie planted his feet as best he could, bent his knees a little and threw himself the last little bit, landing in a heap on the large protruding rock. He hissed an enormous sigh of relief upon reaching the relative safety of his assassin's perch. He rolled onto his back, closed his eyes, and took a little time to collect himself.

The big day had finally come and Eddie was going to become an official "Adult in training." He thought of himself as an adult in training for quite some time but after today he would have the certificate to prove it. He could see it in his mind, gold calligraphy letters announcing the coming into pre-adulthood of Eddie of the Eastside Eddies. It would have the official stamp of Vlad; their leader, and he could use it to get discounts at a number of different outlet stores.

Eddie lay on his back thinking about how great it was going to be not to be treated like a child anymore. He was a little nervous about the task that lay ahead, but he was sure that he could do what was asked of him. He would show he had the same strength as the bigger boys, the ones who seemed to enjoy tormenting those who hadn't made their first kill. Well, he thought, now he would get his kill and the torment would stop.

His breath was more regular now and he shifted onto his knees, drawing the gun case in front of him. He unzipped it revealing the rock gun. It was a X2300//5 J Pentaverat Rocket Launcher with scope. A top of the line weapon provided to Eddie by his Father, who had borrowed it from a friend who had stolen it after being dishonorably discharged from the Whozit Rock Brigades. It was essentially a fancy slingshot that fired rocks of a whole variety of shapes and sizes depending on weather condition and target type. The gun was flat black; the fact that it didn't shine at all in the light made it look even more deadly than it was. The case had a variety of differently shaped rocks; each fitted into its own nook in the thick sponge of the case. It was the sheer number of rocks that made the case, and therefore, the gun, so difficult to lug up the side of a canyon.

Eddie took the gun out of the case and lay it next to him. He decided to take a look at his targets before trying to pick out a rock. He adjusted his position, pulling his body towards the edge. The rock stuck far out, giving him a clear view of the valley far below. The act of shifting his body around caused him to accidentally bump the gun, which immediately began skittering and rolling toward the edge. Eddie felt his throat close and he let out an involuntary gasp, he thrust out his arm and grabbed the gun at the last second, barely avoiding toppling the gun case over the side as he did so. For the second time Eddie stopped to catch his breath and thank Glarf that he made the snag. A minute or two later Eddie was back at the edge of the cliff staring down at his prey.

He was amazed at how high he was. The Flallops below were very small, which was good, it made him less likely to be caught if something went wrong. He could make out their tents clearly; there were four of them, one at each of the compass points. Flallops always camped with two per tent, which made a group of eight. Plenty of targets for him to aim at, surely one would offer himself as the obvious choice.

In the middle of the tents was a fire circle. Eddie could see that there were two Flallops in the process of building a fire, the snap of their lighters drifted up to him. Reaching for the gun, he used the scope to get a better look.

He put his eye to the glass and swept the gun around, looking for something in the shape of a Flallop. Eddie always had a hard time finding things that were artificially magnified but after a few minutes he got his bearings and located the two Flallops lighting the fire. They were ugly creatures, nine feet tall and blue with big horns that stuck out of their butts. The Flallop's horns were big but Eddie knew Whozit horns were bigger.

The Flallops were wearing overalls with buttoned straps and two front pockets. Poor backward bastards, Eddie thought. His own overalls were Velcro, and had a third, larger pocket that the inferior Flallop version lacked. Having demonstrated to himself that he had a clear enough view from where he was, Eddie moved back to the case and pondered the difficult task of choosing which rock best suited his position. His immediate inclination was for a round one, but from his angle a round rock may end up falling short of the target. He went through the case picking up one rock after another, looking for the one that would do the job in a single shot. He could, he supposed, fire a second shot before he would have to flee, but he didn't want the situation to come to that. He would only have one easy shot and he was determined to make it count. The last thing he wanted to do was to have to come out here again on another day. His mind reared at the mere thought of climbing up here again. Although he never knew it before, it was now pretty apparent to Eddie he was a trifle afraid of heights. He only wished he realized this small bit of trivia before he was too high to really do anything about it.

Whenever he started to feel tentacles of doubt enter his mind he thought of that Gold Certificate. He thought of showing it to mean old Mr. Oliver's son Wendell the next time he wanted him to do some stupid errand. Maybe he would get the chance to knock Wendell in the head with his certificate. Everyone knew that Wendell had hired someone to kill a Flallop in his name, yet he was the worst about flaunting the privileges that came with Adult-in-Training status. If Eddie earned his certificate he would be free from such disgraces, an adult in training was not a child, and in Satan's Monkey, this made all the difference.

Eddie supposed it was good that he was killing a Flallop too. They were terrible creatures, who although barely distinguishable from Whozits physically, were nevertheless the completely evil opposite of the benign to a fault Whozits. Eddie suddenly, and with great authority, decided he would use a flat rock of medium gauge thickness. He pulled two similar specimens out of the case and held them up to the suns, which by now shown as full circles a few feet over the horizon.

The flat rock fit neatly into the adjustable breach of the rock gun. He turned the device over on its side and turned a small switch to the proper position. There were different knob positions for each of the different major rock shapes, round, flat, oblong, square, and other. With the switch adjusted, the scope would automatically aim a little low since flat rocks had a tendency to drift up from the velocity of the wind. He switched a second dial that gauged thickness. The thicker the rock, the stronger the initial velocity needed to be in order

to reach the target successfully. Having made his initial adjustments Eddie lay again on his belly, his horn pointing up at the sky, his eye to the gun's scope.

The first Flallop Eddie sighted was praying. He lay strewn out on his back, arms and legs held as far out from his body as possible. His horn was planted firmly into the ground, which thrust his hips out at the sky. This prayer position was called "The Loving of Glarf" and it made Eddie's stomach turn to see it. Such a position was considered blasphemous and demonic to the Whozits, whose ideas of religion had nothing in common with the backward savage Flallops.

Seeing the Flallop praying reminded Eddie of Mintonqua, the Religious camp he was sent to as a boy. In a flash he remembered how he dreaded going, it was the first time he left his parents house for any notable length of time. Camp was considered an important part of every Whozits life and he did as he was told, spending a week total at the camp. Each day was spent primarily in a large auditorium where prominent Whozit religious leaders gave lectures. The seats were, he remembered, quite uncomfortable and he spent most of each day shifting from one cheek to the other, trying to keep his entire ass from falling asleep. He heard most of what was said however, and it became, in time, the cornerstone of his faith.

Each day had a theme of sorts; the first day was about cosmology. Eddie learned that a glorious, omniscient, and all loving being named Glarf created the world. Glarf was a very large fellow who lived before there was a universe. Nevertheless he was decidedly male, decidedly cranky, but still completely loving in every way; except the ways that he wasn't.

Legend has it one day Glarf ate a particularly spicy meal. Some Whozit Sects said it was a curry dish, others said Cantonese. The one thing that everyone agreed about, the cornerstone of their faith, was that Glarf ate a ball of spicy cheese for desert.

Glarf suffered, drank some Pepto Bismal, felt better, and then suddenly died. To which Nietzsche is rumored to have said "See, I told you he was dead." However, miraculously, four score and forty days and three nights later he came again in fulfillment of the scriptures and continued his message of Antacid salvation. He continued his message for three days before he realized there was no one to preach to.

He had yet to create anything.

Never one to be put off by details Glarf set about to alleviate this problem. He did what any rational deity would do- he created the universe. Once he started creating things he was having such a grand time of it he considered altering the basic chemistry of being so that spicy food soothed, instead of bothered, the stomach. However, the marketing people he created poo-pooed the idea, lobbying instead for what eventually became the platypus.

After a few eons of thought Glarf decided it would be a hoot to indulge himself in a Second Coming. After all, there wasn't anyone there to see his first coming, and he so enjoyed an entrance. After a remarkably small amount of thought Glarf returned for the second first time to the world.

For his second coming Glarf chose the form of a can of primer paint which was found in an old unpainted house after a Bingo game by an old woman named Pistis Sophia. She took the can to the divinical authorities because it was glowing majestically in a way that it hadn't during her previous visits to the tool shed. Within days the authorities pronounced the spray can the second incarnation of Glarf. In a unanimous vote, the Whozit Pope, "Pope II-the Sequel" named Pistis Sophia the Wise High Saint of Returning Gods, a title that gave her a fifty-percent discount at the movies, free bus rides, and first dibs on new releases at the video store.

Eddie sat and listened to all of this with interest, it was nice to learn about the universe, even with a sleeping butt. He was pleased to find out there was an all-powerful being in his corner, it made facing the day a little easier. The lectures about the beauties of the Whozit religion took the first two days of camp and Eddie was having a pretty good time despite the abysmal seating arrangements.

Then came the third day, the "Fire and Brimstone" lecture. This was the day they learned about the terribly blasphemous beliefs of the Flallops. Beliefs so shocking some of the younger children vomited in terror.

The Flallops said the Son of Glarf came to Satan's monkey in the form of a small ball of cheese that fell from the sky. He arrived, listened to an old woman talk about her bad knees, blurry vision, and back troubles for about an hour, and was promptly eaten on a nice Ritz cracker.

Glarf returned again a couple of days later (in fulfillment of the scriptures) by exploding out of the old woman's chest a'la Alien. Astonishingly, the ball of cheese was still in pristine condition, like Kennedy's magic bullet. With a cowboy 'whoop' the cheese shot up into heaven where it remains seated at the right hand of the divine salad tong whose left hand holds an individually wrapped baggy of garlic and onion croutons.

As the priest detailed the bizarre beliefs of the Flallops, Eddie found himself wondering what the big deal was about. Then, as if to answer his question, the Priest told him what the big deal was.

"HECK!" The priest's eyes suddenly bulged out; the satin and rhinestone cocktail dress he was wearing sparkled wildly. "Anyone who believes such madness is going to spend all of eternity in Heck. Heck is a place so terrible it makes ballet lessons seem like a day at the zoo.

"Eternity," said the priest, "is the time it takes Jello to turn into a hippopotamus. It is the length of time that Rush Limbaugh will remain a big fat idiot... a very very long time indeed."

Eddie's young mind boggled at how long it would take Rush to not be a fat idiot and shivered.

"Further," the priest continued, "It's your Whozitly duty to try to save every one of the lost Flallop souls. If they won't go peaceably, we'll force them. Either way, the glory was to Glarf, and to those who loved him in the way that they said he wanted to be loved."

Glarf himself made no comment at all. He was out having a nice expresso latte.

To believe the lies of the Flallops was to spend eternity in Heck having your intestines used as a jump rope, your eyes as ping pong balls, and your head for soccer. "You will" the priest informed them "suffer unimaginably forever, wishing the whole time to be dead, to be free of the endless torment, but the end will not come. Not ever. There will be only pain and suffering and more pain and suffering after that. And," said the Priest, "if you are not actively working to change the sick and lost minds of any Flallop that is met, then eternal damnation will meet even the believer. It is not enough to just agree with the right ideas, You have to be a booster."

At this the priest passed several wicker collection baskets. As the basket passed by Eddie he took the envelope his mother gave him and dropped it in, wondering why she didn't even hesitate to put five bucks in the envelope while refusing adamantly to cough up fifty cents for a candy bar. Eddie figured there must be a rule where the giving of money is prioritized, again probably with the threat of Heck to guarantee compliance. Eddie was a little

put off by the idea that he would be punished eternally for something like that, but his fear the threat would be carried out went a long way towards his eventual acceptance of everything he was told in this regard.

Eddie shook his head, the memories clearing. It was a sin to shoot someone who was praying, even if they were praying to the wrong God, so Eddie moved the scope on, looking for a face that appeared sinister, evil, and therefore, easily shootable. He looked at the Flallops cooking, no obvious evil there. He scanned around to a Flallop reading a paperback book; his feet propped up on a rock. For a second Eddie thought he might have found his target, but then the boy shifted the book's cover and he saw it was the latest effort by his favorite writer, Bialini DeTorres, who wrote terrifically exciting stories about pitched space battles and mutant fishmongers from beyond the moon.

Again he searched around trying to find a worthy, or perhaps unworthy was a better term, target. Eddie could only spot four of the Flallops, he thought the others must still be sleeping. Eddie decided to wait to get a look at the other three, maybe one of them would stick out as the obvious choice, although thin tendrils of doubt were beginning to creep up around the edges of his resolve.

As he waited for the rest of the Flallops to emerge from their tents Eddie's mind ranged over the changes that occurred since those carefree days at camp. Besides his growing up, a process which was just as painful for him as it is for anybody, the society he lived in changed drastically as well. He watched it happen with an interested, if impotent eye, the world he knew growing darker as he grew older, the hatred between the Flallops and the Whozits growing more in violence as he grew in height.

In the days of church camp it was very rare for the two groups to actually fight one another, although attitudes about this were changing rapidly. Eddie remembered his parents discussing whether or not violence would be necessary at the dinner table. It was discussed so casually he wasn't aware of the impact it would have. He wasn't aware his parents were jabbering away the long-standing peace of Satan's Monkey in favor of what had come, the tense anger and nastiness of war.

One night ten years earlier Eddie's Dad came home late from the corner bar, his eye swelled completely shut. He made quite a ruckus coming in and Eddie walked bleary eyed into the kitchen, his sleep interrupted and his curiosity overwhelming his desire to return to bed. He pulled up one of the kitchen chairs and watched his mother working on the eye, placing a cold piece of chicken over the nasty pink bruise. His Dad had his elbows on the table, his fingers drumming with a nervous rapidity that unsettled Eddie even more than the eye did. Normally his Dad was a calm guy, slow to anger; and he was never nervous. Eddie asked what happened.

He hadn't heard the whole story that night, but as the years went on he learned the evening's problems went much further than a nasty eye bruise. The entire fabric of their society was ripping apart and Eddie was too young to understand. His Dad was an honest guy and although he knew most of what he said would be lost on Eddie, he told him anyway because it was just the kind of guy he was.

"It's the damn Flallops Eddie, there is talk of splitting the town between us. The Flallops are going to secede from Satan's Monkey. They claim the Whozits have too much power and are actively discriminating against their kind in everything from business to sports officiating. And while for the most part they are just causing trouble, I fear that there might

be just enough truth in what they are saying to cause things to get much worse indeed. I am afraid because I don't know what kind of world you are going to inherit. I am afraid because there is a great deal of uncertainty in all of our futures. I am afraid because it is very possible bar fights are only the beginning, it may get a whole lot worse before it gets any better.

And it did get worse, as Eddie knew all too well. "If it hadn't," Eddie told himself resolutely, "you can pretty well guarantee that I wouldn't be sitting up here on this rock."

As any society that invents lawyers knows, the occasional drunken fistfight can turn into a mountain of litigation with both sides yelling through split lips and busted teeth. This happened the day after his father came home with the black eye on the lawn outside of the Satan's Monkey courthouse. The yelling led to more hitting, which led to more litigation. It was a viscous circle, a tangled kite string, the NJ Freeway system, in other words, a mess. It wasn't long before the litigation turned into focus groups which turned into lobbyists and drunken bar fight issue advocacy. Satan's Monkey was on a crash course with disaster. The lobbyists took a brief detour as parking lot attendants before veering back into the more familiar territory of political scapegoatism. This consisted of otherwise remarkable statements like "It's the Flallops fault the peaches went bad this year; it's not the forty five thousand gallons of pesticide we accidentally spilled behind the garage." That sort of thing.

Only to Eddie- a young impressionable Whozit who had yet to learn the fine art of recognizing bullshit when he heard it- the arguments seemed plausible. Of course he was only a year or so past believing in the jolly fat crucified man in the sleigh whose death everyone celebrated once a year by the hiding and giving of chocolate eggs. Eddie became a strong believer in Flallop/Whozit separation and began to pay attention when his teacher droned on about the superiority of the way Whozits brushed their teeth or did their laundry. He was pleased with what he learned, but as time passed he began to notice a trend that bothered him.

It was never enough to just say Whozits brushed their teeth better, it was always because they brushed their teeth with Gleam O Brightly. As if simply using the proper product would in itself make the Whozits superior, as if a brand name was more important than the people who made the products, as if the people weren't even involved. One day he couldn't stand it anymore and had to ask.

He raised his hand, interrupting the teacher's lesson. Mrs. Panko stopped what she was saying in mid-sentence and asked, "Yes Edward, What is it?" It was clear from her tone that what he said better be good. Mrs. Panko had a hard time getting going, and if someone threw her off her train of thought she would often have to struggle for minutes before she got it back. The kids learned to not interrupt her because when they did it immediately put her into a foul mood.

Eddie cleared his throat, feeling a great pressure on his chest; the entire class was looking at him expectantly.

"Why does it matter if we wear clothes that are made by one specific designer? Isn't the fact the clothes are made by Whozits the thing that makes them superior? If there is only one really good designer, aren't we implying it's a product that's superior, not the Whozits in general?" He was asking because he thought his teacher was making an inadvertent mistake. When she said "Poofbutt overalls were the greatest overalls that modern science produced." Eddie wanted to clarify the matter. But Mrs. Panko's response confused him even worse.

She never answered his question. Instead she simply stood there looking at him, hand on her hip. It seemed like she stood there, still as a statue, for at least an hour. It wasn't that

long, but from Eddie's seat it was. He felt the silence and her gaze like a big bag of bricks settled uncomfortably on his head.

Finally she opened her mouth as if to say something. Just as suddenly she closed it again, her teeth clicking audibly together. She appeared to think for a moment and finally she started again, speaking in a whisper. Eddie leaned closer to hear, "Perhaps we need to take a look at your permanent record, it seems that you may be a troublemaker, a sympathizer perhaps?" Mrs. Panko then lifted a single eyebrow in a facial expression that expressed a definite threat. Her eyebrow was telling him he better walk very carefully now, he was on the verge of serious trouble. Eddie could feel all of the moisture in his mouth evaporate all at once.

"I'm sorry I asked an improper question Mrs. Panko, I beg your pardon and will not repeat my previous insolence." Eddie looked at her with what he hoped was an expression of great sincerity. She apparently bought it because after several minutes of trying, she did eventually get back her train of thought. However, for the next week or so, each time she mentioned a brand name she would say it directly at Eddie, stressing the word until it hissed like an angry snake.

Eddie got the message and stopped asking questions.

This didn't mean that they didn't occur to him from time to time, brief whisperings of doubt at some of his teacher's more outlandish claims. He just didn't voice them. Instead, they remained in his brain, rattling like change in a dryer.

While Eddie had reservations it seemed the rest of the world did not. Society, as a whole, moved unwaveringly forward toward war with a slow predictability that was painful to watch unfold. The political scapegoatism led to small-scale skirmishes involving moderately armed bands of nuns, used car salesmen, telemarketers, and the odd refrigerator repair artist.

Skirmishes eventually became battles. Great nasty things with rocks flying all over the place. The battles were an incredible spectacle. Too incredible perhaps. The battles eventually became televised. Thanks to a good host, (He seemed to generally care about the massive destruction of life that he commented.) the show was a great success. It wasn't long before the war was beating out Monday Night Gladiators and winning Emmys. The latter were small rabid rabbits that came in their own cage. The Whozit leader, Vlad, a remarkably ignorant man, wanted his subjects to be as stupid as he was so he gave the award to any television show that truly *worked* to make the public more ignorant or stupid.

The success of the war of course, only insured more battles. (Not to mention product tie-ins, action figures, and even T-shirts.) Eddie received a T-shirt from his aunt the year before. He only wore it when he was doing chores in the backyard or exercising. Eddie actually liked the shirt when he first got it; his aunt always brought something when she came to visit. This wasn't as good as the time when she brought the baby grobnick, (puppy) but it was pretty good. He thought that he would wear it often.

Three days after receiving the gift however, Eddie saw something that made him relegate the shirt to chore status immediately. (Chore status was the lowest level of clothes, just one good lawn-mowing shy of being in the garbage can.) He was walking along the Flallop's perimeter fence. It was erected to separate them from both the forest and the Whozits. He had a stick in his hands and was rattling it through the links, the Chocka Chocka sound droning monotonously. As he passed around a large guard tower Eddie saw another kid, perhaps a year or two older. He was wearing a shirt almost identical to the one his aunt

had given him. He stopped, taking in the details. The kid obviously thought Eddie was trying to be smart because he spit at him, the large glob of nastiness flying remarkably through the mesh of the fence untouched. Eddie had to jump out of the way to avoid getting it square on his shirt. A bit did get on his arm and he wiped it away furiously on his overalls.

On his rock Eddie waited, quietly hoping the kid that spit at him was one of the Flallops still inside a tent. He had no reason to think he was there, but it would certainly make his decision about who to shoot a hell of a lot easier.

When his mother asked him why he stopped wearing the shirt he told her it was because it was too big. This was actually true; the bottom of the shirt went almost to his knees if he didn't tuck it in. But he had lots of T-shirts that were too big; he wore them all the time. It was the T-shirt itself, the illustration that so closely resembled the illustration on the spitter's shirt. It was a still frame taken from an actual battle that had been shown on TV. It featured a Whozit guy braining a Flallop in the head with a rock. There was a terribly bright spray of purple blood. Beneath it was a caption that read, "Whozits Rule!!! Kill all the Flallops and let Glarf sort em out!!!" The explanation points were printed in the same bright purple as the blood in the picture. The boy's shirt, the one who spit on him, also featured a brain bashing- only a Whozit was on the receiving end on his version, and the caption was different too, it read, Flallops Rule!!! Kill all the Whozits and let Glarf Sort em out!!! Again the letters were written in the horrible blood purple.

The shirt raised a whole new series of questions Eddie wanted to ask, but there was no one to talk to. They stayed in his head and most of the time he forgot about them. Only now, sitting high on a rock, getting ready to kill another living being- for real, not just play acting, the questions were starting to come back. He thought of the plaque he would get if he went through with it and wondered, not for the first time, if maybe it wasn't worth it. Even if he didn't kill anybody he would automatically become an adult in training in a year and a half. He thought maybe he could wait.

In a way, Eddie thought now, what he was doing was cheating. Sure it was accepted and common now, but it was only two years earlier the rules concerning elevation to adult in training were changed. Before then everyone waited until their seventeenth birthdays. Now it was available to anyone who could kill a Flallop. At the age of sixteen Eddie's older friends began to be asked by their teachers if they would like to be assigned to the list of kids who want early promotion to adult in training status. The words, "go murder someone" were never actually uttered in schools but everyone knew what was really being said. It was like when the swear words are cut out of movies on regular television, the actual word is bleeped out but everyone over the age of three in the room knows the lady just said "Bitch."

In the brief two years since the rule was changed the full force of peer pressure had shifted behind the idea of gaining the title early. In Satan's Monkey adults in training have a great deal more power and privilege than do children. In many ways, being an adult in training was the best time of life because a young Whozit enjoyed the freedom of adulthood and only a modicum of the responsibility. Eddie knew he was looking forward to the new privileges, so much so he squelched most of his doubts until the last minute. Most kids now became adults in training at the age of fourteen. Eddie was fifteen and a half. He had endured a year and a half of torment over his hesitancy that had hitherto been more the result of squeamishness than moral confusion. He thought about the picture on his shirt, the way the blood was spraying out in an arc. It repulsed him to think he was going to have to do that to someone himself. He put it off as long as he could.

He finally broke down and asked his Dad to get him a gun, That week, when his teacher asked him (as he did every week, like clockwork) if he wanted to be put down as a candidate for early adult in training status, he said yes. His teacher, now Mr. Przybylski, clapped him on the shoulder and told him he was glad Eddie finally came around to being a good citizen. Oddly, the strongest part of Eddie's memory of this encounter was how strong and sweet Mr. Przybylski's after shave lotion was. It seemed to surround him like some kind of eerie invisible cloud. The part where he agreed to kill a Flallop was somehow lost in the haze of his memory, lost to the smell of after-shave.

The thing that finally put him over the edge was; he now realized, stupid as hell. One of the perks of becoming an adult in training is the ability to vote in elections. Vlad was the only name on the ballot for ruler, so that part wasn't interesting. (There were very few political science majors in Satan's Monkey.) The election that got all the press, the one the public paid the most attention to, was what the official food of Satan's Monkey was going to be.

The current food was potted meat, a product that actually touted "partially defatted cooked pork fatty tissue" as one of its ingredients. It won the last election in a landslide over the incumbent Cheese Doodles on ice cream. The win was largely attributed to Potted Meats campaign slogan, "Potted meat, It's gross, but at least it's not Cheese Doodles on ice cream."

It was the straw that broke the camel's back for Eddie. He loved Cheese Doodles on ice cream; it was his favorite food. He decided to go for early status so that he could vote in the next election. He knew his was only one vote, but it would be a vote for Cheese Doodles and ice cream by Glarf, and that was important.

Only now he wasn't so sure. He was just sitting there thinking, trying to decide what to do when he heard a rock break loose and fall very close to where he was sitting. Eddie whirled around, as fast as he could manage in his limited space, and saw his friend Nigel clinging to a rock only a few feet away.

"What are you doing here?" Eddie asked, really rather freaked out.

Nigel looked up at the sound of Eddie's voice. He immediately began to whisper urgently, "Eddie wait, stop, don't kill anyone yet! I've got to talk to you!"

### **Einstein's 3<sup>rd</sup> Law of Impetuous Rocks**

A month and a half before Eddie decided to climb a cliff and bag his first Flallop, a terribly brilliant bean head scientist named Ernesto Einstein made a discovery. Only he hadn't started out trying to make a discovery, he started out with a powerful, deep annoyance, like a scratch in the center of your back, far beyond the reach of fingers. It started on his front lawn with a large rock that resided there.

Brilliant people often have tendencies that make them prioritize their lives differently than the rest of us. Ernesto Einstein was no exception. He developed a peculiar interest in lawn care that blossomed into obsession as the years went by. He loved his lawn as much as he loved his science. For Ernesto, the state of one's lawn was a direct reflection of the state of one's mind. He spent two to three hours a day on his lawn, trying to keep it as lush and green as possible. He picked weeds by hand and fertilized using a small hand sprayer. He didn't spray each individual blade of grass, but it was close enough his neighbors wondered if this wasn't his true goal.

Ernesto lived in a modest sized house on the eastern side of Satan's Monkey. The Whozit Horticultural Society always made Ernesto's house the last stop on the annual "Lawns of Satan's Monkey" tour that went on every spring. It was by far the nicest lawn in town.

But it wasn't perfect. It could never be perfect as long the large boulder remained in the lawn. We'll get back to the rock in a moment.

It was a Saturday, not particularly different from any other. It was an important lawn day however; Saturday was the day he mowed. Ernesto walked out to the shed in his back yard, unlocked the padlock and swung open the door. All of his tools were neatly hung on hooks; each rake and shovel was clean. On a table to the side was his favorite gardening hat. It was straw, with a wide brim and Ernesto wore it whenever he was doing work outside. He took it from the table and pulled it onto his head. It smelled of outdoors and putting it on immediately improved Ernesto's already good mood.

In the middle of the shed was the lawn mower. It was the top of the line model. After each use Ernesto would wipe it down. Every two months he sharpened the blade. Out of habit he glanced at the calendar on the wall, noting the mower was due in two weeks. He made a mental note to make the appointment with the blade sharpening man.

He bent and pulled the starter cord on the mower. The machine started on the first tug with a roar and the distinctive smell of gasoline wafting from its engine. Ernesto tilted the angle of the mower so the blade was clear of the grass. He pulled the mower over a small cobblestone walkway leading from the shed to the corner of the property. Once he reached the corner he dropped the mower flat again and began cutting the lawn in a precise grid pattern, careful to make each square the same size. He mowed with his head down, very slowly, ensuring the mower had time to cut everything within its circumference. Ernesto took care of his lawn barefoot, the green grass squishing between his toes as he walked; he liked the feeling of connection it gave him to the earth. Ernesto whistled happily to himself, the sound lost to the growl of the mower. He followed the previous week's tracks as a guide. There was however, a part of the lawn that he didn't let his eye so much as glance toward the entire time he mowed. It was as if there was a blind spot in his vision, a place where his mind forbade his eyes to see. Eventually he finished the job of mowing, except for the blind spot. It was here that the fun stopped.

Ernesto took a deep breath. He continued to look down at the ground, working up his nerve. He huffed three quick breaths, clearing out his lungs like someone getting ready to jump off a cliff into water of an unknown depth. His eyes slid up the nicely mown lawn to the left side. There was a stone there, just sitting in the lawn minding its own business. Now that he was looking at the thing he marveled, as he always did, that he was able to block his sight of the thing for as long as he could. It stood at least fifteen feet in the air. It was a solid hulk of a thing, black with thick veins of cobalt gray throughout its rough, craggy surface. Ernesto swore it was alive. It lived a simple life that evolved around one thing and one thing only: The destruction of Ernesto's happiness and/or piece of mind.

It was an alien stone. It hadn't been there when Ernesto bought the house. When he purchased the place it had a nice unblemished lawn. After five years he sculpted it into a stunning example of uniformity in horticulture. Ernesto's work went splendidly during these years, discovering all kinds of amazing things that made the other smart physicists ooh and aah in envious marvel.

One morning he woke up, and there it was, an immense Stonehenge sized stone. A pyramid stone, sitting there in his lawn as if it had been there for eons. Ernesto had a distinct

impression the first time that he saw it. He thought the rock was trying to make *him* feel like he was the one who had just showed up all of a sudden uninvited.

Ernesto examined the grass around the rock, thinking maybe it had fallen from the sky or something. Only there was no crater. There were no tracks on the lawn either. The rock had somehow materialized itself on his lawn. There were times over the upcoming years that Ernesto wished the rock destroyed his entire lawn and the house to boot. Then he would've moved and bought a new house and the damned thing wouldn't be in his front lawn anymore. Except that somewhere, way in the back of his mind, where he kept the Christmas decorations, he knew that if he changed houses the rock would surely follow.

The most obvious solution was to get a big crane and lift the sucker right out of his life. Only that wouldn't work. That would destroy his beautiful lawn, the giant tires of the machine would dig up his grass like a tiller, destroying what had taken him years to create. No sir, that wouldn't do at all.

He tried just mowing around it. He had to admit that the rock was sort of pretty, he even studied it objectively by crouching down low to the grass and looking up at the rock from a perspective that eliminated the grass it was sitting on from view. He would try a sort of *détente*. Only the rock seemed to *really* hate him.

He came to this conclusion after making his first pass at the rock. The lawnmower blade broke once he got within two feet of the dastardly thing. There was no obvious reason, it just snapped off, flying past his bare feet fast enough he would have lost a leg had it not buried itself in the ground before it reached him. He tried the WeedWacker with the same result, once he got a certain distance from the rock (He had later measured it, 2 feet 2 and 2/3rds inches.) The Wacker string would break.

His face scowled deeply the first time. It deepened the second, by the third Ernesto had thrown down his WeedWacker and went inside. If you were standing on the street in front of his house you would have heard loud crashes, swearing and yelling. There was no second voice however; it sounded like someone was having a terrible argument with a mute. This would go on for a while and then Ernesto would suddenly come out, picking up the WeedWacker and re-stringing it. The string would break again immediately. Ernesto would throw down the seemingly cursed hunk of garbage and go back into the house. This process repeated itself for almost a full 24 hours. He stood in his living room, staring out at the thing with all the hatred he could muster. Then it came to him. He would simply figure out the physics he needed to levitate that damn bastard rock right off his property.

The only problem was there was absolutely no precedent; not a single postulate indicated the levitation of large rocks was even possible. The idea that a machine would be built that could actually utilize the nonexistent principle was crazy. Ernesto didn't care, he wanted the rock gone and he would invent the math from scratch if he had to.

It took a long time. He was forced to drop all of his other projects. Ernesto stopped going out at all, except to work on his lawn, just as he did a month and a half before Eddie climbed the mountain.

Only on that particular afternoon, as Ernesto looked at the rock with a weary hatred it suddenly came to him. He knew.

It was the answer, the way that he could do it. He knew before he tested the equation a single time that he was right. He had figured it out; he was finally going to be free of the accursed rock that had nearly destroyed his entire life. He spent the next two days making sure he was right, although he knew in his heart, his head was a tougher sell. Eventually his

head was convinced and Ernesto began to build a prototype. It was a box that stood about four feet high. He could put it onto the back of a truck, move his rock and be able to mow his lawn again by the following week. But not with this first crude attempt. In order to build a rock dropper that could lift his rock he would have to enlist the aid of the military, the only group that could get him the necessary materials.

Ernesto had essentially figured out a way to create a portable null gravity field. Anything that was within the specified field would float wherever Ernesto wanted it by using three-point geometry. When he explained this to the military guys they smiled broadly at him, barely able to keep from giggling like schoolgirls.

It took the Military guys about two seconds to realize that Ernesto's device could be used for a purpose much more valuable than just lifting rocks. It could also be used to drop them, "PLOP" right out of the sky and onto the heads of unsuspecting passersby. It could also, with a few extra batteries and a little duct tape pick up and drop a boulder the size of a small city... onto a small city. As anyone with advanced knowledge of rock velocity physics is aware, the dropping of a rock the size of a city onto a city will leave very few places within the city to have a nice sit down Italian meal with nicely fresh baked bread and olive oil. Indeed, the only possible result of such an action would be the creation of a bigger rock that could then be dropped on an even bigger city. And so on ad infinitum or some other Latin phrase. With this new discovery the Whozits would not have to worry about killing one Flallop at a time, like George Washington chopping down a single cherry tree. Instead, they could kill lots of them at the same time with a huge chunk of rock, like the timber industry in the rainforests.

The machine was built, but not in the shape that Ernesto designed, and not for the purpose he wanted either. In fact, the Whozit military refused to return his phone calls once they had copied all of his research. When he went to their offices in person he was told that he didn't exist in the interest of national security. When he wouldn't stop the military guys told him that if he didn't shut the fuck up they were going to come into his house in the middle of the night and cut his tongue out of his head, stuffing it up his horn. Of course, neither his tongue, nor his horn existed as far as they were concerned, which made doing horrible things to them much easier.

Then it hit Ernesto, well, like a big rock on the head. He knew that the military was going to use his idea and principles to make a weapon. They were going to kill people with his idea, and to make it worse they were never going to take the accursed rock from his front lawn. They would surely leave it there, as a constant reminder that he was a very smart fool who worried too much about his lawn. Now untold numbers of people were going to die for that lawn, and Ernesto knew that it really hadn't been worth it.

### **A Brief discussion of Biology.**

Before we go any further we should interject a little fact about the actual differences between the Whozits and the Flallops. There are none. No biological, genetic or intelligence quotient differences, no color differences, nothing. Just one group of beings who decided that they were two different groups of beings. Like the US and Canada. Or the countries of Europe. Or the whole damn world for that matter.

The only way that anyone could tell the two sides apart was by the color of the clothing that they wore and the whether they said "about" or "aboot." It was true that in

general Flallops preferred green overalls and the Whozits preferred orange but for the most part the cultural differences arose through misunderstandings and the inevitable information fuzzing involved in gossip and rumormongering. The fact was that both groups stood about 9 ½ feet tall, were a lovely shade of dirty blue, and had large horns sticking out of their butts.

### *Here Comes Sunshine?*

The military guys, in a truly inspired bit of efficiency built Ernesto's device into a weapon in only two weeks, amazing even themselves. They worked feverishly and the project moved along at a remarkable speed, building several prototypes along the way, each getting a little fancier. The military guys would have finished two days earlier but they decided to alter the body significantly at the last minute and add some wheels and a V8 engine. Once the rock dropper was actually built the military guys hopped in the driver's seat and laid a good two feet of rubber on the laboratory floor.

Once completed the military scientist's first destination was Vlad's castle. Vlad was the King of the Whozits. He was also known as Vlad-The Not Quite as Mean as THEY Make Him Out to Be on Television. The weapon came speeding into his throne room, glasspack muffler causing the engine to rumble, vibrating on a very low register, like a locomotive. Vlad's eyes literally bugged out of his head, he blinked to insure they remained where they belonged. As he absorbed what he was looking at his body gave an involuntary shudder of pleasure. It was, Vlad explained to his wife later, rather like an orgasm, only it wasn't sexual, it was power. He clapped his royal hands with glee. He knew the weapon was coming, he had hardly been able to think of anything else since his trusted advisor Wayne had briefed him earlier in the day. Nobody had told him about the motor though, he thought it was a great touch, nothing intimidated like a V8.

Vlad immediately took up his "Scepter of Political Power," a large thick shaft with a large bulbous jewel cast onto one end. It was one of several scepters that he kept by his throne for a whole variety of reasons. The Scepter of Political Power was his favorite, he used it whenever he ordered a decree, and without it Vlad felt that his orders didn't carry the proper heft. He jabbed the scepter suggestively at his Head General and demanded that a boy be chosen to be the first to test the new weapon.

The order came as no surprise. Immediately a large, clunky computer was wheeled into the throne room. The computer was covered with lights, dials, and several reel to reel tapes, they spun this way and that importantly, indicating that truly great calculation was going on. Deep in the bowels of the machine was a laptop that easily did the required work, and kept the outside looking busy with enough computing power left over to play music and a DVD or two. In Vlad's opinion the way that something looked was at least as important as how it worked. He had seen a laptop once. He thought that it looked too simple, "That thing looks like shit," he had declared, "if we're gonna have a computer it should look like a computer, put some blinking lights and stuff on that sucker. And so it was.

After an impressive series of beeps and a faint odor of Brie cheese a little green card popped out, an idea they had gotten from the batputer on TV. On the little green card was the name of the kid who was up for promotion that day: Eddie of the Eastside Eddies. Urgent messages were immediately sent out to retrieve the boy in every available medium. Eddie's

friend Nigel knew where Eddie was, Eddie had told him where he was going on the telephone the night before.

Nigel was sitting on his bed, reading Whozit of Fortune magazine when Vlad's message reached him. A carrier pigeon landed with graceful efficiency onto his windowsill and began pecking at the window glass, each strike making a tink tink. Nigel lifted the window and the bird flew right up onto his shoulder. There was a piece of paper attached to a little sling on the bird's leg. He took it out, read it, and immediately ran out the door to find Eddie, the magazine thrown forgotten onto the floor with an ad for Mail Order hand grenades showing.

### **Should Have Hurried**

The paper was small, which left no room for elaboration or clever allegory. It was only six words, but when Nigel read where he was to report, all thoughts left his mind except, "Find Eddie."

The message said, "Stop Eddie. Come to Vlad ASAP."

That was all, no reason, no detail, nothing. Nigel's mind raced as he hurried along the upper rim of the valley Eddie said he was going to shoot from. Eddie was easy to spot from above and Nigel was pleased he found him only ten or fifteen minutes after the receiving the message. When he first spotted him, Eddie was laying on his stomach in the firing position. Nigel felt his heart constrict. His eyes squinted and he realized Eddie had the gun out and his eye was to the scope. He could fire any second.

Whenever the TV news reporters talked about Vlad they made him appear to be quite mean and Nigel really didn't want to meet him for the first time and report that he had failed in his assigned task. He was sure that Eddie would fire long before he got a chance to reach him, he could yell, he supposed, but it was certainly possible the Flallops below were armed. He would do what the message said, but he was not about to get killed over it. That wouldn't, in his opinion, help anything.

Nigel pulled out his climbing harness and attached it snugly around his body. His climbing gear had been conveniently lying in a pile by the front door; he had planned to spend the afternoon watching the Flallop authorities as they cleaned up Eddie's victim. He had gathered the equipment the night before. He anchored the ropes, bringing an extra along for Eddie. After taking a deep breath, jumping over a cliff's edge was frightening, strapped into a harness or not. Nigel allowed gravity to take him and he fell backwards off the cliff, the rope snapping taught and holding nicely.

Eddie was *still* aiming his weapon at the Flallops below. Every time he almost pulled the trigger, something distracted him. It was as if the muscles in his arm were hard wired to the distraction center of his increasingly weary brain.

He almost did it; the trigger was a millionth of a pound of pressure from releasing. Then Nigel arrived and totally ruined his hard won concentration. Eddie's first instinct was to get angry. He knew that Nigel had already killed a Flallop and it was primarily through his peer pressure that Eddie was here in the first place. Eddie was so close to the fulfillment of his mission, only to be stopped by the very protagonist of his actions.

For his part, Nigel had no idea why he was told to stop Eddie from fulfilling his duty to manhood, but what Vlad wanted, Vlad got. He was mostly relieved that he had been able to stop Eddie, he would be praised by Vlad, not eaten.

After Eddie had time to think about it, he decided that he was really glad that Nigel had stopped him. Now that he was getting out of it for whatever reasons Eddie admitted to himself that he wasn't thrilled with the idea of killing anybody in the first place. He didn't even like to hunt.

Sure he hated the Flallops but hating and killing is not necessarily the same thing; no matter what the movies tried to tell him.

His biggest problem was that he wasn't sure why he was supposed to hate the Flallops, even though he did. When the Flallops won the national Pootyball competition, beating out the Whozit champion by three flingers Eddie hated the Flallops quite righteously, at least for a while. But soon enough a new season began and the righteousness of the anger turned into hope for the new season. He looked forward to good news from Nigel who was waving for him to be quiet and hurry up at the same time.

Eddie figured there had been a treaty or something. He was wrong.

"I am supposed to take you directly to Vlad, our glorious leader." Nigel said, rocking back and forth from foot to foot and looking like he needed to pee for three hours. "I don't know why."

Eddie had never actually met Vlad-the Not Quite as Mean as the News Makes Him Out To Be and wasn't sure what to think now that he apparently was going to. Eddie watched the news every night felt pretty sure that Vlad was a nutball.

"Are you sure that I am actually supposed to talk to Vlad himself, not some intermediary or dignitary?" Eddie asked, hoping that he would be spared an audience with such an important and reportedly crazy figure.

"No they told me to take you directly to the head cheese." Nigel, who was adept at hating the Flallops, was unable to hide the bubbling excitement in his voice. Eddie wondered if perhaps there wasn't also a twinge of jealousy. Eddie's emotions were split in half- he was happy that he had gotten a reprieve from killing the Flallops that afternoon, but at what price? What the heck could Vlad want with him, he was still a boy after all, his chance at being an official adult in training dried up when Nigel arrived.

The two boys quietly made their way from the big rock on which Eddie was perched. They headed toward the Far Western end of town where Vlad's palace was located.

### **There's Two Sides to Every Satan's Monkey**

Tim the Flallop slept soundly on his face. There was a little smile on his lips as he dreamed the dreams of teenagers; beautiful female Flallops and great adventure abounded. In reality, his blanket was pulled over his head to keep out the bright morning light and the only female Flallop anywhere around was his Mom in the living room watching TV. His alarm clock suddenly blurted into life next to him, a primeval sound capable of waking the dead and sometimes teenagers. As he woke up he blearily remembered he had to get up early to go to a stupid lottery.

Tim sat up, his vision bleary with sleepgunk. He wiped it away as he reached for his overalls. He couldn't believe that he had to get up an hour early to go to school. The day before, during final period Principal Joan, a thin faced woman with a voice like a chainsaw came onto the intercom.

"Children," she announced, "Tomorrow all students over the age of fifteen are to gather a half an hour before regular classes. Our Illustrious Leader, Uncle Gus, has called for

a special lottery tomorrow. Attendance is mandatory of course; any child not in attendance will be put in jail from three to five years depending on behavior. Remember children..." a terrible burst of feedback roared from the speakers, "...being a good citizen is the backbone of our culture. If you don't accept this, then you won't be a citizen, you'll be in jail. Have a nice day children, see you bright and early in the morning."

Every student over fifteen groaned in unison. Tim was in Religion class; the teacher was discussing the way the Whozit religion was a travesty against nature, being the creation of the devil. The Flallop religion, Tim knew the teacher would eventually add, was the exact opposite, perfectly accurate and true in every regard.

That next morning Tim stood in front of the mirror brushing his teeth. He was fully conscious now, and he considered what the lottery could possibly be about. Normally the lottery was held at lunch. The "winner" was let out of school early. The winner was also given a weapon and told to not come back until they bagged themselves a Whozit.

But now they suddenly had to get up early in the morning and Uncle Gus was going to be there in person? Everything about it stank. For the first time Tim was a little afraid of the lottery. The lunchtime lottery didn't worry him because he had pretty well had his fill of school anyway. Ever since the battles had started school wasn't the same. Gone were interesting classes like art, music, and history. Now it was the Flallop superiority of this and the Flallop superiority of that. Tim found the whole thing immensely boring. His passion was literature, books and ideas. He wanted to make the world a better place and couldn't see how killing Whozits made anyone's life better.

When he thought about it at all, Tim thought that the threat the Whozit's posed was overblown. They were just little rocks after all. The rock throwers were still a new invention; they had come onto the market three years earlier. Only the richest families actually owned one of the devices, but they were happy to let others use them as much as they wanted. (They were not so generous with food or DVD players.) Uncle Gus himself had presented a rock thrower to Tim's school as a gift just a year and a half ago. The gift went along with the start of the daily lunch lotteries. Some days the gun was taken. Other days the student chosen just walked away, never to return to school.

Tim planned on being one of the latter. If their way of life really was in danger, well that was another matter entirely. But that simply was not the way things were. His teeth brushed, he went downstairs to try to get a quick breakfast before heading off to school.

He ate quickly, stuffing an entire piece of toast into his mouth in a single gulp. He wasn't about to go to jail over a lottery, even one as ominous as this one seemed to be. Tim almost walked out of the house without his books; perhaps he wasn't as awake as he thought he was. He spun on his heel and rushed back to his room. His books were scattered everywhere; he had taken to tossing them away in random directions when he finished with a subject. He gathered them together and literally threw them into his backpack. He cursed the way time moved quickly in the morning, then slowed to a crawl the minute he walked into the gaping mouth of school.

Tim was on time for the beginning of the assembly, but just barely. He ran down the corridors to the auditorium where the lotteries were always held. He was one of the last to arrive and had to stand in the back, all of the chairs were taken. Tim took his place leaning against the wall at the same time that Uncle Gus walked up to the podium, his belly leading the way. Tim looked at the stage. In addition to Uncle Gus and the podium, the lunch lottery machine had been set up. There was also a curtain that ringed something that Tim could not



































































































































































































































































































