

Locust Valley Breakdown

by Andrew Edwards

Our grimy and threadbare omnibus got disabled near Locust Valley

when, according the driver, its "coolants" failed. Exiting the highway he

found his way with surprising directness to a bus garage adjacent a diner.

It took but little time for the more observant passengers to note that his

easy companionship with a waitress there made early repair seem doubtful.

Yet when three of us set out to cross the barren weedy miles on a dirt road to the county seat, even I had no reason to suspect we might encounter an example of the infested fissures that wrack the earth in certain quarters. Nor had we any expectation of an attack by vastly enlarged yet otherwise common pests in those weedy dry fringes of the Taconic Hills east of the Hudson.

Between us only I had the train schedule, and that is because of an interview I would conduct with an astronomer in Montreal the special importance of which made reliance on a single mode of public transportation perhaps irresponsible. For what I like to characterize as "research purposes", I had taken the local out of Port Authority just before shooting a new season of "A World Beyond." On this weekly show I would present tales of the strange and supernatural for a network audience. Stories of a typical half-hour were those that concerned such as the body double, ghostly emanation, and presentiment. By taking the bus, I had hoped perhaps to see some offbeat vista or peculiar town, and gain a new story angle; for with the 1957 fall season coming hard upon us, we all had to pitch in. My fictional designs were assuredly more modest as compared to what we were forced to negotiate in the desolated reaches we began to cross on foot.

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Albert, Sue May and I had nothing in common even as the bus pulled out from the city. We trundled north on a road that took us through Poughkeepsie and Rhinebeck. After lunch and a nap, I tried to read a script but left off on page one. I waked when the driver pulled to the shoulder for an inspection of the motor; and after he had done so and made his dismaying announcement, we crawled off the main road and soon arrived at Locust Valley.

Finding us already well north, let us leave the driver and the truck stop siren, and contemplate a scene not much after the three most time-pressed among us affirmed together that the way the motorman plied his lady interest would see us not timely enough on our way.

Sue May, notable to me for a pretty ankle and plucked eyebrows blacked in with pencil, had some cash and tennis shoes in her bag. Albert said he was "a traveling European" and volunteered he'd spent most of the war in a Russian camp. He had a brown sack that turned out sausage, cheese, and Riesling which we shared to moisten dry throats. With a notion we could make an eight o'clock of the mainline in Gansevoort and get to Montreal at a manageable hour, we set out upon the dusty curve that rose up over a straw-colored hill. A clutch of stuck riders waited behind in shadow, drinking coffee out of paper cups and seeming not much to fret.

The sun was still fiery and oppressive early in August, and the rain had not come since June, and the day drew out ahead of us in a dull haze. Sue May announced (to her credit rather immediately) that she was pregnant and needed to reach Montreal to see a specialist.

Albert carried Sue May's hatbox and carpetbag, and I struggled from the first with my Samsonite. The sun beat down hard and made me feel my years--for a moment I thought to beg off. An ugly small sense of menace bothered me as I had no solid notion of why the "European" was in need of any but a leisurely-paced ramble up the Hudson Valley so like the Rhineland in splendor.

We walked, and after a few minutes Sue May "felt something change" in the way the sun shone. She asked if we saw it too. Albert

looked as if he might see it but said nothing. I saw it. And had read of the phenomenon in my personal reference collection as related to uncanny events in the sky and in the earth. Entries I recalled in certain books of arcane lore told of the way the spectrum might "break", as if to reveal slices of happenstance unknowable except in another light.

Sue May sat down on a stump.

Wanting not to alarm, I said it were just the late afternoon haze. But the darkened sun and the insalubrious sheen upon the pale stones in the road put me in mind of passing through a portal of some sinister aspect.

"Ogg." It was Albert. He looked at me with an imbecilic air.

"Yes." The answer came with some indulgence--a reflex of long habit.

He came a little closer and I caught an appealing whiff of the picnic items in his sack. "From the Kino. No words. 'The Terrible Ogg'. I watched as a boy--very much frightened."

I smiled. "Didn't mean much by it. I haven't been 'Ogg' since nineteen-thirty."

"During the war we. . ." as foolishly as he had begun, he stopped. Ogg, a character I invented and named after a storybook legend, was "terrible" because he had a taste for warm bellies. It went over well, before the talkies came in. And at once I knew as much or more of the "European" as I wanted. One imagined him a bit younger, strapped into a gray helmet guarding some misbegotten backwater of the Reich. He busied himself with a knife and a hunk of sausage.

Sue May went to stand on a ridge, maybe to see how far we'd come. She came down and her face looked pale and stricken. "I'm going back."

"What'd you see up there?"

She shook her head rapidly as if to dismiss. Taking the hatbox and carpetbag, she went back on the trail, a receding frail figure in a burgundy dress.

I got up to follow. Albert packed up his viands and came too, perhaps little comprehending. We gained on her though she was moving fast.

I drew even. "What'd you see?"

"There were men."

I figured utility linemen, or some farmhands--nothing to fear--and was about to suggest the likelihood.

A cry came and a shadow fell from where Sue May had been standing. A crack was open, dark and dirty and dry. Sue May was in the grip of a "man" of sorts; two in fact, and they were driving her down the ditch. Worse, the notion of "man" would need an interpretation characterized by exceeding liberality to accommodate any likeness of the branchy, spiny, mandibled things that pulled her down through a deep fissure. In a black split of the earth, I saw big spiny legs and probing antennae. Sue May had been brought down below.

Albert was taken by a third of this species--really an upright mantid of sorts, its carapace like a gleaming veined topcoat in swallowtail. Its eyes were big, black and glassy like those of a mindless nibbler, like one of the billions from those flying scourges one must avoid to imagine if possible. But it was man-sized and seemed possessed of more than a ganglionic nest-building instinct.

A thick stinger driven into the base of the German's skull seemed to cause unwilling activity in his vocal chords. "You shall always be Ogg," was spat out from his choking throat. He had dropped his sack and had lost his spinal vitality and his eyes lacked even the minimal humanity evident just moments before. "And you shall always remember Thogg'n."

Thogg'n! It was that old storybook name, the one I had shortened and made famous for a roaring nation in the throes of *apres la guerre* hedonism. I had known Thogg'n was some supposed arthropod lord of the inner earth, especially noted during the beetly summer of a more primitive Northeast than we had come to inherit. I had at first believed it old Native superstition, as did nearly all the early settlers in the region. What rare accounts extant of Thogg'n

and his army of compound humanoid scuttlers were scribed by such early Dutch as the merchant Pygge, and by Gant in a lesser folio.

The passing of years had served to cover over the scars of what had haunted me as I played silent Ogg. For it was as if by bastardizing and using the name I had become "known" to this crawling subterranean Thogg'n. To me it had started off as fairy stuff, but certain intuitions of a highly peculiar nature soon had suggested otherwise. Where Ogg's taste for guts came from I shall never know, nor might a willing public know why in lines they waited to see the grievous exploits of the Terrible Ogg. But it was me that sweated out dreams of the six-legged underlord during the years I played the Ogg. Entirely more disturbing was the fact that in lonesome quarters I had on a number of occasions already encountered members of his chitinous league.

In an instant it was as if we were restored, except we were not. The fissure had closed. Sue May was back looking dusty but preoccupied--already she had gone to her compact and was pointing up her lipstick. The German pawed his throat bewildered. I only wanted to deny such ill creatures as scratched the dirt far down, and with Sue May seeming put-together, was glad to pretend we had grown but dizzy for a spell.

Dazedly we walked without words. I had not kept track of the sun but saw now we had made our way back towards the bus.

Below, the bus was all polished in the back and purring as the riders got on ready to head north. We picked our way down from the weedy trail back to asphalt.

"You've been gone two hours, what made you come back?" It was the driver. His ladyfriend sat behind him in a passenger seat, checking her watch.

We had been gone not more than twenty minutes. Quietly I suggested to Sue May we ought not make note of the discrepancy.

I made a little joke to the driver to put him off. She got past him shooing the last thistle from her dress.

We sat together northbound, and I found her to have been notably disturbed by the period of lost time. She spoke of dark scuttling

shapes and of a brief moment that felt to her like having been stung in the lower back. It had happened "in an instant", she said. Looking weak and distant, she took a pill, drifted off and rode with her head back on the cushion. I thought about her "specialist" appointment in New France and about the cruel minions of Thogg'n and why they might have stung a woman early with child.

The German sat across the aisle and fingered his neck and throat and often spat into a grim-looking handkerchief. At the border, he got taken off. Hustled down the steps by passport officers, he shot the driver a glare. "Quantity over quality, that is why you broke the bus, and it is why in the war you. . ." and then he was lost in the glare of the crossing.

An hour later, Sue May and I said goodbye at the depot. We exchanged addresses.

My interview with the Canadian astronomer went well; he was a proponent of Nubira, according to him a second planet like earth always hidden by the sun. With good creative, I imagined, it should make for a story later in the season.

Several months later I received a letter from Sue May.

It came with the Queen's postage from an address in Sherbrooke, and related of her recumbence there after her visit with the specialist. For some reason she had not properly recovered from the procedure, and in a short while they had found something else growing inside her but apparently had "got it out just in time".

I ended up needing to see the astronomer again about his Nubira theory. After brandy we got to talking and, English-speaking Montreal being not so sprawling a society, it turned out he knew Sue May's specialist. She apparently had left several weeks prior.

The specialist had kept what he'd taken out of Sue May. I made an appointment with him and was shown it floating in a jar of clean unguent. Not large, it was a beetly pod with humanoid facial characteristics and a generous brainpan; yet it was unmistakable as an insect, a spineless thing with tines and mandible.

Later that year, Sue May wrote me again.

She had come back to New York and was working in a token booth at the Mount Marcy elevated station north of Yankee Stadium. She confessed to have taken a liking to the common cricket, and had pilgrimmed to Chinatown to buy a pair, each in its own bamboo cage. They were for "good luck" she said, and also to commemorate "the twins I lost."

