



"The Broken Spy" (a modified excerpt from *Now is th Tim*) first appeared in *Spontaneous Spirits Magazine*.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This work makes use of film language to describe action as if it's unfolding on a screen. I call pieces written in this style *novies* (novel + movie = *novie*).

Imagine we're watching a movie, and it begins with sounds of coughing, rattling pans and birdsong.

Fade in on a campground. A log fire burns in the middle of a trampled area a hundred feet across. Lean-tos, patched tents and sleeping bags are scattered here and there. Morning sunlight and long shadows.

People go about their morning routines. Some cook at the fire, some wash in a creek beside the campground, and some are trotting off to the woods that surround the camp on the other three sides.

Ripley Pugnature drops his backpack to the ground and sits on one of the large rocks that ring the fire. Rip is six-foot-two and about two hundred pounds. Thirty-five years old. He has brown hair and wears a T-shirt, jeans and cowboy boots.

Arlo is seated on a rock close to Rip's. Arlo's young, black, skinny and shaggy. He drinks from a tin cup as he studies two other shaggy men, Basil and Dong, moving around on the other side of the fire. Basil is tall and Caucasian, Dong is short and Vietnamese.

Arlo glances at Rip. "So you're from south of here, Gipper?"

"Yeah. And it's Ripley. Pugnature. But call me Rip. You said your name's Arlo?"

"Yeah, I'm... Lookit! Dong put a cactus pad in Basil's bag."

Rip sees Dong walking away from a dirty orange sleeping bag.

"A cactus? Why'd he do that?"

"Because he's going to hell."

Arlo points to two women at the creek. One's washing out the mouth of the other with a bar of soap.

"Those're Washippers. They wash the offending parts of their members' bodies in the creek. And those people over there are Methodists. With an A. They practice multiplication tables because the Bible says to go forth and multiply. Happy group, except for one divisionist."

A tall man comes out of a tent near the creek. He's about fifty-five, gaunt and has long gray hair and whiskers. The hem of his filthy gray robe brushes the ground as he walks toward the water. He smiles serenely at the people he passes.

"There's Guru Tawler," Arlo says. "It's his place. They say it used to be one of the biggest ranches in central Texas. He inherited it and lets people live here so we can worship the way we want." Arlo looks at Rip. "What about you? You religious? Trying to get into heaven?" Rip shakes his head and Arlo says, "Good, because it's almost full. And Basil and Dong and me believe what the Bible says about heaven having room for a hundred and forty-four thousand angels. We each have the same vision, too . . . that we'll be the last one in. But that's not possible, is it, for all of us to be the last one? So I got to do what I can to squeeze them out, make sure they don't get my place. And they try to . . . Chill. It's Basil."

Basil approaches. He's carrying a log and acts as if he's about to say something to Arlo, but then he drops the log on Arlo's foot. Arlo jumps up from his rock. He grabs his foot and hops around.

Basil runs off laughing. "You're thinking bad thoughts!" he calls back to Arlo. "You're not going to heaven!"

Arlo rubs his foot and looks at Rip. "I'm not thinking bad thoughts, but I'll get him later." He rubs his stomach. "Right now I need to eat. Let's

go shopping.”



Rip and Arlo are in the woods, foraging among the cactus, grass and trees. Rip’s talking.

“I was a mechanic but they laid me off and my wife got mad. She said she’d miss the job’s benefits . . . insurance and five days a week away from me. So we got divorced and I took off hitch-hiking.”

A couple of armed men wearing camo fatigues appear in the brush ahead of Rip and Arlo. Arlo waves to them.

“Church of the Probable Cause,” he tells Rip. “Make sure they always see you.”

Arlo bends down and picks up a rock. He spins around and throws it hard into a nearby cedar bush. There’s a yelp, followed by a stream of angry Vietnamese. Dong’s rubbing his head when he steps out from behind the bush. He shakes his fist at Arlo, then walks off, still jabbering angrily. Arlo calls after him. “I don’t understand you, Dong, but Jesus does! You just talked your way out of heaven!”

Arlo bends down again and pulls a plant out of the ground. He nibbles on the roots and talks to Rip.

“I used to be like Dong, until I found Jesus. I was a sinner. A sex addict. But now I just shake my head in disgust when I flip through a porno magazine.”

Rip looks around and sees a tall bush about twenty feet away. He goes to it and cozies up to its leaves so he doesn’t expose himself as he unzips his pants. He pees, but something doesn’t sound right, and when he looks down he sees his urine spattering the toe of a big black boot.

He looks more closely at the bush and notices an eye-level tunnel running into the foliage. A pair of angry eyes is glaring at him from the other

end of the tunnel.

Rip gasps and zips up as he backs away. He rejoins Arlo.

“You know,” he whispers, “there’s something funny about that bush over there.”

Arlo looks at the bush and chuckles. He speaks in a low voice. “That’s our government spy. Keep an eye on him and I’ll go tell Captain Hitzfeldt. Have a snack while you wait.”

Arlo hands his half-eaten plant to Rip and hurries off.



A man in camo fatigues is standing at the bush and tying a tin can in front of the tunnel through the leaves. The can is shiny silver and on a short string. The man looks this way and that, avoiding eye contact with the bush. When the can is secured and dangling, the man turns and trots off.

He joins a half-dozen other men gathered about fifty feet away. Each one’s wearing fatigues and a sidearm. Rip and Arlo watch from a distance.

All the armed men but one line up side by side and come to attention. The man in charge begins his inspection.

Captain Hitzfeldt is fifty, trim and medium height. He’s dressed in fatigues and the hair under his cap is short and gray. He moves down the line and barks at his men to button shirts and suck in guts. The men obey. Hitzfeldt finishes his inspection and addresses the group.

“All right! The can hanging from that bush is your enemy, or ‘adversary!’ Note that the bush is backed by an oak tree, which will stop any round passing through the bush! I do not want collateral civilian damage on this exercise! Abernathy on the firing line!”

Abernathy steps forward and pulls his pistol

from his holster. He aims at the can dangling from the bush, takes his time sighting, and fires. A twig on top of the bush snaps as the bullet overshoots.

Hitzfeldt gets in Abernathy's face.

"The target is the can, not the cumulonimbus formation above the can! Holster your weapon, soldier! Next up, Constantine!"

Constantine steps forward and draws his pistol, and as he does the bush begins to tremble. Hitzfeldt notices this, wets his finger and sticks it in the air.

"A breeze is picking up. Consider your windage."

Several men take turns firing. Each misses the can but clips a branch at the top of the bush. The bush continues to shake. Hitzfeldt gets angrier and angrier and finally pops.

"You bunch of spastics! I want all weapons holstered!"

The men holster their side arms while Hitzfeldt kneels down and opens a long case that's on the ground. He straightens up holding a .50 caliber rifle. He unfolds the fore end bipod and sets the rifle on the ground, then he takes a huge scope from the case and talks to the men as he attaches the scope to the gun. His voice is loud enough to be heard at the bush.

"Let me take care of that can with my trusty ol' fifty caliber, then we'll practice our marching!"

Hitzfeldt turns the gun so it's pointed at the bush, and he drops to the ground. He stretches out on his belly and raises the rifle butt to his shoulder. We see a pair of bugged-out eyes magnified through the scope.

Hitzfeldt takes his time aiming. He waggles the gun barrel, clicks the hammer on an empty chamber, mutters, loads the gun, wipes something from his eye, aims again.

The shot roars, and there's a faint yelp from the bush, which sways back and forth a bit but remains standing. The can's untouched. Hitzfeldt jumps up, angry, and begins breaking down the rifle and packing it away.

"Damn scope! All right! Marching practice then Lexicology! Take over, Martinez!"

Martinez shouts, "Ri' face," "Hut-hut," and so on. The men march off. Hitzfeldt picks up his rifle case and follows. Arlo resumes foraging. Rip looks at the bush with the can on it, then he follows Arlo.



It's nighttime, and about fifty people are gathered around the campfire. Murmuring voices and calls of night creatures mix with the crackling of the flames. Arlo's seated on one of the large rocks. Rip is sitting on the ground next to him and chewing.

"Yeah," Arlo says to Rip, "I was a sex slave for a week. I would've got away the second day, but Satan made me tell her the knots were coming loose." He looks across the fire. "Lookit! Remember how Dong put that cactus in Basil's sleeping bag?"

Rip looks and sees Basil getting into the dirty orange bag. He slides halfway in, then he stops, screams and jumps out. He shakes a fist at Dong.

"*They're* not going to heaven," Arlo chuckles.

Martinez comes in from reconnoitering. Hitzfeldt is standing by the fire with a couple of his men and he returns Martinez' salute.

"*Sir*," Martinez says, "the bush is gone, or 'departed,' *sir*! Nothing there but a wet spot on the ground and some blood from where you nicked his ear, *sir*!"

Rip swallows what he's chewing and says, "Excuse me Mr., I mean, *Captain* Hitzfeldt, but wasn't it dangerous to shoot at that man?"

Hitzfeldt looks at Rip, suspicious, but then he relaxes and clears his throat.

“The Church of the Probable Cause, the *short* history. After the Army I became a cop, then a detective, then one day I was investigating a murder and found a gun secreted inside a hollowed-out dictionary. And when the judge asked me later if there was probable cause to look in the dictionary, I told him there was, because people have been using words to justify murder for thousands of years, or ‘millennia.’” Hitzfeldt’s men murmur. He waits for them to quiet down, then he continues. “And when I said that, about words being used to justify murder, I suddenly realized the best way to defend yourself in this life is with an education. Well, with that and a gun. So I founded my church and began learning a new word every day. I started going to the shooting range every day too, and I’m now an articulate and expert marksman. So are my men. They *meant* to miss that agent today, and *I* meant to nick his ear. Now maybe he’ll quit spying on us and go away.”

Rip starts to say something but doesn’t. He shrugs and nods.

“You going to finish that?” Arlo asks.

He points to Rip’s hand. Rip looks at it and says, “Yeah. It’s the only meat I’ve had all day.”

He lifts a half-eaten lizard to his mouth and tears at it with his teeth. The tail whips back and forth.



The camp stirs in the morning light. Coughing, rattling pans, birdsong.

Rip is stretched out on the ground, in his sleeping bag, asleep. The lizard tail dangles from a corner of his mouth. He stirs at the sound of approaching footsteps and opens his eyes to see a pair of boots *crunching* past his head. He watches them move away, toward the fire.

The boots belong to agent Gerdus. He’s young, freckly, gangly and dressed in jeans and a T-shirt.

One of his ears is bandaged. He sets the bedroll he's carrying on the ground near the fire, then he squats and looks around.

Arlo is already up. He, Basil and Dong are all perched on rocks around the fire, spaced as far as they can get from one another. Arlo sips from his tin cup.

Rip walks up to the fire, yawning, and stands beside Arlo. Hitzfeldt and his men walk up to the fire. Others approach. Gerdus nods and says "Good morning" to people, but no one answers. Tension, sidelong glances, then Hitzfeldt addresses Gerdus.

"What's your appellation, son?"

"My . . . Oh, my name? Uh, Smith. I mean, Jones. No, my name is . . ."

Hitzfeldt interrupts. "Are you religious, Joan Smith?"

"Uh, sure. And my name is . . ."

But Hitzfeldt and his men aren't listening. They've turned away and are huddled together.

Rip stands by the fire yawning and scratching. Arlo offers him his tin cup.

"Cuppa mud?"

Rip takes the cup, sips, and spits.

Arlo looks puzzled. "Too much dirt?"

Hitzfeldt and his men finish their conference, and Hitzfeldt addresses Gerdus. "We want you in our church, Joan, but first you have to go through the initiation. Wait here while we prepare things."

Hitzfeldt and his men hustle away, across the creek and into the brush. Rip looks at the creek and rubs the stubble on his chin.

"I'm going to shave."

He walks off as Gerdus asks Arlo, "What's the initiation like?"

"I don't know, but can we watch?"



Hitzfeldt's men lead Gerdus, blindfolded, across a clearing to an oil drum upended beneath a huge

oak tree. Rip and Arlo tag along. The barrel's rusted and has a weathered piece of plywood on top of it. The board overhangs the sides.

"All right," Hitzfeldt says to Gerdus when they reach the barrel. "You need to climb up, or 'ascend' onto this altar so you can take your pledge."

Gerdus is helped up onto the plywood platform, and when he's standing in place on the barrel, Hitzfeldt and his men run off. Rip and Arlo follow. They all run until they're about a hundred feet from the barrel, then Hitzfeldt stops and turns. The others do too. Hitzfeldt shouts to Gerdus.

"Take off your blindfold!"

Gerdus removes the blindfold and is surprised he's standing on a barrel. He starts to jump down.

"Halt!" Hitzfeldt yells.

Gerdus stays where he is.

"We know you're a fed!" Hitzfeldt yells, "and that's a *bomb* you're standing on! One of those fertilizer bombs that homegrown terrorists spend all their time making! The board under your feet is a pressure plate, and if there's any change in weight now, you'll blow up, or 'explode!'"

Gerdus tenses and stands motionless.

"Stay there!" Hitzfeldt yells. "We'll be back to disarm the bomb when we decide what to do with you!"

Hitzfeldt and his men chuckle as they walk away. Arlo turns over a rock and finds a grub. Rip looks at Gerdus, hesitates, then begins foraging.



Night again, and people are gathered around the campfire, same as the night before. Rip is sitting on the ground and chewing. He glances at Hitzfeldt, who's chatting with his men. Lightning flickers far off in the night sky.

"Captain?" Rip says. Hitzfeldt looks at him. "Shouldn't you do something about that bomb before it rains?"

Rip gestures toward another flicker of lightning, and when he raises his arm he has the tail end of a half-eaten rattlesnake in his hand. The rattles buzz.

“Relax,” Hitzfeldt says. “That’s a barrel of dirt the fed is standing on. He just needs to think for a while. We’ll let him go tomorrow. Besides, it won’t rain tonight.”



Darkness and howling wind, then lightning and thunder. Streaks of rain cut sideways in the night. The wind shreds tents and tears lean-tos apart. Utter chaos.



Late morning, and the camp’s getting back to normal. Tents and lean-tos have been re-erected. Wet clothes and sleeping bags are spread everywhere, drying in the sun.

Guru Tawler has moved his tent back from the swollen creek. He finishes tying a rope to a stake and speaks to some kids.

“The storm has passed and thou art spared, my children.”

Rip is wringing out his sleeping bag. Arlo watches impatiently.

“Come on. Rain brings out earthworms.”

“What about that agent? Did Hitzfeldt go to check on him?”

“No, they went the other way. But we can check.”



Gerdus is seated on top of the barrel and gripping the board beneath him. The huge oak tree that was spread above him the day before has been split by lightning. It’s fallen away from him in two halves that are charred and smoking.

Gerdus is in shock. His eyes are bloodshot and glazed. He gibbers and drools. Rip and Arlo stand looking at him for a moment, then Rip asks,

“What should we do?”

“Take him back to camp, I guess.”

Arlo goes to work prying one of Gerdus’ hands free of the plywood. Rip works on the other. Gerdus continues to make his muted little gibbering sounds even when Rip breaks a pinky finger with a *snap*. Arlo looks at the pinky, then at Gerdus’ blank face.

“Man, that’s the worst case of job-related stress I ever saw.”



Back in the camp, people are gathered around Gerdus. He’s sitting on a rock near the fire, gibbering and drooling. Rip is splinting the broken pinky with sticks and string. Hitzfeldt and his men look on. A woman glances disapprovingly at Hitzfeldt.

“Hey,” he says, “it’s not *my* fault he couldn’t stand a little rain.”

Rip says, “I think he might have lost his mind for good. I mean, if a broken finger didn’t pull him out of it, nothing will.”

He finishes with the splint and an old woman steps forward.

“We Washippers can use this young man,” she says. “One of our brethren touched himself sinfully last night, and the defiled member must be washed.”



Gerdus and the old woman are at the creek. She’s leading him away from a bare-assed man standing with his back to us. He’s lowered his pants to mid thigh. One of Gerdus’ hands is covered with soapy lather.

“Let him *finish!*” the bare-assed man yells.



Later, Hitzfeldt is sitting on a rock by the campfire and cleaning a pistol. Gerdus stands nearby, drooling. Hitzfeldt looks at him, then he turns to one of his men.

“How long since we’ve had moving target

practice?”



Gerdus clomps across a small clearing bordered by thick cedar bushes. He's waving a tin can above his head and gibbering excitedly. Drool flows from his lower lip like water from a faucet. He reaches a cedar, turns and starts back across the clearing.

Hitzfeldt's group is clustered behind a shooter. The man tracks sideways with his pistol as he aims. We hear Gerdus gibbering in the distance. The shooter fires, shakes his head and steps aside.

Another man moves up, aims and fires. Hitzfeldt and his men flinch. Gerdus' gibbering stops and we hear the tin can hit the ground.



One of Hitzfeldt's men is bandaging Gerdus' hand. The two end joints on the index finger have been shot off. Gerdus now has a broken pinky on one hand and a stubby index finger on the other. Arlo looks on as the first aid is completed.

“Can I borrow him now?”



Arlo glances around to make that sure he and Gerdus are alone in the brush, then he puts a shovel in Gerdus' hands and helps him drive the blade into an ant bed.

“Just shovel the dirt in here.”

Arlo holds up Basil's orange sleeping bag and spreads open the mouth. Gerdus lifts some dirt, dumps it in the bag, repeats the process.

Ants swarm up the handle of the shovel and onto Gerdus' arms, but he doesn't react. He continues to work, like a zombie.



Nighttime. Everyone's gathered around the campfire but no one's talking. The flames crackle and Gerdus wheezes. He's sitting on the ground, leaned back against one of the rocks, facing the

fire. His body is swollen and he's covered with bumpy ant bites.

Wheeze.

"He's getting worse," Rip says.

An old man walks up to Gerdus for a closer look. "He could breathe better if you wedged his mouth open," he tells Rip. "Jam a stick between the teeth in back."

Rip grabs a stick from the ground and approaches Gerdus. He pushes down on his chin, to open the mouth, and inserts the stick. When he backs away the stick stays in place and Gerdus' mouth remains open. He's breathing easier.

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Morning. People around the fire yawn and stretch. Gerdus is asleep but still leaned back against his rock. The stick still protrudes from his mouth. His swelling has gone down and there's no sign of labored breathing.

Arlo is sitting on a rock and drinking from his tin cup. Rip stands next to him. The old man from the night before walks up to Rip.

"That stick did the trick. Why don't you take it out now?"

Rip goes to Gerdus and pulls on the stick, gently, trying not to wake him. The stick doesn't come out. Rip puts his hand on Gerdus' forehead, for bracing, and pulls harder. The stick doesn't move. So Rip sets his feet and *yanks*. The stick pulls free with a *crack*. The upper half of a molar falls into Gerdus' lap. His eyes pop open and fix on Rip's face. Rip picks up the tooth and examines it.

Arlo walks up with his tin cup. "How 'bout a hot cuppa mud?" he asks Gerdus.

Arlo tilts Gerdus' head back and pours steaming mud into his mouth. Tears roll down Gerdus' cheeks as he looks at Rip.

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Hitzfeldt sits on a rock by the fire and studies

Gerdus. The agent's standing at the fire. Or rather, *in* the fire. One of his boots is in the embers and smoking. His arm's extended and he holds a stick with a frog impaled on it above the flames.

While Hitzfeldt watches, a boy runs up, takes the stick and runs off with the cooked frog. Hitzfeldt turns to one of his men.

"We need to get rid of the fed."



Hitzfeldt and his men walk Gerdus to the side of a dirt road. A gate's behind them. A plywood "TAWLER RANCH" sign is wired to the gate.

Gerdus has a cardboard sign strung around his neck. "BROKEN — RETURN TO WASHINGTON DC." Hitzfeldt turns Gerdus so he'll be facing oncoming traffic, then he sculpts the agent's face into a smile. The smile stays in place, and so does his arm when Hitzfeldt extends it to the side of his body. Hitzfeldt lifts the thumb on the outstretched arm and Gerdus stands like a statue in a hitchhiking pose. He drools but doesn't move. Hitzfeldt and his men start back toward the gate.

