

In Hank's Town

(full version)

A short story by Patrick Mackeown

Copyright © Patrick Mackeown 2005

The right of Patrick Mackeown to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs, and Patents Acts 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of Patrick Mackeown. Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

www.bookscape.co.uk

In Hank's Town

"That's the dumbest thing I ever heard, boy. You gonna have to do better than that, I'm tellin' you," Sheriff Hank Callan said, snorting deeply and expelling a giant globule of phlegm onto the dusty floorboards at our feet.

He examined his damp right hand and wiped the forefinger and thumb together across the dangling mound of his stomach. His sweat-stained, wet, half-open, khaki shirt which stretched over his enormous, pale belly, now had a streak of spittle soaking into it.

"Hell, I don't even believe he knows what the hell he's sayin'. You hearin' me, boy? You know what I'm sayin'? Let's have a look at him. Shit! I don't believe this. I'm tellin' you."

My prisoner, a lean, tall man, I'd say in his early thirties, sat on the floor, with his dark hair covering his eyes. He had faded denim jeans on over scuffed, fawn cowboy boots and a plain, white cotton shirt. I guessed his shirt was hand made. It would have been quite nice once.

Leaning on the bars of his cell, Hank snorted, "git up boy. Let's git a look at you."

The prisoner didn't move.

"Git up, boy. Cumon now, I aint got all night, boy. Git up!"

He still didn't move. Hank looked at me.

"Shit," he said, coiling his fat, stumpy fingers around his night stick.

"Reckon I ought to give him a taste of my lil persuader. That'll git him up!"

I stepped between him and the gate.

"I'll do it," I said quickly.

I'd left my keys on the table in our sheriff's office next door to the goal. If we turned away from the prison bars, we could have both seen them through the open doorway. I didn't want to leave prisoner alone with Hank, so I asked, "can I borrow your keys?"

His narrow, puffy eyes closed even further.

"Where's yours, boy?" he growled.

"I left them in the office," I confessed.

He looked at me, then he looked at the gate, the prisoner and my keys on the office table.

"Well, well, well, ya'll mighty contrary, you college educated deputies, I'm tellin' you. I don't know why ya'll making such a fuss over this here one lill-piss-ant, but if that's what you want, I guess it's alright by me."

Then he waddled back towards the desk. Within seconds I had the prisoner on his feet and was leading him back into the office. I circled the table to offer my seat to the prisoner, but Hank raised his leg in front of me. "That's alright, boy. He can stand. Now tell me," he said, turning towards the prisoner, "what's all this shit about aliens?"

"I didn't do anything," the prisoner blurted. "I know my rights. I want a lawyer."

"Know your rights do you, you kidnappin', child-rapin', smart-mouth piss-ant? I'll give you your rights!"

I should have seen it coming. I was already on my feet by then, but it didn't make any difference. Hank's right leg shot upwards into the prisoner's groin. He doubled over instantly. Hank's night stick must have been beneath the table. I saw it land on the man's jaw and then the sheriff brought it down with a sickening thud on the back of the prisoner's head. "Where is she, you shit-bag? What have you done with her?" The sheriff leant against the table to steady himself. He drew back his right leg and wobbled. The tiny pause Hank took to gather in a chair-back to support his weight, gave me enough time to jump between him and the man on the floor.

"You git outta my way, boy," Hank snarled.

"Listen," I said, "Hank, just listen."

"It wasn't me," the prisoner said quietly. "I swear it. When I got there, she was already gone."

"Let's hear him out," I pleaded with Hank. "Let's just at least hear what he's got to say. His enormous chest and stomach heaved as he considered my request. Sweat splashed from his face into pools on the floor. He grunted, wiped his shining forehead with the back of his wrist and sat

down. Glaring, first at me and then at the man on the ground, he spat, “you got five minutes, you sorry son-of-a-bitch. Five minutes.”

“I was standing by the river. You saw me,” our prisoner replied looking up towards me. Then he raised himself onto one knee, in a semi kneeling position. Hank snorted and looked at his watch.

“Git on with it, boy,” he said, ejecting a stream of spittle onto the floor.

“I saw her going into the woods and I followed her. But I didn’t get anywhere near her. She was on the other side of the river. Ask your deputy. I was on the near side, and she was on the other side. I couldn’t have been responsible for the girl’s disappearance because I wasn’t anywhere near her at the time. That’s when the green and orange lights came out from between the trees and the girl just vanished. One minute she was there and the next she was gone.”

“This is horseshit,” Hank hissed. “Your five minutes are up!”

“He’s right,” I added quickly. “He was on the near side of the river, but the girl’s footprints were on both sides. His only went as far as the bank on the near side, right where we found him. I saw the lights through the trees, we all did, Hank. We all saw them. I don’t know what the thing was, but I think he’s telling the truth about not having crossed the river.”

“I don’t believe ya’ll stickin’ up for this no-good...” he had began, when the phone rang.

“It’s the FBI,” I said. “They’re sending a man out from Jacksonville. He’ll be here in about two hours.”

“Two hours,” he repeated. “I got the no-good, child-kidnappin’ son-of-a-bitch right here on my floor and those do-nothin’, know-it-all sons-of-bitches think they’re gonna just come walkin in here and take it all away from me, just like that? They ain’t,” he snorted. “There ain’t no-one takin’ nothin’ away from me, not in my town, not now not ever. You hearin’ me, boy?”

He grabbed at the prisoner, “ya’ll comin’ with me!” Then, pulling the captive by the hair, he sidled towards our rifle rack. “Gimme them shells, boy,” he ordered, pointing towards the ammunition shelf.

“You can’t go out there!” I pleaded with him. “For God’s sake, let’s wait. It’s only two hours.”

“Come on, you son-of-a-bitch,” he hissed, dragging the prisoner towards the door. I followed them with a rifle, a hold-all bag containing several ammunition belts and two high powered torches.

“You lock up, boy?” Hank asked as we moved along the street. “Not yet,” I confessed. “I’m a bit weighed down.”

The wide dusty street was well illuminated. Our vehicles, which we always parked facing the gaol had two observers leaning over them.

“Where you takin him, Sheriff?” the nearest of them asked, blocking our path.

“Don’t be a damn fool, Wade. Git the hell outta my way,” Hank replied, brushing the young man aside with a loaded pump-action-shotgun barrel.

Wade’s brother, who was leaning against the sheriff’s four-wheel-drive, with his thumbs hooked into the front of his jeans stepped aside without being asked. A camera flashed from across the street.

“Where you taking him, Sheriff?” the editor of The Weekly Gazette called from across the causeway. He broke into a run snapping as he came.

“You tellin’ me my business?” Hank challenged him.

“No,” the newsman replied, a little taken aback, “I was only askin’ where you’re takin’ him. Some of these folks want to know.”

The group, the reporter was pointing at, had a lot of fancy equipment: telescopic lenses and ratchet-controlled tripods. They were professional photographers and there were lots of them. One man in particular looked familiar. I couldn’t quite place him, but in equal measure, I couldn’t shake-off the feeling that he was one of those people who talked a lot.

“You got here bloody quickly.” I told the reporter, as he opened the tailgate of my four-wheel-drive so I could dump my things. “It’s pitch dark up there,” I warned him. “All that fancy camera gear won’t do you any good tonight.”

“We’ve already thought of that,” he replied. “Look over there.”

Between the hardware store and the church, a convoy of jeeps and pickup trucks with rear-mounted searchlights was circling and forming an orderly queue.

“You must be expecting something to happen that’s going to be worth all this trouble,” I said.

“You tell me,” he replied. “You’re the deputy.”

Something was wrong. They simply couldn’t have had enough time since the girl’s disappearance less than two hours ago, to get here, and yet, here they all were. Hank had climbed into the lead vehicle with the prisoner and was accelerating up the slope behind the store. I followed and the convoy fell in behind me. As I accelerated an explosion shook the road ahead. I skidded and the pickup behind me ran into my tailgate, pushing my vehicle headlong into a tree. I turned the key in the ignition twice, to no avail.

“I’m going to have to leave it,” I yelled to the driver behind.

“You’re blocking the road,” he retorted.

I ran ahead, leaving him circling my jeep and waving his arms in my direction. I reached the remains of Hank’s vehicle a few seconds later. He was slumped on the ground, a few feet from the burning wreck. His prisoner sat motionless but unharmed beside him.

“Is he dead?” I asked.

“No, I think he’s breathing.” The prisoner replied.

“The others are coming on foot,” I said. “I’m going to call out to them.”

“Wait,” he said. “Look what’s that?”

I looked towards him and said, “it’s nothing. It’s only the sunrise. Check his pulse for me, would you?”

“It’s not the sunrise,” he insisted. “Look, the sun is over there.”

Two large orange disks were rising simultaneously over the horizon. I wiped my eyes and looked again. I could only see one orange disk now, bathing the tree-line with a magnificent kaleidoscope of alternating colours.

“Dan,” the prisoner called out. “Dan, look!”

I followed his extended arm. Between the trees, directly beneath the orange disk, a small child emerged. She looked directly at us and then walked quickly into the undergrowth.

“Oh, shit!” I said. “Oh, shit. You wait here.” I looked at Hank’s shattered radio. “Don’t go anywhere. Stay with Hank,” I instructed him. It was the right thing to do.

Our prisoner clearly hadn’t kidnapped the girl, because we’d just seen her running into the undergrowth. Somebody had to stay with Hank until help arrived. I couldn’t leave him unprotected, but what was I to do? I left Hank’s shotgun and half my ammunition.

“Don’t go anywhere,” I repeated. “Just stay here, OK?”

He nodded.

“OK,” I said, strapping the ammunition belt around my waist. I loaded the shotgun and slung it over my shoulder.

“What am I going to tell the others?” he asked. “What if they see him like this and me with the gun? They might think the worst and start shooting.”

“I don’t know,” I replied honestly. “You’ll have to think of something. I’ve got to go. I’ll leave Hank’s broken radio on transmit. They should be able to trace it, if it starts working again. And with that, I got up and headed into the forest in the direction we’d seen the small girl running.

Then it hit me. I knew who the familiar looking man opposite our local reporter, in the centre of town was, everyone did. He was Alan MckNight, a hugely vociferous advocate of the existence of UFOs. MckNight even had his own TV show. He had profited greatly from the much celebrated, supposed alien abduction of Travis Walton in a forest, much like this one, decades ago. But I had never heard of anyone being injured or killed in any of his media scoops. Hank had been hurt badly. There was nothing false about his injuries. I surmised that this either wasn’t one of MckNight publicity coups, or that he must have decided people needed to be hurt on TV, in order to boost his flagging audience ratings.

No matter what had happened, if MckNight had set this whole thing up, he couldn't very well admit it to me in front of the cameras anyway, so I didn't wait for him and the others to catch up with me. I parted the low branches where we'd last seen the girl and headed into the forest. I don't know what happened next. I must have passed out or something, because the next thing I'm aware of is that I woke up here in this hospital, with my face all over the TV news and the girl at my side in her mother's arms. I don't know how it happened, I swear, I don't. I have as many unanswered questions as you do, I can assure you. The main problem which keeps occurring to me is: If MckNight set up an explosion to add drama to his 'alien rescue scene,' how did he know Hank was going to be there? Nobody could have known that Hank would rush out of the gaol and drive up the mountain.

The sheriff himself, who had been too badly injured to appear on TV, hardly received a mention. My prisoner, a gentleman with a lengthy police record, was kept out of the public eye just as rigorously. Scientists have come up with several explanations for the explosion, even though no-one, as yet, has been able to discover the source of the blast. We've been given a range of explanations for the appearance of the strange lights too. None of them fits all of the things we saw, and some don't fit any of them. The child's memories of silver men, with pointy heads and lights behind their bodies, have been explained by some sceptics as having been introduced to her by popular culture. No-one disputes the fact that she saw them, or at least she believes that she saw them. The dispute is about why she believes it.

You can submit me to as many polygraph tests as you like. I'll pass them all. I'll end my memoir here, but, before I do, I'd like to give you one piece of advice. Why don't you submit MckNight, the TV show host to a polygraph examination? It wasn't done last time, because nobody thought of it. But think about it, who stands to gain the most from the broadcasting of this story?

Thrillers by Patrick Mackeown - available from www.bookscape.co.uk

Mutilation Murders

The torso of a black child has been discovered in London's Kensington Gardens. Detective Chief Inspector Hawthorne and his men quickly discover that the boy was a victim of a ritualistic killing. At Heathrow airport a second child, Jubulani, and his mother disembark from their plane. On his arrival in London Jubulani is kidnapped. A Ju Ju witchdoctor in South London is preparing the new child, Jubulani, to be sacrificed. Hawthorne is racing against time to save the boy.

Midwinter's Children

Georg, a nine-year-old street child, has been captured by human traffickers from Moscow and is about to be sold to a child pornography ring in Amsterdam. Detective Chief Inspector Hawthorne, from Suffolk CID, is on the case...

The Black Daimler

Nexus, a London-based Chinese dissident, learns that his friend was found with an axe embedded in his head. As more of his politically active associates die, he becomes involved in a frantic struggle to understand and defeat the threat to himself and his organisation.

The Expendability Doctrine

Oil tycoon Keith Connors is found dead in the garden of his villa; undoubtedly the work of a pro. His ex-wife flees to Libya, where she is linked to the brutal murder of the White House Trade Representative. In his investigations, Inspector Hawthorne discovers a sinister web of treachery and greed in the international oil business.

The Devil's Brothers

Catherine Bronston, a fifteen-year-old girl, is snatched outside her local swimming pool. The kidnappers, ruthless Albanian mafiosi, issue a ransom demand containing dismembered body parts. Catherine's father fears that the ongoing police investigation could reduce the possibility of her being found alive.

Sign up to the Bookscape Newsletter at www.bookscape.co.uk to be the first to learn about Patrick Mackeown's latest work, including thrillers in the style of Dan Brown.