

Ball of String

Monday

Ron leaned back in his chair, resting the back against the side of the station. An old rusty yellow and green pickup truck was making its way down the highway in his direction. He unscrewed the top of his Snapple bottle and drank a deep draught of the amber mango iced tea therein. The truck approached. It did not slow.

The fine mist of dust stirred up by the tires of passing vehicles left a residue on everything in the station. The gas pump gauges were hardly visible through the layer of dirt and sand. The concrete walkway he perched upon was covered in the fine-grained earth. Inside the store was not left untouched. He would have to feather dust the merchandise if he wanted any kind of chance to sell any of it.

It would be another hot one, Ron surmised. It still being early morning, the temperature had already passed ninety degrees. The air conditioner had long since died. He didn't have the money to repair it. Not since the factory left. Heck, he didn't even know if he could find anyone to repair it, the town was basically deserted. Only the stupid, or just tired remained

in town. Ron wondered which category hit fit into. Probably both.

Finishing his bottle of tea, Ron stood to begin his daily chores. He closed to door to his living quarters in the back. He called them living quarters, but it was essentially a closet with a cot. He flipped the sign in the window from 'Closed' to 'Open'. He didn't know why he bothered anymore. The chance of a customer was getting less and less every day.

The auto parts factory nearby had been a hub of activity when he bought the gas station. He had purchased the business with all kinds of anticipation of massive profits and a life of ease. One executive decision to move the plant to, of all places, Canada, had turned his thriving enterprise into a dead weight around his neck.

Ron was unable to make his mortgage payments any more. The bank would have foreclosed on him long ago, except that they knew the few dollars he sent them every month was probably more than anything they could get from trying to sell the property. The town had died. The ones left were just waiting for the funeral to begin.

He turned on the small TV on the counter. There wasn't anything on worth the watching, but he needed the noise of the box. It was something. Something other than the haunting silence when it wasn't on. He sat in his chair behind the counter. He would wait. What he was waiting for, he didn't know.

The sun was setting, and the TV was blaring the news broadcast when he awoke from his nap. Another day shot. He

looked in the register. Twenty-seven dollars. He stuffed his fat fingers into the till and extracted a wad of ones.

He started his walk into the town proper but stopped at the door. The smell of his garbage prompted the halt in his step. He grabbed his bag of trash by the back door and headed for the back of the gas station.

The town had long since stopped trash pickup. They were on their own. He put the bag of trash into the 55-gallon steel drum he used as an incinerator and threw a match inside. After a while, the flames were high enough that he was satisfied the trash would burn. He left the trash to itself and made his way town-ward.

Main Street in the town looked like one of those burned out apocalyptic towns of the movies. Almost all the businesses were boarded up, their owners had long since thrown in the towel. The sidewalks were filthy. Filthy with the dust and grime that plagued his own business. Filthy with the dirt of failure and neglect.

No cars were visible, save the one in front of Mae's bar. Mae's bar was the meeting place for those of them left. Mae's was his destination. He ambled across the street, not looking for traffic. Traffic was basically non-existent. If there had been traffic, he'd be getting more business. Getting hit by traffic would be nice, in a sick dark way.

Mae was busy wiping down the bar when he arrived. She was a heavy-set woman in her middle age with dark red hair and an attitude. Ron hefted his own ever-widening girth onto a stool at the end of the bar.

"Hey. Beer?" Mae knew his order. He was on that stool most nights.

"Why not." Ron attempted a small joke of sorts.

"How's business?" Mae attempted some conversation, but she already knew the answer.

"Made a deal today with an Arab Sheik to buy the whole shebang!" The two laughed.

Behind Ron at the bar, Orson Charles was slowly getting piss-faced in one of the booths.

"Looks like he's been here for a while." Ron estimated time in the bar from Orson's obvious total inebriation.

"Actually, he arrived drunk." Much to Mae's chagrin, she hadn't been the recipient of his drinking dollars.

Ron sipped his beer while Mae resumed her cleaning activities. He could drink alone in his gas station, but he thirsted for more than beer. He thirsted for human contact. As probably did all of them.

He didn't know if it was the searing heat of the Nevada desert, or the cooling effect of the beer, but he was feeling quite philosophical. Maybe it was the alcohol. His mind wandered to what life could be. He wondered if there could be more. Could there be better?

Suddenly an idea manifested in his brain.

"What we need ..." Ron had had a vision.

“Hmm, what’s that?” Mae wasn’t much interested in what they needed. She thought they needed money. She thought that might be obvious.

“What we need is a ball of string.” Ron picked up his mug and drank the rest of the cold amber liquid in one gulp.

“Another?” Mae was already filling his glass, she knew Ron to be a three-glass customer. But it was polite to ask.

“Sure.”

“So, go on. What do we need a ball of string for?” Mae yawned as she lay the new glass of beer in front of Ron, the coldness of the glass precipitating the humidity in the air into beads of water. The beads of water made the glass slippery, but Ron was an expert at navigating the mine field of reduced friction. He pulled the glass to his lips and sipped the foamy head.

“You ever driven down the highway and seen a billboard for the World’s Biggest Ball of String or something like that?” Ron waved his hands in the air drawing the mammoth sphere of twine in the air.

“Oh sure.” Mae started washing the glasses.

“What if we had that?” Ron was serious.

“What if we did?” Mae placed the now clean glasses in the rack for drying.

“Just think of the traffic. The customers!” Ron’s eyes moistened as he contemplated the windfall. “We could be millionaires!”

Mae considered the proposal. It did have merit, but one big flaw. "We ain't got any string."

"We don't need a ball of string necessarily!"

Mae scrunched up her forehead. "Ain't that what you just said though!?"

"Yes, but that ain't the point!" Ron tried to compose himself. "All we need is something for folks to come gawk at!"

"Hmmm ... " Mae was considering that last part. "Some kind of draw then... ?"

"Yes! You got it now!" Ron had an ally. "We build some kind of ball of string that folks can come and gawk at. Then we just rack up the dollars selling them beer and gasoline and such!?"

"We could use some customers for sure!" Mae knew the benefits of paying customers. Mae also knew Ron to be full of ideas with very little follow-through.

Ron went back to sipping his beer. He was onto something. He could feel it. He downed the last of his beer and plopped four dollars on the bar. "OK, see ya."

"So soon? You ain't had your third beer yet!" Mae held her hands out wide in disbelief.

"Next time." Ron was out the door.

Ron's mind was running wild as he walked back to his station. He needed an idea that would attract the customers.

Maybe a circus? Maybe an alien space ship. He didn't have either of those but that was the kind of idea he needed. Why, oh why, hadn't the gas station been hit by a meteor or something? That would bring them in! He'd be knee deep in scientists!

The trash at the back looked finished burning. He decided it best to dump it now. It would be another hot one tomorrow and he didn't want to do it in the heat. Rounding the back of the station, he grabbed the large steel drum and started dragging it to the hole.

Ron had been using a sink hole by the large mesquite tree as his dumping ground. It got the trash underground quickly and prevented any varmints getting at any unburned bits. He tipped the steel drum over and poured the contents into the waiting hole.

Now what Ron had not expected is that the trash was not completely finished burning. There were bits at the bottom still not combusted. When Ron poured these burning bits into the hole, burning his left hand on the stuff. But that wasn't all that Ron suffered that night.

The trash and ashes went into the hole but what whooshed back out was a rather large and loud fire ball. The cloud of raging fire filled the local area around Ron and started the mesquite tree to burn. Ron backpedaled as fast as he could but caught his foot on an outcropping of rock. He fell backward.

Everything went dark.

Tuesday

The sun was rising when Ron regained consciousness. He was unsure what had happened but looking around and finding the trash barrel lying on its side brought back the memory. He felt the back of his head. It throbbed with pain.

Ron made his way inside the gas station. He washed his face in the sink of the men's room and, drying off with some paper towels, he noticed something strange in the mirror. His eyebrows were gone. So was the hair that used to be his bangs on his forehead.

The skin of his face was reddened. Some of it was peeling. His face would hurt, if it weren't for the pain at the back of his head. That pain trumped all other pains.

He had placed his personal items in some boxes under his cot. He rummaged through them and produced a bottle of acetaminophen. He took three of those. He knew they only recommended two, but the pain was a three. A visit to the cooler produced another mango iced tea and he washed the pills down with that.

He sat in front of the station for a while, which was his preferred start to the day. Ron sipped his iced tea. He rolled over in his mind what had happened the night before. He sipped some more tea.

All he could surmise to fit the facts of the encounter was that maybe there was a natural gas pocket under his property that the burning trash had ignited. The plume of fire had been huge.

Having finished his iced tea, he headed for the back. The first sight that awaited him was the burned-out mesquite tree. That tree had probably been there a hundred years and then in one night – gone.

He pulled the trash barrel back from the hole and placed it in its normal trash burning place. Then, slowly, inexorably, he tiptoed to the hole. He approached it as if it were a wild animal. The beating the hole had given him the night before was still fresh in his mind. He did not want a repeat.

There were charred bits around the lip of the hole but other than that, all looked as it had always looked. Ron tried leaning over the hole. He looked deep into the darkness beyond. Nothing presented itself. It was too dark.

Now Ron was nothing if not curious. He would brag to his friends that if he hadn't opened a gas station, he might have been a nuclear physicist or bigfoot researcher. Ron went back to the station to get something.

When Ron returned, he held a broom handle that had been fitted with a wad of toilet paper at one end. He had dipped the paper in old car oil. Ron placed the makeshift torch between his knees and lit it on fire with a match.

He proceeded by throwing the torch into the hole. He wouldn't wait long for the result. A massive tower of flame vomited from the hole. It flew thirty feet in the sky or more.

“That’s it!” Ron had an epiphany. He had to tell Mae. Into town he went.

It not being even nine AM yet, Mae’s bar was closed. Ron rapped on the window in front. After a couple of minutes, the front door of the bar creaked open. Just a bit to allow one to see without being seen.

“Do you know what time it is!” Mae had been roused from her sleep.

“We’ve got it!” Ron was excited.

“Got what?”

“Our Ball of String!”

Mae looked at her friend. “Good night.” Mae closed the bar door.

One Month Later...

“Just take any seat you like.” Ron handed the customer his change.

Ron strolled out of the gas station to the arena he had built in the back. There, in a semicircular arrangement were his bleachers, made by his own hand. The stands were packed today. Word of “The Devil’s Fountain” had reached far and wide and folks were arriving daily from all kinds of weird places. Today there was a couple from Kyoto in attendance.

Mae had built a smaller version of her bar in the parking lot next to the gas station. She had hired a bartender to mix and serve the drinks and she took the time to relax a bit.

Mae saw her friend and crossed over to meet him. "Nice day for a cold beer!" Mae smiled.

"Indeed." Ron hugged his friend. "A couple of years like today and we can retire!" They laughed.

Now Ron had rigged a system of ignition for his 'Wonder of the Underworld'. He had run a thick power cord wire from the light switch in the garage under the ground about one foot. The 'sparking' end of the cord was wrapped around a metal spoon on one lead and a metal fork on the other. He had placed the eating utensils just wide enough apart that they would generate an electrical arc between them at over 35,000 degrees Fahrenheit. It was hot enough to weld steel if he had wanted.

The fork and spoon assembly he dropped deep into the hole. When he flicked on the light switch in the garage, he sparked the flames in the hole that caused the fountain of fire that he had dubbed 'The Devil's Fountain'. Adults and kids alike would scream with delight at the effect.

Ron powered up the PA system. He had to build the anticipation. The more he built the suspense, the more the crowd liked it. He pulled the microphone close.

"Ladies and Gentlemen." The crowd fell to a hush.

"It's another beautiful evening in sunny Nevada! The Fountain should be coming very soon."

The audience to Satan's effluent of flame and fire went all atwitter with that. Dads exhorted kids to focus on the hole. Moms put down their margaritas to better experience this once in a lifetime event.

Ron watched the crowd. He knew from experience to let each phase of his little spiel play out before going on to the next. "I hear some rumblings..." Ron clicked on the low-level rumbling sound he had recorded from a far-off thunder storm. It shook the speakers in the outside auditorium.

The crowd froze in fear at the rumbling. Children hugged their parents tight.

"I feel it's coming!" Ron put his best vibrato on this part.

The crowd gasped as one.

Ron threw the switch.

Now Ron had done this bit time and time again for almost a month now. Every time it had gone without mishap. The crowds that came had left fully satisfied that they had experienced something they would tell their grandkids. Heck, they would tell everyone.

Today was different. Different in a very important way. What Ron had theorized as a natural gas source for the flame fountain was, in actuality, a gasoline supplied inferno. The old and rusting underground tanks of his gas station had been leaking gasoline for years. This small chain hydrocarbon river had flowed underground and made its way to the sink hole.

When Ron fired the fountain, he was setting off a combustion of gasoline and air.

What Ron further failed to realize, is that given his recent success he had ordered a fresh delivery of gasoline to replenish the supply he had sold to his guests. That delivery had been completed just that morning. More gasoline in the tanks mean more pressure in the tanks. The resultant pressure of the tanks had increased the flow of gasoline to the sink hole.

So, the fountain that came out of the sink hole when Ron flipped the switch was much larger than his normal thirty-foot flame. This one reached into the hundreds. The crowd got their money's worth that day for sure. Adults and kids alike oooed and ahhhed at the display of unbridled exothermic reaction. But their delight at the display would be short lived. The plume of raging fire had 'bits' in it.

Now those bits that were now falling to the ground from the fountain were just unburned pieces of Ron's trash from the past few years that had been thoroughly soaked in gasoline. When they hit the ground, and they all would eventually hit the ground, they acted like a sort of napalm. They were hot and burning and they stuck to whatever they landed upon.

The saving grace of that day was that there was a cool Nevada night breeze blowing from the stands toward the gas station. This wind probably saved them all from any loss of life. The moving cooler air pushed the burning bits of trash that landed on the roof and exterior walls of the wooden gas station building.

Ron marveled at the speed with which the station burst into flame. The napalm trash bits sprinkled everywhere and

that amount of accelerant caused the wood, that had been dried by years in the Nevada desert, to almost immediately combust.

In minutes the gas station was consumed by the fire. But the disaster was only just beginning. After the fire burned the station to the ground, it decided to ignite the gas pumps that were fueled by the massive tanks below ground. What was already an impressive fire bloomed into an unmitigated conflagration.

Nothing escaped the grip of the licking flames. Mae's bar was consumed. The stands by the sink hole vanished. There was no calling the fire department. It would have taken them an hour to get there.

The spectators to the debacle, having raced to their cars and exited the area early on, watched with a mixture of amazement and sadness – but from a distance. Most recorded the sight on cell phones and posted for the world to enjoy the spectacle.

Ron would spend the night sitting on the ground beside his former gas station. He didn't talk. He refused to be consoled.

The next day ...

The fire had died down and Ron's inspection of the disaster revealed it to be a total loss. Nothing of his former life was left unburned. Everything, including Ron himself, smelled of smoke and burned plastic. He hadn't slept all night. He needed a trip to Mae's.

Mae was busy packaging up the rest of her liquor when Ron arrived.

"Pick up that one." Mae indicated a box that Ron was to carry.

The pair took their boxes out back to an awaiting vintage Cadillac convertible. The car was in mint condition with its original turquoise paint. They put the boxes in the massive trunk along with other of Mae's worldly possessions.

"You leavin'?" Ron asked the obvious.

"Ain't nothin' to stay for any more."

Ron nodded his head.

"Well I guess that's it." Mae closed the trunk lid. "I got a seat for you up front?"

Ron stood for a moment. He bowed his head. There truly wasn't anything left for either of them here. He moved to the passenger side door and got in the car.

Mae fired the engine and put her in 'Drive'. She pulled around the back of the stores and onto Main Street. They cruised past the boarded-up shops that were covered in dust. She turned onto the highway.

“You know what we need?” Ron broke the silence, the reverie, the saying good bye.

“Shutup Ron.”