

Scrapbook: A Collection of Short Stories

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499) by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Wade Jennings".

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Purpose of Thesis

This collection of original short stories is designed to inspire the reader to think, contemplate, and wonder. The thesis consists of an introduction followed by five unique and original tales.

Introduction

This thesis is more than a capstone to my honors education here at Ball State University, it is a capstone to the last four years of my life. While these stories could not exist without the knowledge and thought involved with the Humanities sequence and other honors classes, there are a great many other ingredients which have gone into their creation. My Anthropology courses, my experiences with summer jobs, job interviews, late night discussions in the hallways, meeting new and different people, all of these things have shaped me into the person that I am today, and I have in turn shaped these stories in my own image.

I have found it impossible to write without envisioning myself as each character in each scene, thereby becoming that character. This is not an easy process, and can even be quite tiring, but does have its rewards. As Billy Joel said, quoting someone else, "I hate to write, but I love having written." I love the feeling of accomplishment, but also re-reading my stories and having other people read them, and realizing that I've created something that others find enjoyable.

I have found this project to be a great challenge, which perhaps added to its enjoyment. As an actuarial science major, I haven't done much creative writing, but I've always had ideas and wanted to see what I could do with them. Some stories seemed to write themselves in my mind, and some required a little more encouragement, but none were easy to write. This thesis has taught me that I have neither the dedication nor the concentration to write professionally, but I can say with honesty and pride that these are good stories, and that I am now an author. My only hope is that you as a reader find some enjoyment here, and gain one new thought or insight. With that I give you my college scrapbook.

Flavor

A man sat at a table and began to eat his dinner. Finding the meal somewhat bland, he reached instinctively toward the center of the table for a condiment with which to flavor his food, and was surprised with what he found.

Perched atop a short stack of napkins was a squat porcelaine bowl. It was white with soft blue patterns attempting to add a touch of class to so basic an item, and it showed signs of cracking. On either side of the bowl was a handle, an odd, bony protrusion from a portly torso, almost amusing to observe. The lid rested askew, allowing a small silver spoon to bury its head inside. The man was strongly reminded of the sugarbowl from his grandmother's tea set, so it's no wonder he was confused to see the word "SALT" clearly stenciled on the side in large blue letters.

Such a simple matter, yet it left him stupified for many minutes. Who would do such a curious thing? This piece of china was obviously intended to be a sugarbowl, yet it was clearly labelled as containing salt.

The man's first reaction was to return the oddity to the pile of napkins. He wanted no part of such tomfoolery, to be the target of such an unusual practical joke. And he certainly wouldn't be foolish enough to put sugar on his dinner. Yet what if it was salt, and his meal could be made that much more enjoyable merely by giving in to the

prankster. In that case, he was fulfilling the joke by settling for insipidness. What would be all the more sensible would be to sample the contents, then there would be no guesswork involved at all. It was amazing how much of a problem such a silly thing could be.

After thinking briefly, a bit of a grin sprouted slowly from his lips. The man lifted the lid from the bowl, and removed a spoonful of its mysterious contents. He then sprinkled them generously over his plate and ate heartily.

To Learn A Lesson

A group of men sat in a room. It was a long and narrow room, and they sat on the floor for there was no furniture.

One Man spoke to another who was the furthest away. He said, "Those are great shoes you have. I have a pair just like them. They're a little pricey, but the quality can't be beat." The man in the corner agreed silently.

Another Man proposed a question to be discussed by all. "Suppose you were going away forever, and you could never talk to anyone you left behind. Who would be the one person that you'd take with you?"

"I'd take my girlfriend," said One Man, "Definitely my girlfriend."

"I'd take my best friend," said the Thinker. "He knows more about me than anyone else and supports me in everything. His advice and companionship are invaluable to me. What about you?" he asked Another Man.

Another Man was silent a moment, then replied, "I'm not sure. Probably one of my really good friends, or maybe my girlfriend. I guess I'd have to think about it.

There was a brief pause, after which One Man again addressed the man in the corner, asking for his thoughts.

"I think I'd go alone." He said it slowly, as if it were some strange new realization that he wasn't sure if he believed.

"Alone? There isn't anyone you want to take with you?" Disbelief emanated from Another Man, who didn't even try to understand.

"Well...You're all just so great I wouldn't be able to decide which one of you to take." The sarcasm was thick enough to see, and they all laughed a little. But Thinker gave him a glance that told more than words ever could. There was curiosity in Thinker's eyes, but something more as well. A hint of recognition peered through. Not so much understanding as a small piece of shared feeling.

For a while the men spoke on many tangents. They discussed sports for some time, and their daily goings on, and said that they were hungry, but their hunger was minimal for they did nothing to appease it. Another man noticed the hat that the man in the corner was wearing and complimented him on it, and the Thinker echoed the sentiment, for he was wearing one that was quite similar.

Then the Thinker surrendered to his intrigue and questioned the man in the corner. "I can relate to wanting to be alone given the opportunity, but how long do you think it would be before you became lonely?" he asked curiously.

"I am always lonely," was the response.

"Yes, but you have people like us with whom to interact. You aren't truly alone."

The man in the corner stared upward in a pose of thoughtfulness, then changed to express frustration. After the pause he managed, "I can't explain it. I've sometimes

felt as if I was meant to be alone. Granted, not in so extreme a context as the one we discussed, maybe just that my relationships with those around me would... well...lack a certain intimacy, if you will, that others enjoy." The tone with which he ended the statement made it apparent that he would be happy to move on to another topic.

Thinker responded, "Well, to each his own. And I thought that no man was an island." The line was aimed to be a pointed jest, and a bullseye was struck, for they all laughed, and the man in the corner missed most of the next few minutes of conversation, contemplating the implications left hanging by the Thinker.

After continued discussion of other matters, One Man announced that his priorities lie elsewhere and he therefore needed to leave. He thanked the group for the pleasant chat and bid them farewell. And while his departure did not end the men's discussion outright, Another Man took advantage of the lull to babble senselessly about days gone by. He bragged about once being a good sized fish in a very tiny bowl who was acquainted with all of the truly big fish, and soon all of the men found that they also had priorities that they needed to attend to, and the group adjourned.

Before leaving, the Thinker caught the attention of the man in the corner. "Learn anything?"

The man looked up, smiled a half smile tinted with confidence, and shook the Thinker's hand.

"Goodbye," was all he said. Thinker echoed the smile

and they both turned and left slowly, and it was some time before either man's smile faded.

In the next few years, the man in the corner became very successful. He was a skilled businessman, and he found someone who he decided to call Wife. Much of his success was due to his great talent and intelligence, yet he still attributed a portion of it to a small piece of time he had spent with a group of men a few years ago.

One day, his wife approached him. "Look, I know that you have been very successful, but you seem to have made fewer accomplishments recently. Have you exhausted your ambitions?"

"No, I'm just happy where I am," was his reply.

"But I would think that you would want to continue to move on. Why stop your progress now?"

He became a bit angry, and his voice a bit more harsh. "I have found a place where I belong, and it is a good place. I learned long ago to find my place and be there. This is where I belong. Would you deny me that?"

His Wife appeared unconvinced, and spoke with reluctance, for she had news that would take the man by surprise. "I've been offered work elsewhere. It is the opportunity that I've waited for for some time, and I can't pass it up."

"I see," said the man. "Well, I'm afraid I can't go. I need to stay where I am. You'll have to go alone." His Wife had always supported him, and he did not anticipate any

discontinuity in her behavior.

His Wife fumed inside with frustration, but showed very little of it, knowing that the man was too stubborn to contend with. Such was not always the case, but her husband had recently become unwilling to discuss various matters, as well as becoming steadfast in his decisions.

She caught his glance, and as they stood frowning at each other, she said, "Well, That Man, you won't deny me what is mine."

As she walked out, the man was filled with surprise and confusion. Somehow he knew that his previous assumption was incorrect. She would not be coming back. He reminisced about a time when he was more confident, of a time when he was a bit more certain of who he was. He then became confused once again, for he had learned such a valuable lesson long ago, yet it had failed him now.

The man felt lost, and did not know what he would do. What he also did not know was that he owed his despair to another incorrect assumption. It was not the lesson that had failed him, it was he that failed to learn the lesson.

A Fable for All Ages

In a pond in a park there lived a great many ducks, who were all very good friends. Every day they waded around and quacked at each other, and munched on bread crumbs when they had generous visitors. They lived a very simple life, as you might expect ducks to do.

One duck, however, felt his life as a common park duck was too dull. He had seen a great bald eagle soaring through the sky, and longed to be part of the majestic display that had held him in awe. After bidding his farewells, he set out to find the eagle.

It did not take long to find the bird, and he asked it if he might learn all there was to learn about being an eagle. Fortunately, the eagle was very tolerant and friendly, and agreed to help the duck. They began eagle lessons that very day.

The first lesson was to spot a fish from the sky and swoop down after it. The bald eagle soared high into the sky, until it was barely visible from the ground. The duck tried to follow, but could not handle the altitude. Flying lower, the eagle spotted a fish quickly and pointed it out to the duck, but his vision was not keen enough to spot the prey. The eagle began his descent, and the duck followed, but he had no claws with which to catch the fish, and he instinctively slowed himself to land on the water instead of

keeping his speed up and returning to the clouds. Feeling sorry for him, the eagle took his fish to share with the duck, but the duck couldn't bite the fish very well with his flat beak, and didn't like the taste of fish anyway. The duck thought about his failure, and decided that he just wasn't cut out to be a majestic bald eagle. Thanking the eagle for his cooperation and patience, the duck took off to find another adventure.

While flying around, the duck heard a beautiful song coming from below. He landed on the ground near a tree and saw a nightingale in the tree singing away. The duck sat and listened to the entire melody, and began to feel much better. At the song's conclusion, the duck applauded the nightingale and thanked her for cheering him up. Then he got an idea. Perhaps he should learn to sing, so that he could cheer others with his voice. He proposed this plan to the nightingale, and she agreed to help the duck.

Since the duck couldn't sit in the tree very easily, the nightingale flew to the ground for the first lesson. She was going to sing a note, and he was supposed to repeat it. The nightingale hit her note perfectly, and the tone rang out clear as glass. But when the duck tried to repeat the note, all he could produce was a harsh quack. He tried and tried, but never once could his voice make anything appealing to the ear. The nightingale tolerated the terrible noise for a while, but eventually she could no longer bear it and she left.

The duck sat alone on the ground feeling very upset. It seemed there was nothing he was good at. In his sulking, he failed to notice the pigeon that had come up to him, and he was startled when the pigeon asked why he was so sad. The duck related his story to the pigeon, who suggested trying to be of service to someone. The pigeon bore a message strapped to its leg, and maybe the duck could deliver messages as well. The duck agreed and followed the pigeon home.

When the message was delivered, the pigeon was placed in a cage, but the man wanted nothing to do with the duck. Wanting desperately to help, the duck quacked loudly until the man let him in out of frustration. The duck was placed in a cage, but he was extremely cramped as it was sized for a pigeon. Later that day, the man tied a note to the duck and set it free, but the duck had no idea how to deliver the message. The only place he could find was his pond, so he headed in that direction.

Since he didn't want his friends to know that he had failed, the duck stopped before reaching the pond to debate his next move. While he sat and pondered, a wise old owl landed in a tree near by and asked the duck how he was that day. The duck told his story to the owl and asked if there was any advice that the owl might give him. The owl told him that everyone measures success on different standards. The task of life is not to find the standard, but to excel within it. He wished the duck good fortune, and then flew away.

The duck thought for a minute, and then perked up. He

decided to fly back to the pond to be with his friends and to be the best duck he could be. From that day on, he quacked with all his heart, swam with all his strength, and when winter came, he led the whole flock south for the winter.

The moral of this story is: if it looks like a duck and it quacks like a duck, it's probably not a swan.

Grandparents

My grandfather is a grumpy old man. He has a crooked face with an expression that is anything but friendly, and his favorite lines are "you're rotten" and "you're full of bologna", although "damn" was a close third. My grandmother works crossword puzzles and worries that I might hurt myself doing things she'd rather not know I was doing. She's tremendously proud of all of her grandchildren, and perhaps a little jealous that she never had the chance to do a great many things that we are all doing. They are very different from each other, and very different from me, yet there is something about them and their lives together that I long for in my own life.

When I was a young boy, I stayed with my grandparents for a few days from time to time. My brother and I would wake up to the smell of pancakes and bacon, which was especially nice compared to home where doughnuts were considered a special breakfast. We then moved to the back porch, which was always pleasant in the summer. There was an awning to block the sun, and the breeze kept it cool except during the hottest part of the day. I've spent countless hours on that porch, and will probably remember it in great detail for the rest of my life.

In the morning, after cleaning up the breakfast dishes, my grandma would sit in a rocking chair on the porch and

watch my brother and I play on what seemed a mountain of a hill that made up the back yard. One of our favorite games was to kick a ball off of the top of the hill and see if the other could catch it at the bottom. The few times we did catch that ball, Grandma was sure to tell us how good we were, which was all the more incentive to keep playing. Years later, I still play that game with my younger cousins.

Grandpa would join us outside for lunch, and then turn on the Reds game. He's probably spent more time listening to the Reds play and complaining about them than I've spent alive. When he's reminded that they're loosing, he responds with "Well, what did you expect?" And when they've got a good season going, he's the first to point out that they'll screw it up. I'm not sure if he qualifies as a fan, but he follows them like he owns the team.

Usually, the only time Grandpa said much before being spoken to was when one of his grandchildren was about to do something stupid, such as throwing rocks at people or being careless near sharp objects. Otherwise he kept to himself and make short and sweet responses. A drawn out "yup" was common, but I've heard "I guess so, Christopher," a great many times as well.

I usually tired of playing ball before my brother, and he would continue throwing the ball in the air or off the wall while I moved on to bigger and better things. Part way up the hill was a tree, and I loved to climb trees. There was danger and adventure in climbing a tree, and I was in

control of my own destiny. If I fell, I would have only myself to blame, and I never fell.

From the back yard I could see the steeple of St. Dominick's church, and it was always my goal to climb high enough to see the roof of the church, but I never came close. What I did see as I climbed was the house across the street from my granparent's house. It was monstrous, with several large pillars lining the front of it and a yard five or six times the size of any I'd ever played in. But the best part was a tree right near the house. It was one of the biggest trees I've ever seen with branches low enough to make it climbable. As a typical child, I envied the tree, not the house.

My short attention span shifted to the many other things I could see from my improved position. I had a much better view of the neighbor's yard, where two black dogs chased each other tirelessly. Also, I could lower my head a bit to make the top of the hill level with my line of sight. I've always noticed silly geometric trivialities like that. And I could watch my grandparents.

It amazed me to no end how they could just sit for hours doing nothing, barely even talking, and still be smiling and enjoying themselves. Grandpa sat near the table, drinking his iced tea and listening to the ball game. Gramma sat a few feet away, rocking slowly and watching a couple of robins nibble from the birdfeeder. After telling me several times to be careful in the tree, she told me I'd better get down,

so I joined them on the porch and watched my brother chase the ball down the hill.

It was at that time that I got a taste of the enjoyment my grandparents found in what seemed to be a very dull afternoon. There was a certain peace in that scene. Just sitting in silence with people who care about you, enjoying each other's company without the need to say anything, that was the secret. And I've spent much of my life since then trying to grasp that feeling to the extent that they have.

Revelation

Korna brushed aside a bit of the vegetation surrounding him with the tip of his spear. Peering through the trees, he could catch but a glimpse of the behemoth boar he had earned the right to kill. Ever since it began its destructive charges through the village, there had been countless challenges among the warriors, tests of strength and skill, to determine who was most worthy of ridding them of this foe. The honor fell upon Korna.

As the village champion, he had led the others in the hunt of the great boar, and they had found it. He then sent the others to silently surround their target, and within a few moments, they would chase it through the forest to the place where Korna lay waiting with his spear.

A bird's song broke the silence, the signal that everyone was in place! The silence returned for just a second, then a sudden cacophony destroyed the peacefulness and the beast charged. Korna jumped out with his spear, waiting for the boar to close the distance between them. It was an incredible creature, far bigger than any he'd ever seen before, with tusks the size of his forearm it seemed. The whole village would eat heartily tonight!

Korna prepared for a simultaneous stab with his spear and a leap out of the charging animal's path, and flinched in anticipation. The great boar saw the plan in store for him

and altered his path. With a tremendous dive, the village champion avoided what would have been a mortal tusk wound, but now lay prone on the forest floor. Turning too quickly, the boar stumbled a bit, but quickly recovered and charged Korna, who did not recover quickly enough. Two large tusks tore into the man's intestines and threw him into the air. A deep snort of victory filled the area, as if the hairy beast were taunting the men staring in shock at their fallen comrade. The boar prepared to flee his audience, but was stopped by a sharp pain between its shoulder blades. Korna drove his spear deep into the boar's back, and they both collapsed lifelessly, the hunter atop his prey, still grasping the end of the spear.

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The morning sun began to burn away the thick mist, revealing all sorts of plants and trees, and various chirps and chants rang out from unseen wildlife. Korna sat up, so disoriented that he forgot who he was for a moment. Trying to figure out how he had arrived at this unfamiliar place, he recalled his battle with the boar. It had thrown him into the air, he remembered landing hard, seeing the opportunity to slay it, and then collapsing in complete exhaustion. "I must be dead," he thought.

Tales of all sorts began to wash over him, many told to frighten children, but some were the traditional legends passed on from shaman to shaman to be lessons for the villagers. Korna never cared much for the crazy old shaman's

tales, he was far more interested in learning to use his spear and how to hunt the various animals that provided them with food. One thing he did know, however, was that if he were actually dead, he must begin searching for the Great Panther. All those who die must search out the Great Panther, for it is he who will lead them to the world of the dead. Some may find him in a day, and some will take much longer, but no one may enter the world of the dead without his guidance. "I am a great hunter," thought Korna, "The best in the village. I ought to be able to find the Great Panther by nightfall." And so he began his search.

After some consideration, he headed east where the jungle seemed to be thicker, hoping to find a river or a stream. Surely the Panther must get thirsty, and if not, a cool drink sounded refreshing anyway.

There was indeed a river to the east, with clean, clear water. It was twice as wide as the river near his village, and crept onward at a slow, steady pace. Korna knelt near the shore to scoop up a handful of water, but before he even had a chance to cup his hands, he was frozen by surprise.

Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed the reflection of an enormous cat, black as night, with penetrating green eyes that seemed to pierce through his heart right into his very soul. Instantly his eyes slammed shut in fright and his whole body shivered at the memory of the green eyes. The creature couldn't have been more than twenty feet away! Hearing heavy footsteps, he shot a look to his right, but saw

nothing save a few swinging vines, and the jungle was silent.

Soon the fear was driven away by the hunter's instinct that had made Korna the village champion, and he raced to the spot where the cat had been standing. Again he was frozen stiff by what he saw, but this time the cause was disbelief. There was nothing here. No prints could be found in the soft, moist earth, no plants whispered the secret of recent passage to those with keen eyes. Korna searched the area for nearly an hour and could find nothing to betray the Panther's presence or where he might be headed.

Perhaps the vision had just been his imagination. His obsession with finding the Great Panther at record pace may have gotten to him. But it had been so real! The thought of those green eyes looking right through him still made his skin crawl. "Maybe I should get that drink," he thought aloud.

Korna took a few steps toward the river, then heard an odd noise, a sort of swoosh, like the sound of a stick being swung through the air by a child. Trying to find the source of the noise didn't take long, for a split second later, Korna found himself hanging upside-down among the trees, a thick vine wrapped around his ankle. A high pitched cackle of a laugh drew his attention to a tiny little bearded gnome, literally rolling with laughter across the jungle floor beneath him.

"Let me down now, you pest, before I string your limbs all about through this forest!" Korna was infuriated that

such a helpless old man could get the better of him.

"Oh goodness, not that!" shrieked the strange little fellow, who only laughed the harder at Korna's threat. "You'll not be making many threats from there. At least not believable ones."

"Once I get out of these trees we'll see how empty my threats are." All of the swinging and tugging in the world was only helping to cut off the circulation in his foot.

"You've a lot to learn, warrior," the old man replied with a sneer. "Especially if you ever hope to find the Panther."

"You know how to find him? How? What must I do? Was that him that I saw?" Korna became so excited that he forgot his anger.

"If the Panther you do seek,
I fear your future may be bleak.
You must unlearn all that you know.
The warrior stays while wise men go."

And with that the old man dissipated into a thin mist and vanished. A quiet curse escaped Korna's lips at the disappearance of his only help. A loud curse followed as Korna found himself falling from the trees, his vine having been cut. He landed with a soft thud, and remained on the ground briefly to catch his breath. When he finally did sit up, the old man was hovering within an arm length of Korna's face, staring with his beady little eyes, and let out a soft sigh.

"Pay you heed to what I say,
Or you can stay with me and play!"

Korna tried to capture the old man who was laughing again, but all he touched was mist. Sitting on the damp earth, feeling confused, frustrated, and a little bit of pain, he cursed again. Loudly.

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After an entire day of searching, Korna had not found the Panther, or even the slightest sign of it. He hadn't seen the old man again, either, but that was cause for glee, not grief. Some hunter he turned out to be. He couldn't find any clues whatsoever to help him locate the most enormous cat he had ever seen.

Frustrated and bored, he sat on the ground against what must have been the oldest tree in the forest. He didn't require any rest, just a break from the monotony of the fruitless quest. He had no hunger or thirst, either, though he'd consumed nothing since his battle with the boar. How strange it was to be dead.

Relaxing at last, Korna's thoughts began to drift. He imagined his wife helping the shaman prepare his body for the death rites. Despite his great value to the entire village as a hunter and protector, none would feel his loss more than his wife. Closing his eyelids conjured up an image of his beloved, and a half smile crept onto his face. He thought of many good times he had had with her, and of how much he enjoyed her company. Ah, yes, he would miss her as well.

Still basking in the pleasant memories of his life, his eyes cracked open, and standing right before him was the

Panther! Korna's body, flooded with fear, was no longer under his control. The great cat's shining green eyes held the hunter fast, pinning him to the massive tree he had previously been relaxing upon. He felt those eyes passing through his heart, threatening to steal the very life force from his body. Teeth and fists clenched in concentration, Korna fought off the eyes. He strained against their hold, but still it wasn't enough. His well of options run dry, he swung a fist in desperation at the feline's jaw, but struck nothing. The strength of the punch cost the village champion his balance, and he staggered to regain it, but the cat was gone.

Korna shrieked with rage, and only became angrier when his scream was echoed by the squeaky, cackling laugh of the old man. The laugh slowly died out, and the man appeared before Korna, legs and arms crossed, hovering five feet off of the ground.

"Well, it seems the champion
Has only losses on day one.
I wish that sometimes you would think.
Or do you only have instinct?"

Sounding a battle cry, Korna leapt at the little old man and wrapped his arms around mist and air. "Leave me alone, you little troll!" screamed the hunter into the empty jungle. "I'm tired of your games!" Despite the lack of a reply, somehow Korna knew that that witch of a man heard what he said. And so the hunt resumed.

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Another day of searching had passed, and still there

was no reward for the effort. Though hunger, thirst, and sleep were no longer concerns for the hunter, he felt the fatigue of failure, frustration, and a search in vain. And for the first time in many years, he considered giving up.

Soon he was no longer hunting, merely wandering about, unaware of his direction and surroundings. As his steps were chosen with less and less care, his mind, too, began to wander. He looked back on his life with nostalgia, though it had only been gone for two days. Reminiscing, he relived glories and triumphs, recalling them in vivid detail. Only he was strong enough to defeat anyone in the village, and thereby protect them all from the many dangers the jungle provided, and he had proven this over and over again. Many were the times that his hunting prizes sustained the village, and even provided them with feasts. Truly he had accomplished a great deal. Perhaps the shaman would even begin to tell legends about him. That would be a great honor indeed.

Feeling a bit more confident, Korna's back straightened, and he walked with pride and confidence in place of the despair that his stride had displayed before. He began to feel as though he could find the Panther again. Yes, the village champion was loose in the forest, and he would prove that his title was well deserved.

This sudden pride helped him mask his fear and surprise as a minor startle when he felt a heavy, warm breath on the back of his neck, along with the tickle of what may have been

a whisker. In one swift motion, Korna turned around and jumped at the Panther, only to find himself lying on his chest with a small trickle of blood dripping from his chin. The Panther had been ten feet behind him! Feeling frightened and a little sheepish after having his pride checked, Korna reacted by charging the beast. If it was going to shred his flesh to bits, he would at least fight it off as best he could, and not be snuck up upon from behind. As he charged, the magnificent cat reared back on its hind legs and sprung into the air, clearing the man's head with plenty of room to spare. The hunter spun to face it, but it was gone.

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For several days Korna wandered and saw no other living thing, save a plethora of insects hunted by small birds and monkeys. Their numbers were dwindling, however, and the terrain was growing somewhat rocky, the jungle was much less dense, and he could see the hint of a great mountain in the distance.

The hunter now thought only of his recent failures. His mind had long ago stopped wandering, and his body now surrendered and followed suit. He mounted a large, flat rock and sat down. The apathy had grown inside him, and now he felt little else. Spotting a long and wispy branch beside him, he grabbed the near end and began to fiddle with it. After a short while, he noticed something odd on the far end of the branch that he could not identify. He tried to pull it closer in order to examine the oddity, but he only pulled

an inch or so before the branch suddenly stopped, as if still rooted in place. He gave another short tug, for he could clearly see that the branch was not attached to the ground, and again it only gave an inch. Several times he repeated the test, and the results were the same. Finally, he decided to give the stick a quick yank for all he was worth, and the branch pulled easily, as if it were just lying on the ground. But, where the branch had been, an enormous black paw slapped the ground with a mighty thud, and several feet away a thick black tail danced playfully along the ground.

Korna's curiosity overcame him and he returned the branch, continuing his play with the paw, which was more than willing to cooperate and play along. For some time, Korna bounced the branch along the ground while the great paw slapped at it. And the more they played, the more there was to play with, for the paw had grown into a full arm, and the tail was connected to massive back legs and hindquarters.

The village champion became like a child enthralled with this pastime, and tried more vigorously to keep the branch away from the lightning reflexes of his partially substantial playmate. The intensity of the game seemed to be a catalyst for bringing the ghost out of its spell, for Korna could see the four thick legs sprout hips and shoulders, and soon there was a whole body as well. Leaping to his feet, the hunter ran, dragging the branch behind him. The headless beast reared back and launched itself through the air, pouncing on the end of the branch. Feeling the branch pull free of his

grasp, the man turned around just in time to see the deep, green eyes forming in the empty sockets of the Panther's terrifying face.

Adrenaline rushing through his body, eyelids closed tight in fear, Korna could think only of the Panther's penetrating gaze, and his muscles unconsciously tensed to prepare for whatever may happen next. But then he heard something. It was distant, from somewhere deep inside. Far below the fear and the image of the green eyes, beneath the thrill of the battle and the push for victory, in the deepest recesses of his inner self, there was the slightest chuckle. It was the little old man's sarcastic laugh mocking him. That laugh now echoed in his ears, and had been joined by the mysterious words to which he had paid little attention until now, "the warrior stays... the warrior stays..."

The great hunter concentrated on the laugh, allowing his focus on it to camouflage his fear, excitement, everything else. There was only the laugh, and Korna wanted the last laugh to be his. Barely aware of his surroundings, he knelt to the ground. Up until now, his training as a warrior had netted only frustration. It was time to try something new.

With firm resolution and plenty of doubt lingering in the shadows, the hunter gave up defense. All he knew about keeping a ready stance, being prepared for all contingencies, never letting weakness or fear show, all of these were worthless to him now, but very difficult to give up. Slowly his muscles relaxed, his arms spread wide, and his head held

high. Korna opened his eyes to see what reaction the Panther might give to this free exposure to the man's body, but it just stared at him. He studied the great cat with curiosity and intrigue, and when he met the gaze of the deep green eyes, the hunter knew that he was trapped.

The Panther's eyes swirled and flowed with every emotion imaginable, constantly changing with smooth transition and no particular order. At the same time, the gaze completely filled the hunter's being, touching his soul, searching through all that he was. As the gaze grasped every event throughout his life, the swirling emotions of the eyes began to correspond, to match up with certain events. In essence, he was feeling his entire life in what might have been a single moment or a dozen lifetimes, and feeling the inherent good and evil and everything in between throughout.

The endless individual events began to mold together, slowly becoming fewer and fewer feelings of greater size. Once his life was rolled into a single ball of accomplishment, the great and mighty village champion looked into the Panther's green eyes and saw the one thing he had least expected ... disappointment.

Overwhelming shame rushed over him, threatening to overtake him. He understood. Many were the times he had not treated others properly, many toes had he stepped on to gain the high honors he sought. His wife, brothers, childhood friends, all of these and many more had been victims of his ambition. The great hunter now realized and understood what

was really important, and knew where his errors had been. He now looked to the Panther for the next step.

Again the eyes were a myriad of emotion, but this time there were fewer emotions present. Forgiveness, joy, love, and respect were among them, and Korna felt the Panther's grip on his soul loosen, giving back his own emotions. He felt understanding, inner peace, and incomprehensible respect and reverence for the Panther's wisdom and love, and he told the Panther all of this with his eyes.

Korna reached up and gently stroked the great cat's cheek, then smoothed the fur on the top of its head and neck. The fur was softer than anything he'd ever felt, and it seemed to welcome his hand and embrace its caress. A smile crept upon the man's lips, and he hopped onto the Panther's back. As the cat began to walk, he stroked its neck and shoulders with both hands, reveling in his new existence, and overflowing with peace and understanding.

The crazy old man watched from his concealed position. He stared as the magnificent cat carried away the man, and gave a half smile at the sight. A small sigh escaped him, he wiped a single tear from the corner of his eye, and he dissipated into a thin stream of mist.