



THE INTUBATED BREATH OF TRUTH

At bedtime the dark stretch of land outside Pep's window had the usual three pinpoints of light. Then he saw a new one. It started out dim and grew to a steady glow on the other side of the valley. He couldn't tell what was causing it, so he decided to investigate. He pulled his overalls on and grabbed his boots.

There was just enough moonlight for him to make out the footpath that led to the low-water dam at Wakeman's Creek. He splashed across and then stopped to put on his boots. The new light was still there and still unidentifiable, but brighter now that he was closer.

He took the zigzag path up from the dam. Half-way to the highway he came upon old Miz Crabbe. She was huffing along fine under her own power but he offered her a supporting arm anyway. She rejected it with a swing of her cane and he pushed on.

When he reached the highway he headed for the light. It looked to be about a half mile away. He sidestepped potholes and weedy cracks until he arrived at the source, a travel trailer, and while he stood taking things in he marveled at the size of the crowd that had gathered.

He counted eighteen people. That was more than he'd ever seen in one place at one time. They said twenty-three lived in the town of Mumfree, nine miles down the road, and beyond that was Philadelphia, with more than four hundred. Trying to picture four hundred people in one place made his head swim.

The trailer was parked on the shoulder of the

highway, and most of the light came from a half-dozen torches on the side facing the road. The torches were on long rods that had been driven into the pavement in a wide semicircle. Mr. Pizeney told the crowd that the torches used to be called tikis. "Don't know why," he said, "but then I don't know why my wife calls us happy, either." Mrs. Pizeney gave him a punch on the shoulder and people laughed.

Four big dray horses were hitched to the trailer. They stood with their leather loosened and their feed bags on. The trailer was kind of like the one that Pep lived in, but his rested on rotted rubber tires. The one at the side of the highway was fitted with big wood-spoked wagon wheels.

In addition to the tiki torches a pair of oil lamps provided some light. They hung from swinging arms high up on the side of the trailer, front and back. The space between the lamps was painted with a banner-like sign that said THE INTUBATED BREATH OF TRUTH. Pep sounded out the words to himself and wondered what they meant.

A wide rectangular opening took up most of the trailer's side. A roll-up shutter covered the hole, and as Pep watched, the shutter rattled up to reveal a hunchback in a red jacket with brass buttons. The man had frizzy black hair and a long scar on one of his cheeks. He latched the shutter open and pulled a black curtain sideways across the hole.

A moment later a door slammed on the other side of the trailer and the hunchback emerged from around the back. He was carrying a crate of bottles. Pep watched him set the crate on the ground and lower a countertop that was folded up beneath the opening on the trailer's side. The counter ran the width of the opening, and when it was resting on the support chains at the two ends it looked solid. The hunchback placed the crate on the counter and then went back around the trailer.

The crowd pushed forward to look at the bottles. Pep got close enough to see that they had labels on the front and corks in the tops, but they seemed to be empty.

The hunchback returned and placed a second crate on the counter, then he asked who hadn't received a number for the drawing yet. Pep raised his hand and the man gave him a slip of paper. A large 19 was scrawled on it in pencil. Miz Crabbe came huffing up behind Pep, and the hunchback handed her a slip. "That's the last of the numbers," he announced to the crowd. "Hold onto them for the drawing at the end of the show. The winner will get one free bottle of The Intubated Breath of Truth." Somebody reached for a bottle and the hunchback said, "You can handle those but don't remove the corks. Improper use could result in cerebral infarction. The professor will address you shortly."

"A cerebral infarction's like a stroke," Mrs. Haywood said loudly enough for everyone to hear as the hunchback disappeared again behind the trailer. People passed a couple of the bottles around but were careful not to touch the corks. The labels didn't give much information so everyone had a different opinion about what The Intubated Breath of Truth might be.

Whatever the bottles contained, Pep wished he had something he could swap for one. It was too bad about the blight on the corn. He could barely survive on what he grew, and there wasn't enough to trade. Still though he might win the free bottle in the drawing. He shoved the slip of paper with the number on it into the deepest pocket of his overalls, to keep it safe.

The curtain on the side of the trailer slid open to reveal another curtain farther in. It too was black, and between it and the trailer's open side were two large wooden puppets. They hung sway-

ing on each side of the opening. The puppets were bent forward slightly and seemed to be staring down at a wooden stool between them. Pep had seen pictures of how people used to dress, and one puppet, the male, was wearing what could have been a doctor's white coat or a barber's smock. It was probably a doctor's coat because the female wore blue nurse's scrubs. The puppets were pretty beat up. The male's long gray face had several chips of paint missing, and the female's hooked nose had been broken off at the tip.

A man in a green suit stepped into view inside the trailer. He was thin and pale and had shoulder-length gray hair. He crouched to keep from bumping his head as he walked to the stool in the center of the stage area.

He settled onto the stool, looked out at the crowd and adjusted a red scarf that was looped around his neck. The ends of the scarf passed through a gold throat clasp shaped like a beetle. The beetle and the man's dark eyes danced with reflected tiki light.

"Good evening," he said, spreading his hands in a welcoming gesture. "I am Professor Emerick J. Alexander." His voice was raspy and not very loud. Pep and the others inched closer to hear better. "I debated which play to present tonight. We could have staged a production about the SEERS pandemic, or World War Three. . ."

"The Chinese Fire Drill!" Mr. Skokie yelled, and people laughed.

"Quite," the professor smiled. "But for tonight I want to reach farther back in time. I want to present a play that's close to my heart because the events described in it led me to develop *The Intubated Breath of Truth*."

The hunchback came around from the back of the trailer. He carried a large tray that was covered with a black cloth. The crowd made way

for him and he set the tray in the center of the fold-down counter.

The professor thanked him and produced a stick that was about two feet long. It had a black claw on each end. They looked like dried buzzard claws. One was spread open and one was closed. He reached through the side of the trailer with the open claw and hooked the cloth that covered whatever was on the tray. He pulled the cloth away and a couple of people at the front of the crowd let out little gasps.

Pep leaned forward to get a better look and saw a widemouthed gallon jar about three-fourths full of purple liquid. Eight pieces of black rubber tubing were attached to the top of the jar's black metal lid. Each tube was about a foot long, and the way they hung down made them look like spider legs hugging the jar. A much longer tube passed through the center of the lid. One end ran to the bottom of the jar and the rest was coiled on the tray.

The hunchback began inserting the spider leg tubes into some bottles that were on the tray. The bottles were like those in the crates. After he inserted a tube in one he'd stand it up beside the jar and move on to the next.

As the hunchback worked, the professor undid his scarf. It fell away to reveal that he was clean shaven from his Adam's apple up but had a strip of mussed gray hair across the apple. The strip was about an inch wide and ran four or five inches side to side.

The professor produced a small glass jar, removed the lid and dipped two fingers in. The jar contained wax, which he rubbed into the mustache. Then he used a little comb to part the hair in the middle and rake it to the sides.

When he put the comb away Pep saw that there was a hole just below the mustache. Mrs.

Haywood turned slightly to tell the people behind her that the hole in the throat was from a tracheotomy. "They put a breathing tube in." The professor twisted the ends of his mustache into upswept tips as Pep studied the hole. It looked like a little mouth, a sideways slit with little lips top and bottom.

The hunchback finished putting the eight tubes in their eight bottles and then nodded to the professor. He leaned forward and picked up the long tube that led from the jar. He lifted its end to his throat and inserted it in the hole there.

He pinched his nose shut, breathed in through his mouth, then closed his lips and exhaled into the tube. Bubbles shot from the end of it at the bottom of the jar. They rose through the purple liquid, and things had gotten so quiet that Pep could hear the little pops they made breaking the surface.

After the professor had inhaled and exhaled several times the hunchback said, "This one's full," and pulled the spider leg from one of the bottles. He plugged it with a cork and then did another. The professor blew through the tube until all eight bottles were corked and lined up in front of the jar.

And then a gong sounded somewhere inside the trailer. The professor pulled the tube from his throat and dropped it to the counter. He looked out over the crowd and said, "Tonight, my friends, you will hear my testimony and watch our dramatization, and then afterwards you will receive an exceptional offer on The Intubated Breath of Truth. Simply make your purchase and then when you get home place your bottle on your bedside table. Remove the cork before you go to sleep and your dreams will be energized with the truth of my long-researched observations in all areas of history, science and mysticism."

The hunchback lowered the flame on one of the hanging lamps and asked for someone at the

other end of the counter to do the same. Monk Taub lowered the light, then the hunchback disappeared around the back of the trailer. When the professor heard the door close on the other side he looked out at the crowd and said, "Consider this the prologue to tonight's play. I want all of you to travel back with me to when Covid-19 first appeared in America. I was young and in the hospital at the time, recovering from a motorcycle accident, when the government said the country must prepare for a wave of death. Hospitals were told to clear out all non-Covid cases, and I don't know what would have become of me if I hadn't tested positive for Covid. They were fake of course, the tests, but my result was positive so I was allowed to stay where I was. And then one day I learned that the government paid hospitals a bonus of fifty-three thousand dollars for each Covid-related case they reported. And if they intubated a Covid patient they got a hundred thousand, something I learned after I awoke from a drug induced slumber. My jaw was wired shut from my accident so they'd cut a hole in my windpipe to insert their tube."

The professor paused to clear his throat, and Pep thought again how his voice was raspy, but in a soft way. It was smooth but ripply like the water running over the dam at Wakeman's Creek. It soothed you and drew you along with its sameness. And the professor's mustache danced when he spoke. His Adam's apple bounced up and down, and the mustache bounced with it. The bounce drew attention to the hole in his throat, which widened and flattened with the movement of the skin around it. The hole could have been a tiny mouth saying something too soft to hear.

Professor Alexander continued, his black eyes twinkling in the tiki light.

"Shortly after I was intubated I learned that

hospitals received three hundred and sixty thousand dollars for each Covid death they reported, so before my caretakers could maximize their profit on me I removed my tube and limped away into the night. My wounds healed quickly, but I decided to keep the one in my throat open, in case I should ever need it again for breathing.”

He paused again and looked at the unmoving female puppet. “What’d you say?” he asked it. He cocked his head like he was listening. “No my dear, I won’t shut up. My prologue is . . .”

The puppet jumped. People recoiled as it clattered and there were even a couple of screams. But then things settled down again and Pep figured the hunchback had jerked the puppet’s strings. The others realized the same thing and a little titter of embarrassment ran through the crowd.

“She’s eager to get started,” the professor said, smiling and twisting a tip of his mustache. “But before we begin the play I must say a word or two about the remarkable product you see before you.”

He used his clawed stick to reach out and tap the jar on the counter.

“This filtration device is the culmination of years of research. It produces a ninety-nine point nine percent pure version of The Intubated Breath of Truth. I first experimented on mice with The Breath, then on cats and dogs, and in each trial I detected what seemed to be a sharpening of the senses. But it was impossible to tell if the sharpening was an actual increase in intelligence, so finally I did a human trial. I tried The Intubated Breath of Truth on my assistant, and he gained more than forty IQ points.”

“It’s true!” the hunchback yelled from inside the trailer. “I used to think that manmade climate change was real!”

That got a big laugh from the crowd. The professor let the noise die down and then he con-

tinued. "As I said earlier, you will be able to buy your very own bottle of The Intubated Breath of Truth at the conclusion of tonight's play. Buy one bottle for yourself and one for a friend or loved one. It's what Jesus would have done for Buddha. And now, as the Bard might couplet, the prologue's done and the play must run!"

With surprising speed the professor got to his feet, grabbed his stool and exited to the side in a crouching dash.

A moment later the gong sounded and the puppets clattered to life. They bounced and twisted this way and that, then they settled down to a loose-jointed jitter. They faced each other and the female said, "Hi, Dr. Fauci," in a high, screechy voice. Her words were out of synch with the flapping of her jaw. "You seem excited today."

The male puppet, Dr. Fauci, gave a stiff full-bodied nod and said, "Indeed I am excited, Nurse Piglosi." His words were timed better to his jaw. "I just got some new numbers on that coronavirus I helped create. The one called Covid-19."

Fauci had a raspy voice. The professor was working him, and the hunchback was working Nurse Piglosi.

"Are the new numbers good?" Piglosi asked.

"Not very good in people's homes, but great in places where we control the environment. Patients in hospitals and nursing homes are dropping like flies."

Piglosi said, "We're doing well in the hospital where I work. The victims walk in under their own power, and we immediately put them on Remdesevir, an old cyanide drug that killed more than half the test subjects in its last trial. No telling how many we've killed since we began using it."

"Excellent," Fauci said. "The sedatives we're giving Covid patients are doing well too. The drugs

are the same that prisons use to suppress breathing during execution by lethal injection. Convicts take them and go on to die, and Covid patients go onto respirators.”

Piglosi let out a cackling, jaw-clacking laugh, then she said, “The respirators are my favorite part. We run the tube down the throat and turn the pressure up high to rupture the lungs. It’s like blowing up balloons until they pop.” Some people in the crowd grumbled but Piglosi pushed on. “We don’t want witnesses, so we don’t let friends or family visit the patients. They die alone, then we make internet videos of ourselves dancing while we wheel their bodies off to the morgue. Watch me shake my booty!”

She cackled again and did a spastic, clattering dance. Pep wondered if it was meant to be a joke, and he looked at the old people in the crowd. They all seemed to be upset. Miz Crabbe was even wiping a tear from an eye, so he supposed the stuff about the murders in the hospitals was true.

Nurse Piglosi exited the stage still dancing, and Dr. Fauci moved to the center. He faced the audience and said, “The Covid pandemic was a medical and social control experiment conducted by the United Nations. The damage the experiment did to humanity was incalculable. Among other things, the Covid shots’ mRNA technology reprogrammed cells to replicate the spike protein of HIV. This led to the breakdown of people’s immune systems, and over the course of three years we saw death rates jump by up to forty-four percent in the most heavily injected countries. Covid also initiated the era of worldwide mass starvation events. The pandemic began in 2020, and by 2023 more than eighty million people had starved to death because of things like lockdowns leading to a shortage of farm workers, disruptions to fertilizer shipments, and so on. The U.N. incor-

porated lessons learned from Covid into later depopulation events that would kill nearly eight billion people.”

Pep was fascinated by the play, but the rest of the crowd seemed to be growing restless. People shuffled their feet and began chatting here and there.

But all of that stopped when the stage lighting changed. A radiance appeared from above. Its source was hidden but the light bathed Dr. Fauci in a golden glow. He moved aside, looked up and said, “Lo, what thing is this?”

A new puppet descended on the other side of the stage. It was an angel with a sword in its hand and wings of aluminum foil. The foil glittered under the overhead light.

Fauci dropped to a kneeling position and said, “Is this a sign, or is it a judgment?”

“A judgment,” the angel said, hovering. “You must answer for the billions you poisoned.”

“I’ll answer but not apologize, praise be to Satan. My foul deed is done and cannot be undone.”

“Not true,” the angel said. “One shall appear who will bring The Intubated Breath of Truth. He will pass among the people and tell them this: Buy one bottle for yourself, and one for a friend or loved one. It’s what Jesus would have done for Buddha.”

With that the angel moved toward Fauci and lifted its sword. The sword came down on Fauci’s head, the light above snapped to blood red, and Fauci fell. The gong sounded as a hidden hand drew the curtain closed.

There was a scattering of applause and Miz Crabbe said that execution had been too good for the sons of bitches. Then the hunchback reappeared from behind the trailer and went to the counter.

It took a couple of minutes to settle on the

price for a bottle of The Breath, but after three eggs was agreed upon everybody knew it would be one for a hatful of root vegetables and two for a rabbit.

Pep didn't even have an ear of corn on him, but then he remembered the drawing for the free bottle. He asked which number was the winner.

The hunchback took a card from a pocket and held it up for the crowd to see. It was a white card with a big 19 written on it in pencil. "Number nineteen gets the free bottle," he said.

Pep couldn't believe his good luck. That was his number. He took the slip of paper from his pocket to double check, and sure enough it was nineteen.

He waved the slip above his head as he pushed forward to claim his prize. Mr. Pizeney offered half a rabbit for the bottle, but Pep said no and hustled away from the gathering. He couldn't wait to get home, to set the uncorked bottle beside his bed and let The Intubated Breath of Truth rise through his dreams. He was in such a rush that he forgot to remove his boots before he splashed across the dam at Wakeman's Creek.