

BEFORE THE NEBRASKA SEA

by Dennis Hiatt

Jason watched the sun set from the top of a boulder the size of a country club. The white rock had been formed before Nebraska had become part of the great inland sea. How the huge granite rock had ended up near the peak of a mountain of West Coast basalt was one of the better mysteries of North American geology.

Jason loved geology much the same way his father and older brothers loved sports. Jason knew the whys and where-fors of alluvial fans and ox-bow lakes, the way his father understood the ins and outs of the wish-bone and single wing formations. Geology was his hobby, his passion, his first love. The grandeur and wonders of the vast, great Earth, brought him peace. How could anyone perched on the lip of the Grand Canyon not feel awe? How could a man standing

before a mountain whose eroded face revealed a sea bed two hundred million years old worry about his own small problems? Jason had driven one hundred and eighty-three miles to admire the eighty thousand tons of granite that had no business being on this side of the Mississippi. For five hours Jason wasn't a slightly built, colored, computer programmer who'd grown up in a shack in Frankfort Kentucky. He was not a black man with an older white girlfriend. A rich and well-connected girlfriend who seemed to hint he didn't quite fit in her world. For five long, quiet hours he was man primeval, and eternal.

Jason walked the mile back to his Toyota in the rapidly gathering dark. The pines and underbrush that lined the trail seemed denser and almost rock-like, as the dusk filled in their hollows, and the spaces between their needles. He did not feel as one with the forest, as he had with the boulder.

When Jason turned twelve, his growth had shot upward,

leaving him a gangling and awkward head and shoulders above
his friends. That same year he'd saw Halloween and while he'd
laughed at it,

for years afterwards, he was plagued by slow motion dreams of
being chased

by the fanged unseen.

Jason's interest in geology had taken him to many hidden
and lonesome places over the years. Conversations in
crossroad gas stations and country restaurants usually began
with him asking directions to a site. Somehow the locals
always managed to warn him of the perils of straying into the
hills. Vietnam vets growing dope, hung fish hooks at eye
level. Serial murders dumped the gutted bodies of whores in
the hills. Satanists rounded up camping families and hung
them out to dry from trees. And if there weren't rabid
coyotes lurking in the undergrowth, there were psychos
harvesting travelers for their flesh. During the day Jason
could laugh off the tall stories, but at night, forty miles

from even a single stop sign town, he didn't laugh.

Surrounded by the tall grey trees, Jason felt as out of place in on the mountain as the granite boulder was on its sea of basalt.

To his relief the Toyota was still neatly parked by the side of the Forest Service road where he'd left it. No one was hiding in the back seat. The car started on the first try, and nothing leaped out of the dark to claw at his door, as Jason made a clumsy U turn on the dirt road.

There were twenty-eight miles of Forest Service road to cover before he reached the black top that would take him the twelve miles to Bidding. From Bidding to the interstate was another sixty miles of two-lane highway. If there were no problems, he should join the flow of homebound Sunday travelers about 10 PM, and be back at his apartment before midnight. Carol would be fast asleep in their brass bed, cuddled deep in its old feather mattresses, but her cat, Pascal, would slip into the kitchen hunting a fresh can of

Kitty Stew.

Jason hated the cat, and if he'd thought he could lie to Carol with a straight face would have taken the cat on a long ride and lost it. It would be a trip like this, Jason thought, smiled, and glanced at his rear-view mirror at the deepening darkness.

For an instant, Jason thought he saw a light flicker in the forest behind him. The mountain was Forest Service land, and no one lived on it. He checked his odometer. He'd traveled eight slow miles down the rutted, red, clay road. The road took a broad left turn, and began down a steep incline. At the bottom on the hill, Jason looked in his rear-view and saw headlights paint the pines at the top of the hill.

Grinning at his own nervousness, he eased the Toyota up to thirty-five, and tried very hard not to think of all the bodies-found-in-sleeping-b

ags stories he'd heard over the
years.

In the dull, soft light of the dash board, Jason's watch
read seven-forty-five. Carol would have fed Pascal, and might
be watching television from an over-stuffed, depression era
chair. No, Jason shook his head, she'd be catching up on her
work for Monday morning. Carol owned, and operated a
clothing store named GIRL PLANET. It's motto "ISN'T FASHION
FUN" did not apply to the owner.

As he took another wide left turn, he glanced in his
rear-view and saw a wall of trees light up. Jason nudged the
Toyota up to a bone-rattling forty miles an hour, and
wondered if Carol was thinking about him. He doubted it. One
of the reasons he had been drawn to her was that she seemed
so complete. She was forty-four, eight years older than him,
and to be fair, he'd fell in love with her apartment before
he'd felt anything deep for her.

Almost everything in the apartment was old. Not old by

geological standards to be sure, but still it was a place out of time, and, to a degree, timeless. The apartment was neat, and orderly, not over-furnished or tasteless, but there was a mix of styles, and periods you wouldn't expect to find together. It was rather like finding shallow-water limestone from the Triassic, peppered with deep-water charts from the Devonian, side-by-side with Permian sandstone on the face of a basalt island-ark.

Carol was a beauty in decline, and her type of beauty had been out of vogue for four hundred years. She reminded Jason of one of James The First's mistresses. They'd met at Mattie Karan's annual Louisiana hurricane party. After a night of Cajun music and crawfish gumbo, Jason had drove Carol home. She'd asked him up for coffee, and to meet Pascal.

The cat, who was as black as the inside of a deep cave, hated Jason on first sight. Jason, who didn't like children, or pets that weren't plants, tried to suck up to Pascal, and

failed. Carol'd laughed and said with a shrug, "Men come and go, but the cat stays."

The forest outside of the twin beams of the Toyota's headlights blinked by, tree, by black tree, and in his rear view, Jason saw the pines light up as the car following him drew closer. He thought about pulling over, and letting the vehicle pass, but something deep within him seemed to whisper that he would not see another sunrise if that car caught up with him.

His Toyota jarred down the road at almost fifty miles an hour. Common sense assured Jason that the vehicle following him could not possibly go any faster than he could slam down the crude road. However, by the time he hit the paved road, the car behind him had closed to about three hundred yards. Jason put his foot to the floor, and covered the twelve miles to Bidding in eight minutes.

He pulled into the parking lot of a tavern on the

outskirts of the town named The Dew Drop Inn. Inside the tavern, he found a long hall which led to the rest rooms and a beat-up, old-fashioned payphone. He barged into the men's room and relived himself in a flurry.

As he stepped out of the bathroom, he heard the tavern's front door slam shut. Jason shuddered, and phoned Carol.

She picked it up on the second ring. "Hello?"

Jason was surprised by the unusual softness of her voice. "Hi Honey, I just called to see how you're doing, and to tell you I might be a little late."

There was a slight pause, and then Carol gushed. "Baby, poor, little Pascal's dead."

"What? What happened?" Jason shivered, and glanced down the long, shadowy hall.

"He was hit by a car in front of the apartment." Carol sounded near tears.

"Oh Carol I'm so sorry." Jason murmured, and oddly enough, found he meant it. "I'll be home as soon as I can,

Honey."

"Thanks Sweetheart, I'll wait up for you."

Exiting the long, dusty hall, Jason made a beeline for the door. He was halfway across the tavern when the bartender boomed. "Say nay-bor, if you're gonna' use the crapper, the least you can do is buy a beer."

Jason turned and stared at the skinny old man behind the bar. The man's face was lined with broken blood vessels, and his yellow eyes were as bright and mean as a cornered ferret. Several rough, older men rose from their booths, and stared back at Jason.

"Yeah, sure...that sounds like a good idea." Jason's voice sounded weak in his ears.

With small, claw-like hands, the old man drew a glass of beer, and sat it on the bar. "That's two bucks."

The sign above the bartender's head said draft beer was fifty cents a glass. Jason glanced at the sign and back to

the old man. The bartender smirked, and coughed wetly, "Old sign."

Jason fished the money out of his wallet, and sat on a cracked vinyl bar stool. The men who'd stood, settled back to their seats, and the old man drifted down the bar, leaving Jason alone.

Using the mirror behind the bar, Jason surveyed the country people. They were dressed in soiled coveralls, old blue jeans, plaid shirts, and down jackets. His rock outfit of hiking boots, khaki pants, and shirt, seemed like a uniform in this setting.

Sipping his beer, Jason noted that all the customers were older than he. Most of the men were bigger, and all of them looked like they liked to fight. One old couple in a booth seemed particularly quarrelsome. The old woman had no teeth, and a face as wrinkled, and blotched as a rotten apple. She was gumming away in a rather nasty fashion to a fossil of what Jason took to be a farmer.

The sheer ugliness of the couple fascinated him. He tried to imagine them young, and...beautiful? He couldn't do it. He worked on young and firm. That image tried to waver into focus, and when it would not, Jason saw that the hag was smiling at him. He looked quickly back to his beer. It was half gone.

As the old woman left the booth, Jason downed the beer in a single gulp, but before he could wipe his mouth, the bartender picked up his glass, and grinned a picket fence of ragged, yellow teeth. "First refill's free."

Even as Jason waved him off, the old man drew another beer. As he started to rise, a wrinkled hand with ragged, dirty fingernails, clamped on his shoulder. Her old face hovered warmly near his. "Want'a dance?"

Jason grasp the beer glass with both hands. "Uh...thank you, no."

Eyes bright, she nodded at his beer. "A few more, and I

won't look so bad."

Suppressing a shudder, Jason offered up a weak smile and nodded back. As if on prearranged signal, when the hag made her way to the jukebox, a giant of a middle-aged mechanic left his friends in a booth, and came to roost beside Jason.

The grease ball's sun burntface, and steel-grey hair floated a half head above Jason. "Micky," the mechanic motioned to the bartender with a paw that seemed the size and softness of a mid-range iron ore meteorite. "You screwed the kid. Give him his change."

"No refunds." The old bartender snapped.

The giant sighed, and spread his hands on the oak bar as if to rise. "Then give him the god-damn beer."

Pouting, the ancient bartender drew two drafts, and slid them to Jason. Jason nodded and mumbled, "Thanks." to no one in particular.

Staring at the two beers, and sipping the third, Jason didn't notice that several men had drifted from their seats,

and formed a rough semi-circle behind him. The dirty, old, old man who'd been with the hag, cleared his throat, and ask. "You gott'a reason for being this far from the highway, boy?" Jason's head snapped up, and he wheeled on to bar stool to face the men. "I like...", he started to say geology, but seeing a room full of mean, stupid eyes changed his mind and said, "rocks."

The men looked at each other, and shook their heads as if to say, "Bullshit."

Jason smiled as disarmingly as he could, and hoisted his beer glass toward the door. "Up on the mountain there's a granite bolder that's two thousand miles from where it should be, and how it got there is one of the mysteries of this area."

The old, ugly farmer grinned snaggle-toothed at his friends. "Yeah. Well, boy, there's a lot of mysteries up in those old mountains that nobody ain't ever gonn'a dig up."

Jason looked down, into his half full glass, and said,

"No."

"What'd you say, friend?" The giant mechanic rested a huge hand on Jason's shoulder.

Jason looked up, and met the giant's cool, blue eyes.

"Those mountain's aren't old. They were formed about fifteen million years ago."

"Sound's damn old to me!", one of the men wheezed.

Jason shook his head, and shook off the giant's hand.

The hand came off with surprising ease. "Those mountains are kittens in geological terms."

"Yeah?" The skinny man in soiled jeans, and rubber boots, who lounged next to the farmer said. "How old are the Rockies?"

"Sixty three million years old." Jason smiled firmly over his glass and took a swig.

"Now those suckers are truly old." A lumpy grandfather type spat.

Jason laughed. "No they're not. They're just year-old cats."

"How about the Alps?" Ask another mechanic who'd sidled up to the semi-circle.

"They're just off the milk at twenty-five million."

Jason saluted the mechanic, and downed the beer.

The giant handed Jason another beer, and said, "Now the Himalayas---they're as old as the hills!"

Jason laughed, and shook his head. "Nope, there the same age as these mountains."

Micky tapped on the bar with his fist and said, "I'll bet you a two dollar beer that the Andes are as old as they come!"

"At thirty-six million you lose, pal." Jason said smiling at the crowd before him.

"The Appalachians are old as hell, friend." A soft, southern voice said.

Jason didn't see who'd spoken, but he nodded, and said.

"Two hundred, eighty million years of wear and tear."

Several men whistled, and someone chuckled, "That'll be about as old as they get I reckon."

"No...", Jason leaned back against the oak bar, and crossed his legs. "the Laurentain range is two billion, three hundred million years old, give or take a few."

"Shee-it." The southern said, and Jason spotted him off to one side. "I never heard tell of no mountains by that name."

Jason shrugged. "So? You're not into rocks." Two and-a-half beers in fifteen minutes had settled his nerves and made him a hair cocky.< FONT>

"Say," the nasty, old farmer stepped forward, "just what kind O' rock did you say was up on the mountain, boy?"

Jason looked to the door, and said. "There's an eighty thousand ton granite boulder which was formed in the Devonian period of the Paleozoic era in what is now upper

Pennsylvania." He drained off half his glass, "No one can figure out how a four hundred million year old rock ended up half a continent away, on top of fifteen million year old volcanic mountains."

"Maybe UFO's did it. I hear tell they built the Pyramids." The skinny mechanic looked around the circle for approval, and found none.

The greying bear beside Jason shook his head. "Maybe that rock's some asshole's idea of a joke. Maybe they hauled it up there with an earth mover."

Jason uncrossed his legs, and sat up straight. "It was first noted in the geological survey of 1902."

"Kill's that idea deader than duck shit, don't it?" The skinny mechanic said, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"How's about a game of eight ball, Bill?"

"Rack 'em up." The giant said as he rose, and the small crowd drifted back to their seats.

Jason looked at the empty beer glass in his hand and wheeled back to the bar. Five full glasses were sitting before him. He picked one up, and saluted the bartender.

"Thanks, Micky."

"My pleasure." The old man grinned, "You put on the best show we've had in here since Delbert Smith rode his horse in, and the damn thing jumped the bar, and went hog-stupid-wild."

Jason was mellowly aware that three beers in twenty minutes made the Dew Drop Inn a tavern of rather rustic charm. "Well," Jason sipped the beer, "it is a hell of a rock."

Micky nodded. "Yeah, there was an Indian who lived up there until the Forest Service drove him out, and one time, when he was three sheets to the wind, he tried to tell me that damn rock of your's was haunted."

"Haunted?" Jason sipped his beer.

"Well," the bartender moved down the bar to Jason, "not exactly haunted." Micky picked up the empty glasses. "Now

just what the hell was that feather-butt's name?"

"Haunted?" Jason repeated, remembering Pascal's accident, and wondering if he really was sorry the cat was dead.

"Black Elk! That's what he went by." Micky wiped the oak bar with a foul rag, but his eyes looked toward the door as if he was thinking about the mountain. "No, not haunted exactly. More like a wishing well where you got what you wanted, but it didn't make you happy." Micky lowered his old, bright eyes to Jason. "Why I remember now. Ol' Black Elk said that before the battle of the Little Big Horn, a bunch of chiefs made a trip to that rock and prayed for a great victory over the Long Knives." Micky laughed and shrugged. "Well now, they kicked butt on the Seventh Cavalry, but it was the beginning of the end of the great Indian Nation." Jason took a deep drink from the glass. What had he wished for up there? Surely not the cat's death. "That's one

hell of a story. I wonder if it's true?" He said to the bartender.

Micky laughed like he was choking, and spat, "Na, I made it up. You really think you can bullshit better than a bartender kid?" Jason grinned, and shook his head. The old man leaned forward, and said in a near whisper, "You may have fooled those jackasses, but everyone knows the Andes are the oldest damn mountains there be."

Jason laughed, and fished two dollars out of his wallet.

"Tell you what, why don't you put this in the jukebox, and play us some tunes."

Micky nodded quickly in appreciation of their shared wit, and went to the ancient cash register to get quarters.

Jason tipped back his beer, and drained it as the trite-but-true words of a country-western song filled the bar.

Events after his sixth beer went from soft focus to blurry. Jason woke the next morning with a head full of granite, and a mouth as dry as Death Valley. The room was so

dark he couldn't see the wall, but he was deep in Carol's feather bed. He lay holding his head, wondering if he could survive the walk to the bathroom for some aspirin. After a minute of near-death sickness, he noticed that the bedroom stank like an inland sea, and he wondered if he'd been sick on the floor. Carol stirred beside him, and he rested one arm indifferently above her shoulder. She rolled over, and started wetly kissing down his stomach. Jason groaned, "Baby, I don't think I'm up for that."

"Don't you worry none Rock Man," Cooed the old hag, "I got my teeth out."

Jason moaned in pleasure, and pain. The unfanged obscene had finally caught him in the night.

