

The Gold Nugget
by Tony Diem
For Mike

The smell of fresh paint still permeated the room as Mark Simmons got ready for bed in his new, quite unfurnished home just outside of Nevada City. Mark was mid-thirty, medium build, tall enough and had short, dark hair. He stayed active by walking with his dog and going to the gym. He spent the day running last minute errands before closing and getting the keys to his first house purchase. Mark managed to run to the Quick-n-Cheap to get some things for breakfast, and brought in the few things he could carry in his truck like a change of clothes, his sleeping pad and bag and disposable dishware.

Nevada City got its start as a gold mining town with the insurgence of the 49ers during California's Gold Rush. It is set in the Sierras with Ponderosa Pines and spruces interspersed. It survived as a living ghost town, and now booms as a tourist attraction and a center for high cultured artisans. This was Mark's new home. It was a far cry from the hustle and bustle of "The Valley", just north of Los Angeles, where he grew up, went to school and worked for the municipal water district.

Lying in bed, Mark enjoyed listening to the sounds of rustling pine trees outside his window, rather than the drone of the freeway he was so accustomed to. There was finally silence as sleep overtook him. He awoke to the sound of breaking twigs and crackling understory. There standing over his sleeping-bag-covered-feet was a grubby miner pulling a heavily laden mule through a grove of trees. As cloud cover darkened the moonlight that filled the room, the apparition vanished. Mark wasn't sure what he saw, but he wasn't all too sure if he was actually awake either. He scrunched up his fleece jacket pillow, seemingly blinked and the next thing he knew sunlight was beginning to fill the room.

The next morning Mark headed outside onto his porch to have some cereal, orange juice and take in the morning. His deck was only a few feet off the ground, small, but functional. His yard butted right up against forest service land and he could see some deer in a meadow off in the distance. He thought about what he saw last night. He couldn't help think of a scene from the Twilight Zone, where an unnamed man walks through a town alone and finds himself in a soda shop discussing his plight with himself in a mirror. "You remember Scrooge O' Buddy?" He asks his reflection. "It's what he said to that ghost Jacob Marley, he said 'you may be an undigested bit of beef. A crumb of cheese, a blot of mustard, a fragment of an undone potato. But there is more of gravy then of grave about you.' You must be. But now I've had it. I'd like to wake up now!" Mark felt the same way. It was that lousy microwaved burrito from the gas station last night, just a bit of indigestion, not a ghost. Mark thumped his sternum.

After eating he set out on the game trail he saw while leaning over the deck railing. It was well worn, and the opening into his yard was amassed with deer droppings. The trail made its way through the short forest to a meadow, then across mid-thigh high grass for several hundred yards into another wooded area. The trail climbed a bit more before reaching a small plateau in a grove of trees. Mark then came across an area devoid of forest debris where a ring of large rocks lay. Within it was another circle of rocks that were darkened and charred. There were also beer cans and wrappers strewn all around. Mark had come across some sort of hangout. He sat on one of the larger rocks and wondered what kids would talk about while a fire burned; they drank cheap beer, and listened to some music on a portable boom box. With the intention of coming up later to dispose of them, he gathered up the cans and collected up all the trash into the smaller ring, then headed back to his house.

For the next few days life was buzzing. Mark would be getting his moving truck to deliver his furniture, and his parents would be bringing Charlie, his five year old Aussie Shepard-Border Collie mix. He had started his new job at the water treatment plant. Things were good and he almost forgot all about the grubby old miner. But every so often he would pass some sort of business that used a 49er to attract tourism, causing Mark to stop and recall his dream. He questioned if it wasn't a ghost he saw that night. But always convinced himself it was only a dream.

He started his days now with a walk on his little deer trail with Charlie. Usually going a bit further each time, until he worked up to a nice little routine to get Charlie and himself some exercise. He bought a new bicycle, had it set up with racks and bags and enjoyed being able to ride his bicycle to work and make an occasional run into town for groceries or what have you.

After two months, his miner friend made another appearance at the foot of his bed. This time the miner stood there, looking over his shoulder and around at the trees that were amongst his settings. He petted the nose of the mule and asked it to keep an ear out. Mark sat up and watched him as he paced off some trees and seemed to scribble some notes on a piece of leather. When Mark closed his eyes to blink, he was gone. He again put it off as some sort weird lucid dream. Yeah that was the ticket, it was a lucid dream, one of those you can walk through in your mind. The next morning he got up as usual and went for his walk, the number twenty-seven floating around in his head for some reason.

A few days later while walking with Charlie, Mark started to notice how similar all his different walking trails seemed and how familiar he was with his own little trail, but how easily other trails nearby looked very much like

his own, and so much like each other. It was a wonder he never got lost he thought to himself. What made him realize this was that the trees and openings on his trail seemed eerily familiar, not necessarily because Charlie and he walked by them nearly every day, but more familiar even than that, they reminded him of something. He concluded that they looked like the Twin Thieves Trail, some 15 miles south. Although Charlie and he had only walked there once, he tried desperately to convince himself that this was why his trail seemed so familiar.

It was a loud thumping sound that woke him this time. Mark looked up to see the miner take several swings with his pickaxe into the ground at the foot of his bed. He watched as the miner grabbed the short spade from the mule and began clearing some of the felled trees and debris where he had been swinging the axe. Mark slowly pulled his covers back and got up and walked around the bed. He could feel the needles, twigs and understory at his feet. He was standing next to the miner when the mule snorted, startling both of them. As they both turned to look, Mark saw nothing but his dresser and wardrobe.

Mark knew he couldn't have been dreaming, it was all too real, the noises, the smell of the pine; but the window was open. The smell of wet soil; Charlie had been digging in the yard again. It was all too easy to explain away. A lucid dream, there couldn't be a ghost. He convinced himself that he read to many stories about ghost towns and mining camps and that what he saw was his imagination running aimlessly through all those memories. He decided he would go to the visitor center and see if he couldn't find out from someone about local folklore and historical characters.

"Interesting miner characters, the hillsides here have hundreds of stories son." The library assistant told him. He was an old school bus driver retired now and sorted books two days a week. Mr. Holden was squatty, what hair he had left was more salt then pepper and had a very stern voice, probably from settling kids down on busses all those years. "Son, I could tell you stories 'till your ears bled. There's Old Mule Head Jackson, Patsy Maybel, who dressed like a man, and swore better than any foul-mouthed fool I know. There are also gunslingers, no Wild Bills or Doc Holidays but we had our share of crooked card players, charlatans and two-bit madams. Any in particular you're interested in kid?"

"Not sure. How about the grubby miner type." Mark thumbed through a book on the table. "Why don't you start there."

"Ok, let's start there." Mr. Holden turned and walked toward the history section.

Mr. Holden went on to describe about half dozen grubby old miners that panned for gold, dug for gold and a few crazy ones that danced in the moonlight barefoot. But none of them really sounded like the intriguing man that was at the foot of his bed digging a hole.

BAM! The crash of dishes woke Mark up. He was startled by the clattering sound of a metal object hitting the ground. At first Mark thought it was one from his dish rack. Then he looked up and there was his grubby guest once again at the foot of his bed. The miner was picking up whatever it was he had dropped. Mark saw it was a gold pan, and that the miner was setting it inside another one that was already on the ground. Mark again got up and walked around the room, taking in the trees, the earthen smell of the freshly dug hole, and the worn odor of an unwashed miner. He looked for markings but couldn't make any out. Mark petted the stiff hairs of the mule that nuzzled his hand as he pressed down on the top of its head.

The minor reached into a leather bag on the side of the mule and pulled out a brown and worn rag. He crouched on one knee as he slowly unrolled it. Mark was eager to get a glimpse but couldn't as the miner suspiciously crowded over it concealing the object. He re-rolled the object into the rag, placed it into the gold pan, took the bottom pan and placed it on top of the other. With some twine he bundled the two together and leaned over and placed the object neatly into the hole.

Mark saw a drop of water hit the pan, realizing then that the minor was crying. Mark tried to look into his eyes, the minor began to rub the tears from his face, he slowly evaporated from Mark's sight.

By far this was the most time he had spent with his odd friend. Now he had to look further, deeper. He went back to the library only to find that Mr. Holden wasn't there. He asked around for someone else. Then the head librarian suggested going up to the cemetery and asking the caretaker. "His family, the Hermann's, have roots in the community from the first days of the gold rush. His great-grand-something set up a mining camp and general store in the days following the Sutter Mill discovery," she told him.

In his seventies, Robert Hermann lives above the Old Bernham Bar where the Hermann General Store stood over 150 years ago. Mark knocked on the door at the top of a narrow flight of stairs. Four stern raps, and he heard the creak of floorboards and the metallic squeal of the door handle turning.

"Can I help you?" Came the deep voice of the man in the doorway. Robert stood just over six feet, looked good for his age and had a comforting way about himself and spoke deliberately. A good looking grand father Mark thought to himself.

"I hope you can." Mark replied.

Robert asked Mark in. He fetched him a soda and listened as his visitor explained what it was he was looking for. Mark made up a story about seeing a picture of his grubby miner at an office somewhere. Robert seemed curious, and let Mark continue with some details that seemed more involved than just the thousand words a picture could tell.

While intently listening, Robert spoke up "The murder of Gold Dust Willie".

Mark looked at him. "What was that you said?"

"Your mystery man, sounds like William Evans. The locals called him Gold Dust Willie. He claims to have found a nugget the size of a pinecone. No one believed him, so they said he had spent too much time sniffing gold dust."

"Well, is it true? Did he. . .did he have a nugget?"

"No one knows son. Old Willie was killed, quite brutally. But I stand corrected, the only people to know the truth are Willie and the vermin who killed him."

Mark didn't want to ask, but it got the better of him. "How was he killed?"

"Uh, where did you say you lived?"

"I bought the Miller place, out on Dickenson."

"Oh, out by Willow Hollow. Didn't they just remodel it?"

"Uh? Yeah. It's out by Willow Hollow, and they just touched it up really." Replied Mark, before eagerly asking, "Why do you want to know where I live?"

"He was killed not too far from you. Just up the hillside there. The side of his head was cleaved in by his own pick axe." Robert grimaced as if receiving the blow himself. "No one really knows if he had the nugget or not. They never found the person who killed him, nor the nugget on his person or on his mule."

"What happened to the mule?"

"Actually, funny you asked, my great-granddad took it. Kept it and rented it out from time to time."

"Maggie." Mark whispered.

"What was that? How did you know the name of that mule?"

Frantically Mark thought of any number of reasons, he knew Maggie's name. "Oh, it was written on the back of the photo."

"So the name of the mule was on this photo, but not Willies? Son, I was born at night, but not--"

"I've seen him in my house. . .walking with her," Mark turned and tilted his head away from Robert. "Looking around and talking to her."

Robert raised an un-groomed eyebrow, "What else is he doing?"

"Please Mr. Hermann, you can't tell anyone. I don't want any stories going around about this. I don't need people around here thinking I'm some sort of crazy city boy."

"Son, you're not the first, nor do I believe will you ever be the last person to see Willie." He tried to comfort Mark, "He makes his rounds. And besides, the whole town already knows you're a crazy city boy."

Excited by knowing the name of his sporadic visiting guest, Mark went home by way of the hardware store, picked up a rake, shovel and a pickaxe. The total for the three items after the sale price reduction came to \$27.00.

Mark really didn't know what he was going to do, but he thought what could it hurt. Robert said it was near his place where Old Willie was killed, and at times he could swear the game trail took him right past the grove of trees he saw Willie and Maggie in.

Mark spent his days at the water treatment plant installing new systems and software and instructing the staff on the upgrades he was hired to oversee. The job required a lot of attention, but at times he would spend several minutes staring at a gauge or some other instrument that didn't change much. Usually his mind wandered through that grove of trees as he thought about Old Willie. Co-workers noticed, most thought not to ask what was on his mind. The few that did would get stock replies about how he had stayed up too late finishing up some painting or other fixer-up type chore.

Mark didn't sleep well most nights. He often drifted off to sleep hoping to catch one more glimpse of Willie, the dug hole and of course what was in that worn, brown rag. He kept going over everything he could remember about Willie, Maggie and the location of the trees, but couldn't get the awful feeling about Willie's death out of his mind.

He was running at full stride up the game trail chasing after Charlie who was barking and seemed to be running after something. He called after her, but she ignored him. He came to the fire pit and Charlie was there, sitting. Not barking, not doing anything she just sat there staring into the woods. Mark could see the silhouettes of two men. They were hard to make out in the moonlight and the shadows cast by the over story played tricks on his eyes. Slowly Charlie got up and went back down the trail, Mark did not notice. He made his way toward the two men walking softly and hiding behind trees. Moonlight trickled through the pines, as did the shadows of the men and their voices. As he got closer to them he could make out more. They were young and nearly identical in appearance. They were rugged, wearing long coats, cowboy hats and holsters with guns. Right out of a movie Mark thought to himself.

They were talking about robbing someone. Their seriousness interrupted by drunken laughter and slaps on the back. It haunted Mark. But whom do they want to rob? Then all at once he could see. This is why the woods seemed so familiar. It was here where he first saw Willie. He could smell it, the moist freshly upturned earth. He was gasping for breath, could this be. It can't be, he thought to himself. He yelled at the two men, they seemed to turn toward him, but then their gazes focused back up the slope ahead of them.

Mark darted off into the trees to his left. Following a portion of the game trail he'd run with Charlie so many times. He thought he could get around to Willie before they did. But it was a long way around. And there, amongst the trees in a small clearing was Maggie. Alone. Where was Willie? He called his name in the dark, not really expecting an answer. And there was none. He looked hard across the opening and he finally saw Willie, he was carving something into a tree. They both heard something beyond the opening. It was the two men Mark had seen earlier, one carrying a bottle, the other Willie's shovel.

"How 'bout it Willie." One of them spoke, bringing the bottle to his lips.

"Yeah Willie, where's that nugget yer always talkin' 'bout." He thrust the shovel into the ground and leaned on its handle.

"You know we're pretty dern tired of you talkin' 'bout it, it's 'bout time you show'd it to us." Said the one with the bottle as he took a swig of the vile liquid it had inside.

"Come on Willie." The other beckoned him with the shovel. "Tell us. We won't tell no one."

Mark could do nothing, but watch. He turned to see that Willie had carved his initials into the tree: "W E". Willie tried to use humor to bide some time. "Boys, it's just some dumb tale I tell. I ain't got no nugg'. Now go on. Go on back to town and leave an ol' man be."

"Thing is Willie, we knows 'bout the nugget. We knows you got it. Now where is it?" The one said as he hoisted the shovel over his shoulder.

"I don't have the nugget. Come on boys, le' me be." Willie's desperation came through in his voice. "If its money you want, I don't got much, but you can have it." Willie fumbled with his shirt pocket, took out some bills and waved it at them. "Go on back to town. Have a drink on me. But leave me be."

"Then you won' mind us lookin' around on your mule here. Will ya?" Keeping the bottle at his side, he reached with his other hand and took the money.

Before Willie could reply, the shovel smacked him on the side of his head. Mark could hear the deep and hard reptilian breaths that Willie made as he laid there unconscious, his face in the pine needles of his freshly covered buried treasure. The men strew Maggie's belonging all over the opening. No nugget. When they were done searching her they smacked her hindquarters scaring her off. They angrily turned toward the listless body of Willie.

"We're tired of you ol' man." He took one last gulp from the bottle before trading it in for Willie's pickaxe.

Mark couldn't watch. The sound nearly sickened him.

Tears covered his face as he awoke from his dream in a cold sweat. Charlie was at his side wagging her tail. Mark went to his truck, picked up his tools, and made his way back up the game trail. The smell of moist earth filled his nostrils as the shovel scraped a metal object. He tapped at it, then dropped to his knees. He reached into the hole, which was as deep as it was in his bedroom. He used his hands to clear the remaining dirt. And there it was a 12" circular piece of metal engraved with Hermann General Store, Nevada Camp. As he stood above the hole and surveyed around the clearing the emotions of the events of last night overwhelmed him. When he opened his eyes, he could see the rust circles from Willie's tears next to a few wet drops of his own.

Once back at his house, where an excited Charlie greeted him, Mark laid out some newspaper. He placed the pans there, took a deep breath and cut the twine with his pocketknife. He lifted the pan, and there was the brown rag. Mark's heart raced as he slowly unraveled it and revealed Gold Dust Willies final secret. . .

Mark laid the pans into the hole, took his time covering it back up, scattering needles, understory and cones, to minimize any look of disturbance. It was far removed from the fire pit, and he hoped would remain undisturbed for another 150 years. He patted Charlie on her side. "You're such a good girl. How does that look?"

He walked the twenty-seven paces over to a tree. Took out his pocketknife and carved below Willie's initials "M S". Mark looked over his shoulder, and there was Willie pulling Maggie along. Willie stopped just at the edge of the opening, he stroked Maggie's main, looked at Mark, tipped his hat, then turned and lead Maggie away and vanished into the trees.
