

Wounded Knee

by Jason W. Stuart

"They picked me up in their spaceship about noon," Austin Grantham says to me while pulling up an apple crate to use as a stool. I'm sitting outside the Smith's Farm Supply and General Store shelling peas because my dad thinks it's good for me. My dad and I don't always agree on such points. Austin's sipping something out of a coffee cup that definitely ain't coffee and looks off toward the horizon, his long white hair blowing a bit in the wind. Culloden County's still dry as a bone, last I checked, but I reckon that never stopped any of these guys anyhow.

"Aliens, I mean," He starts in again. He's got the quaintest grin on his face and I know he's getting excited about it. I've heard this story before, but it's always different and I've got three more bushels and not a lot else to do.

"They had me drugged pretty bad there for a while, so some of this is still a bit hazy to me. They were little fuckers, 'bout four feet five or so, all of them. Green eyes. Didn't care for 'em, tell the truth. Anyhow, they had me tied down to some kinda alien hospital bed and was getting ready to stick them probes up my asshole and all that shit. Well, I don't know, but I reckon they never picked up a double jointer before and you'd think with all that souped-up space technology they got they'd have used something stronger than plain old rope.

"So, I popped my arms out that hemp right quick and clocked one square in his little gray jaw. Cracked in six pieces from the sound it made. Then I kicked two of the little shits in the face a time or two and after that they was all making tracks for it.

"I got the rest of the shoe-string off my hands and feet and collected my wits about me again, also my jeans. I was definitely in a spaceship, all right. The ceilings were real low. Had to stoop quite a bit just to get around. I made a gander about the room I was in to see if there wasn't nothing I couldn't use as no weapon of some kind. As luck would have it, one of them dropped his laser pistol on the

ground in his hurry to scamper out the door. I snatched it right up and made my way further up the ship, a little more spring in my step now that I had a nice piece of artillery in my hand and nothing sticking up my rear-end.

“I made my way up the fuselage of the ship. For such a small bunch of shits, they sure built an awful long bunch of hallways. I caught a quick glimpse of a gang of 'em headed my way. I took at 'em with my blaster, but the damn thing only turned out to be a fucking TV remote. Next thing I know, all the walls light up with thirty two channels of anything you can imagine. Well, it at least startled 'em good, as it did me, but I was quicker to catch on and took advantage. I pitched the damn remote and beamed one of 'em right in the eye. He went down like he meant it and tripped up another two. That left just one to square off against me and he knew he didn't have the sand, so he made like a baby and headed on out of there.

“After that I made a bee-line for the cockpit. I didn't have no trouble with the feller at the helm; he lit out like a match soon as I poked my head in. Next thing I knew, there was a bunch of real loud popping sounds coming from the back of the ship. I looked out the windows and seen all these little metal contraptions shooting off the side of the spaceship. Escape pods, I figured.

“Well, that had me rattled for a minute, 'cause I knew that meant it was just me and a big empty ship with no one at the stick. And I felt sure they hadn't had the courtesy to leave it on auto-pilot for me. Shitasses.”

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I first met Austin Grantham when my family moved here from Atlanta last year and I was worried, at first, about being able to go back for college. It was after the storm and all that big jailbreak stuff had quieted down. It seemed kind of cool at first to be moving to some place sort of famous, but the new of that wore off fast. I remember when we first turned down the road to our house and I saw some guy (who later turned out to be our next-door neighbor,

Cole) driving a wagon pulled by a team of oxen. That was about the time I started missing Atlanta.

Austin had walked over to say hello and offer up a hand as we unpacked. He lived right across the street from us. Turned out he'd built our house. Hindsight's 20/20, I guess. My dad shook his hand and he helped us in with all the big stuff. I noticed he seemed awfully strong for an old dude.

One time, a buddy and I were out front at my house working on a physics project for school one day as Austin rode up the street on his lawn mower. He had an old Dodge something-or-other, but never drove it anymore. "She's retired," he'd say. He parked in front of my house and eased over to see what we were doing.

We got halfway through explaining what a Rube Goldberg machine was and he said he knew all about it. Said he'd helped an old friend's son build one once some years back then warned us not to get our hopes up on taking the record for size, cause that one was a "doozy," as he put it. He offered to help and we let him drill some holes in some plywood for us. It was actually pretty nice of him. I probably would have made a botched job of it myself.

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"Well, I had to think quick." He continues. "She was steady baking for the dirt and me standing there holding the damn bag. First thing, I had to kick the armrests off the rocking chair just so I could sit the hell down. Damn thing had two sticks instead of one and that shook me. Getting the thing under control took a little doing, but directly I got the hang of her handling. There ain't much land, sea, or air that I can't jam the gears on, son. She flies a little like an old spitfire. Learned on those old boys before I started dropping the hot stuff over Cambodia—but you didn't hear me say that.

"She'd gone into a spin real bad and I kicked hard to pull her out, but I pulled her out all right. After that, it was clear sailing for a bit. And, son, that bird could sing. I can't accurately figure how fast I was going, 'cause all the controls and gauges was written in Space-

Jap. But, I know I was at least one better'n Mach 5, and that ain't pissing around, son."

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Austin used to be, by most accounts, pretty hardcore. No one around has much to say against him during the old days. He had flown cropdusters even before the war. During Vietnam he piloted F4's and sent more than a few commies to the "hot place," as they say.

After that he came back and started cropdusting again. And on the weekends he'd drive up and down Culloden County from Collierville to Coalwater seeing how many cops he could get to chase him. This was something he did for his own enjoyment. The Culloden County Sheriffs finally caught him one day and took him in on reckless endangerment. They beat the blue hell out of that man. Tore his knee all to hell. Kicked him so hard in the head one eye turned blood-red and still looks pink today. Folks say that's what turned him. Others say he was always off.

He keeps a scarecrow in his front yard for no reason. At least none that he'll ever give us. He wears the same clothes almost every day: old faded Levi's and denim shirts. Even in the summer. He's got a closely trimmed beard just as white as his hair except for the tobacco stains from his pack-a-day habit. He always offers to get us all we want, but I don't smoke, nor do any of my friends. He let me try real moonshine once and that was awful.

He's got an old black dog named Bob. Same as every other dog he's ever owned, people told us. Guess he likes things simple. Bob tends to follow him around half the time grinning like an idiot. I like Austin, but I really hate Bob. He gets in our garbage a lot.

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"Got the radio a-going good and tuned to a country show. Loretta Lynn was humming as I broke atmo. That's a fine feeling, don't let 'em fool you. Had a tingling in my toes that tickled me half to death. Cold up there, though, so I dipped back down over Shanghai and burnt across the night."

Austin pauses here to spit and I have to switch baskets and notice Mrs. Agnes standing outside the store watching us. I think she's always afraid I'm stealing something out here.

"You ought not listen to him," she says. "He ain't never had sense enough to pour piss out of a boot"

Austin doesn't even hear her anymore, I think. He takes a sip and moves right along. He's at his favorite part because he always gets a little jumpy right here and chuckles a lot.

"Didn't get halfway through Cali 'fore I had them damn Apache helicopters after me. Fucking Yankee government bastards. They was slapping rockets at me left and right and I was sliding that heap all over the sky ducking and dodging. And if there was a button to fire a laser or shoot a bomb anywhere about me, I never found it. I was beginning to think these Marsmen didn't know the first thing about advanced weaponry. Softheaded sons of bitches.

"Since shooting was out, on my part at least, I took them bluecoats southeast to Monument Valley and started weaving in and out of them cracks and gorges. Sure enough, that had 'em popping like firecrackers upside them mountains. Whooeee! That was a sight. Never a sequel to that in a life of Sundays.

"I touched down in a little cove in Jamaica. And parked her out of sight and footed on into a little beach town I used haunt back in my service days. I hocked a couple twenties I had with me for some rum-money and took a seat at this little outdoor bar called Moek's. Twitchy sort of place, but a good spot to sip a beer or pina colada and kick 'em back for a few.

"Feller at the bar asks me 'what can I do you for?' and I holler at him to pour me some rum with a whiskey chaser and stick some ice in 'em seeing it was hot enough cook hog on the asphalt. He goes in that the only drink they serve cold is Red Stripe Beer and how it'll do me one just as good as them others. I tell him I got no time for beer. I need something with some pep. Then he starts on about Red Stripe Beer being 15 percent alcohol content which I well know is a damn lie. Ain't no beer one better than 6 percent that I've come across. He goes in then about how it's all different in different

countries and I'm getting aggravated and tell him to shut his ass about America else I'll have to slap the black out of his mouth and on and on like that we went 'til, directly, I don't recall how, I wound up with a tall glass of Red Stripe Beer in my hand and was sucking it down like it was God's own groceries. I declare that was good beer and worth the 80 cents I paid for it, too. So, naturally I paid another 80 cents and then another and he kept 'em coming."

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With his knee gone bad, Austin took to working in a little shop next to the general store: Grantham's Carpentry, Appliance, Outboards and Airplane Repair. Building cabinets and tables, fixing outboards or small engines, appliance repair, that kind of stuff. As far as I know, no one's ever dropped a plane off for him to fix, but I bet he knows how. Apparently somewhere in there he'd taken the time to build a house and sell it. Leastways, he made enough money to keep him in tequila which he sampled from frequently.

He had a five hundred dollar smile, as he put it, since he had half his teeth kicked out by the cops and the other half pulled to make room for a fake set. He carried himself like a twenty-year old man, despite the age, the booze and a poor diet. Aside from tequila, all I ever watched him eat were ham sandwiches and honey-buns he bought out of the store.

Once, my mom had me out helping her weed the front lawn. She likes to have a clean yard at all times at the expense of my video games. Between her and my dad farming me out to do odd jobs, like the one I'm doing, it's a wonder I ever get anything done.

We tossed all the pulled weeds into a cardboard box that we were going to burn. Then Austin came over and asked if he could have them. I shot a half weird look at him, but didn't think too much of it. It was Austin, after all. My mom asked what on Earth for and he explained that we were pulling up sweet grass and that it was good to eat. Then, he pulled a big hunk out and stuck it in his mouth and started chewing like a damn cow. I shook my head and sat down on the car bumper, glad, at least, for a short break. Then he takes some and hands it to my mom and urges her to try it. My mom always

tries to be polite and it usually gets her in trouble. So, naturally, not wanting to be rude she sticks some in her mouth, too, and goes to gnawing on it. 'Yeah it is sweet,' she'd said and turned to me giving a 'what the hell?' look. Mom, it's Austin! I wanted to yell at her. But, I didn't.

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"I don't recall now how many I had, all told, aside to say I woke up face down in a sweaty bed and short a few more twenties. I stood up and had a look around. I wasn't sure where I was. I had to prioritize. First things first, I took a piss. That took a minute. Slowly, I remembered the beer and the bartender and Jamaica. Then I tried to remember how I got there and that part was coming up fuzzy. I had the vague impression it had involved some kind of flying, but the exacts of it escaped me. But, then, I had worse problems on the way.

"I pulled my jeans back on and spent half an hour cussing and looking for my shirt before I remembered I wasn't wearing one in the first place. So, I stole one out the closet of the room I spent the night in. Kind of a checkered blue and white deal, short sleeves. I did happen to notice the pair of women's panties beside the bed, but didn't think enough of it at the moment.

"I stepped out the door and headed back the way I thought I come, that being toward the bar. I found that same bartender, I assume, and give him the third degree on what happened. He claimed I tipped him plenty and took off with some Cuban woman half an inch taller than me. Well, that didn't make a heap of sense. I'm never one to tip a man too much. It ain't my style. It did at least seem to offer an answer to the panties I'd seen, not that I really needed one badly.

"What I did need was a clear concept of where the hell I'd come from and most importantly how the blue hell to get back. I walked into the main market area of the town, not knowing exactly what I was looking for, and rather hoping it would just find me. And it did, of a sort.

"This woman comes up to me, lays a nasty one on my face and rubs her leg up and down the back side of mine. She was about the

height the man at the bar described and looked it, too. She spilled half out the little red dress she had on and that didn't hurt my eyes a whole lot. She had a face to club a hippy for and legs long as you like, I don't care who you are. She was stacked up."

This part is kind of new. There was a woman last time I heard it but she didn't factor in much and was certainly not as highly praised in her description. Makes me wonder what inspired the change. Maybe Austin got lucky here recently.

" 'Baby,' she says to me as I'm trying not too hard to figure out who she is and why she's so keen on me. 'I thought you be in the bed still. You drink too much last night.' Well, that was a fact. I stared her up and down a time or two more and genuinely had no memory of her whatsoever. She started in about how happy she was to be my wife and how happy our life was going to be together and five or six other things of the kind that I only half heard as I stepped on down the block, telling her I had to see about a thing with a guy with a boat, which wasn't but half a lie. She was fine to look at, but I had her right off as a Yankee government spy done followed me down this way. May or may not've been, but either way the last thing I need was some foreign woman nipping at my heels everywhere I go. A wife'll bring you to harm, son. Remember that one alone if nothing else."

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Austin was married once that I know of to a woman named Bertha Ann Mosley from Cherokee County. Some mayor's daughter or something, but she left him right after the war, I think. She took their son with her and supposedly had it fixed so Austin never got to see him anymore. At least that's what I heard.

There's a little creek that runs through about a half mile behind my house. I used to walk back there and sit by the bank and pitch rocks at the water, just me and my thoughts. Austin found me back there once and cussed me pretty good for being the one scaring off all his catfish. Claimed it used to be the best fishing hole this part of the county 'til I came along. At first, I was just irritated at him for interrupting me, but then I did kind of feel bad. I had this image in

my head of him coming out here to this same place, doing just about the same thing, sitting and thinking. I could see him there with his fishing rod, only in my head there still were no fish, just him and the world all alone.

After that we would throw breadcrumbs in two or three days a week getting them back used to it being a good feeding ground. Then Austin showed me how to bait a worm on a hook just right so it wouldn't wiggle off or get stole by a too-clever fish. No one had ever showed me how to fish before. Wasn't long before we got to where we catch a few, or mostly Austin does. I usually just sit there and hold my pole and listen to him spin yarns about all the bullshit he half makes up. He talks about atomic bombs going off and earthquakes and giant tigers and crazy cults and about the Grady brothers and a lot about some guy named Hank who was, I think, their uncle or something. It's tough to keep track of. I got that he knew them all, and that Hank was somebody at least as crazy as Austin is. But, he died a long time ago. I guess Austin just misses him.

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“Figuring they was wise to me and I was likely pulling a tail, I had little intention of leading ‘em straight back to the ship and getting a set of steel bracelets for my trouble. So, I shot straight for the docks and thumbed on back up to the Gulf. Made land just outside of Mobile, thanked a feller and headed for the bus station. Bought a cheap seat back here to Culloden County and breathed a long one glad to be out of a pickle like that. Had no idea how I was likely to get back down there and get that bird back and tell the truth, son, I still ain't worked out the kinks.”

Austin pauses here as he always does when he tells this story. He gives a vacant stare out into nowhere and takes another sip from his coffee cup. He hocks some phlegm into his throat and spits it on the ground.

I have a hard time really imagining Austin with a kid of his own, somehow. I wonder how old he is, his son, if he really has one. It makes me too sad to think about too long, though. I guess that's why

I'm not sure I believe it. I think, as weird as Austin is, he'd have been an awesome dad, the kind I'd wished I had when I was more of a kid. My dad is better at making money than making up stories about aliens. Win some, lose some, I guess.

"Lord knows they must have found it by now," He says after a while. "I mean how else you think they figured out all this internet horseshit? No way that's regular old human technology. That's them space-midgets' gizmos sure as anything. Bet me on it.

"Yeah, they probly got it stored in some warehouse half took apart somewhere. And it just further proves they could beat this gas shit anytime they damn well please to, they just don't care. They milking us six ways from Sunday on that score, all right. They could strip that bad boy apart and build a car to run the same way or I'm a flat out liar."

He spits again and sits a long while silently. Directly, I notice a huge white cloud of smoke billowing up from behind him. It's coming right up from his shop and now it stinks, too.

"Austin," I say, "You know your shop's smoking real bad."

He turns to look and then turns back to me, shrugs a bit and sips his drink. The smoke keeps billowing and I don't know what to do exactly, so I just sit and stare at it a while. The smoke is pouring out of every crack and corner of the shop and drifting slowly southeast. A Fish and Game truck pulls in to the store and Clayt Ramsey, the game warden, spills out.

"Hey, Austin, your shop's smoking," he says.

"I know," Austin replies.

"Well, all right, then," he says headed in the door. "Long as you know."

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We sit here for a while, silent. I keep looking at the smoke while Austin sips and ignores it—the deepest thought going on in his head probably whether he should have another honey bun or not—and I think about how odd it is—all this. I'll go back to Atlanta in a month and a half to stay with my granddad for college. More often than not my parents will come to me for the holidays rather than me to them.

It occurs to me I may not ever see Austin again. I used to wonder if anything he told me was maybe partly true or his own weird version of something that did happen, but I finally decided I don't want to know. I think I like his versions better and I know he does, like the time him and Hank Grady raced across the world to see who could come back with the best tasting can of beer, or when they attached a snowplow to a rocket-powered eighteen-wheeler and wrecked through a thousand police cars. He just does it so people will keep thinking he's crazy and leave him alone. I don't think he likes what the world turned into. I know I'll actually miss that about him and all the other things about this place I don't really understand.

The smoke from his shop is starting to taper off and Austin finally turns back to look. He sets his cup down directly and stands up to crack his back.

"Well," he says. "Guess I'll go see if them roaches is dead."

