

## HE TALKING STICK

by Bart G. Farkas

"What's the address?" I asked, as Bob put the van into gear and started it rolling down the street. "57 Pillar Road," was his answer. It didn't surprise me that we were going to the old area of town. Our work involved old buildings; actually, it involved tearing down the old abandoned structures for small companies that had purchased the property for new apartment complexes. Most often these houses were merely shells that served as a refuge for vermin, crack heads, and street people. But, occasionally a house had an old iron stove or a restorable antique rocking chair that could be salvaged for a small profit. This was one of the little perks our job had. We could take home whatever we found in these junk heaps; so the four of us — Bob, Neal, Dave, and myself — always went to have a thorough look around before demolition.

There was a steady rain that made the images through the windshield alternate between clarity and distortion as the wiper blades swished back and forth on their watery bidirectional journey. The brisk westerly wind made the puddles in the road ripple and cringe with the pelting rain. As we pulled onto Pillar road I could see Neal's car parked in front of a large, run-down Victorian mansion: The place was huge, with turrets on either corner of the front. From the front of the house I could see a massive oak front door, but the rest of the house remained featureless due to the thick vegetation that had overgrown the structure.

"Hi guys," I shouted to Neal and Dave as I got out of the van and started to walk up to the house where they were already inspecting the doorway. Neal was busy looking at the large brass knocker shaped like an elephant's head. "Jesus! I can't believe that somebody hasn't ripped this off yet; it must be worth at least a hundred bucks!" We all nodded silently in response. "Well, let's get at her. No time like the present," blurted Dave. I took my crowbar and wrenched open the door to the creaking sounds of splintering wood on metal.

Inside it was dark. Only faint daylight filtered through the trees surrounding the house, and the windows were covered in a thick dust. There was a large spiral staircase in the middle of the entrance way. "Weird design," said Bob. "It reminds me of the house in that horror video I watched the other night — what was the name of that?"

"Return of the Pussies from Hell," chuckled Neal. We all laughed with him. The house was cool, damp, largely unfurnished, and fortunately looked as though no one had been living there in quite some time.

It was customary for us to split up, and the two places of interest to us were the basement and the attic. This time it was Bob's and my turn to check out the upstairs and, most important, the attic. People will store things in their attic without telling anyone, and, once deceased, often no one would look up there, and the stored belongings would age at a height. Other people would just put their old junk up in the attic and forget it purposely; after a good fifteen or twenty years, some stuff will become valuable. So, armed with our Coleman flashlights and my trusty crowbar, Bob and I headed up the stairs to find our fortune.

The rooms upstairs were a disappointment: only a few tattered pieces of junky furniture scattered about. We quickly gave up and looked around for the attic door, which we found in the bathroom, above the doorway, disguised by a stylish moulding that enclosed the perimeter of the entrance. The opening into the attic was no more than two feet across — just enough for us to squeeze through — and I was disappointed, as it seemed unlikely that anyone would go to the trouble of storing objects in such an awkward place. But we found a couple of old packing crates to stand on, and within minutes we had gained access to the attic.

To our surprise the attic was not lightless. There was a small window at the apex of one of the four steeples in the room, which was large enough to stand up in at the centre. The walls sloped away on four sides from the middle of the chamber, which was about twenty feet square. There was a small chest and an old file cabinet pushed up against the far wall, just under the window, so we squeezed in for a closer look.

The file cabinet proved to be full of a lifetime's worth of tax returns for somebody named Sir Edward Cumberland. "Shit, do you know what it takes to get knighted?" Bob asked, with a look of amazement on his face. "This guy must have done something really important in his life, or he paid somebody off big time!"

"Probably 'laid' somebody big time," I quipped. Further investigation of the file cabinet yielded no other information on Mr. Cumberland. "Maybe he was on a search for the Holy Grail and stopped in Vancouver," I jabbed.

"Very funny," countered Bob. "Let's see what's in the box."

The chest was small, a little bigger than your basic shoe box, I guess. The chest needed a skeleton key to open it, but a crowbar did just as well. Inside, there was only one object: a stick, one foot long, with elaborate swirled carvings adorning a shaft that was black but did not look stained or painted. The bottom of the rod had a small hole, through which a piece of leather was strung. The carvings progressed up the shaft and led into a wild tuft of what appeared to be horse or perhaps cow hair that sprang from the top.

"What the hell is this?" I inquired, not expecting an answer. I reached into the chest and

withdrew the object, cradling it in both my hands. It had a solid and substantial feel. I thought that this must be what a king's sceptre feels like.

"Wow, that's really a work of art," Bob said. "But I don't think it's worth anything. Kind of like a lamp made from a clarinet."

By the time Frank and Dave were on the scene, we had discovered a crumbling piece of yellowed scribe in the bottom of the chest. It read:

23 September 1934

The talking stick is to be used by men who gather after dusk to reveal themselves to the side that once was. The Zulus have used it for centuries. He who bears the stick speaks, the others must listen in confidence. I bid you not use this stick if you are not true of heart; the talking stick has many faces. To be on the other side permanently means death. The stick can leave you on the other side.

Signed,  
Sir John Cumberland

"What's with the weird lettering at the bottom?" Dave asked.

"Beats me." I looked up, and nobody else had a response.

"Wait a minute," Neal started. "I think that the writing might be ancient Greek. I took a course on that stuff in university, not that I remember any of it though."

"That's why you drive a tractor and demolish houses for a living, eh Einstein?" I chopped back. Actually, two of us had completed university educations but were unable to find work in our fields; mine was economics and Dave's was history.

"Seems like hocus pocus to me. It looks like that door knocker is all that's worth anything here," finished Neal. "If that's the way you guys feel, I'm gonna take the stick. Any complaints?" I asked.

There were none.

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A week passed, and with our help the old house on Pillar road passed with it. It had become customary for the four of us to get together for drinks and a barbecue once a month, this time being my turn to host. There was the usual beer and charred steak, and the Blue Jays crushed K.C. 7-3 on the tube. A good evening was being had by all, and was beginning to wind down, when I got the idea that maybe we should give the talking stick a try. Fortunately, I felt, everyone had just enough beer in their systems to agree, albeit reluctantly. We sat around the outdoor fire pit, the flames providing a comforting heat in the cool night air.

"This guy's instructions say that the person holding the stick has the floor, so to speak, and he can say whatever he wants," I started. "The other thing is that everything that is said does not leave here."

Everybody nodded. And after taking a swig of beer, Dave said, "Is Elvis coming to this?"

"Very funny," Bob chimed in. "Let's give it a try, and if it doesn't work out we bury our host up to his neck in the garden."

"Don't sweat it, Kreskin, I'll start," I affirmed.

As I removed the stick from the chest, its weight inundated me with an odd feeling of security and warmth. I rolled it around in my hands; the sight of the swirling carvings sent a wave of relaxation over me, and soon I was alone with the flames and the stick. The guys were still there, I was sure, but I felt as though I was detached. I remember talking about my ex-wife when my skin started to crawl, like an electric charge was running through me. My mouth was filled with an earthy metallic taste that brought a wave of nausea, and I closed my eyes and tried to stand up.

When I opened my eyes, I was looking at a moonlit jungle.

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Breath quick, muscles tense, eyes fixed on something moving just ahead. It is my prey. The smell is sweetly sickening; my head swimming with the pungent aroma of game. Sparks of excitement, hunger, and trepidation compel me; it is familiar, yet I have never sensed this before. I have no control over my actions. It must be some sort of dream state, able to sense everything but unable to control my actions.

Moving forward slowly, gracefully, every muscle in my body is ready. The animal itself looks like nothing I have ever seen, perhaps a cross between a deer and a pig. Forward, ever so slowly, a twig snaps and the beast flashes a glare at me before darting away with fear in its eyes. Using every muscle, tendon, and bone in my body I plunge forward through the jungle in pursuit of my meal. Blurred flashes of green speed past. The adrenaline surges through my body, as every move the creature makes in its escape is quickly reproduced before my eyes. Extending into the air, I launch onto the animal, my teeth sinking into the side of its neck. The warmth of the flow of blood satisfies and intensifies the grip of my jaws, my head flailing back and forth, savagely snuffing out the life of the creature. It ceases to move, its eyes are blank, and I gruesomely rip its neck apart with my teeth and claws.... A hand on my shoulder.

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As quickly as I was in the jungle, I was back with the guys. I stood up in front of the fire, then fell to the ground and vomited into the beer cooler. "Jesus, man, are you OK?" Bob offered, not looking particularly surprised by my actions.

"I...I had a dream or something," I sputtered, getting my bearings. "Is somebody putting

acid in the beer?"

"I think the problem is that someone's been putting BEER in the beer," chuckled Frank.

The talking stick lay on the ground near my lawn chair, and, judging from the look of the others, nothing strange had happened.

"Well, shit you sure got a pile off your chest, buddy," Bob said. "I didn't know that the ex was givin' you such a hard time. You seemed so serious I thought you were in a trance or something; you've gotta lighten up!" He finished with a smile and a pat on my back.

"My turn," blurted Frank. "Give me the stick."

I was in a dazed state of recovery as Frank took the stick firmly in his grasp and started to talk. "Well boys, it all started in a small 2,000-watt radio station in Akron, Ohio," he quipped with a smile on his face. "I was young then...and I, uh...."

Frank's face became deadly serious, his eyes glazed. He whimpered and spoke of a childhood that involved frequent beatings from his father and older brothers. His eyes were blank and glassy as the fire danced inside them, both his hands grasping the stick as if it were a lifeline.

I couldn't help noticing that he was drooling slightly from the corners of his mouth as he spoke of the bizzare disciplinarian actions taken against him for the petty mistakes he had made as a young boy. This continued for a while, and then his head jerked up, his eyes blazing with fear. The stick fell to the ground, as did Frank as he vomited in the grass.

Silence flowed though the four of us, as Frank gained his composure and looked up at me. I knew that he had been where I had, and the dazed fear in my gut went from a searing ball to a cold lump.

In the minutes that followed we recounted our experiences. We both seemed to have been some sort of large cat hunting its prey; neither of us could remember anything about what we had said to the guys, and it was as if our spirits were transported to another world but our minds and bodies stayed behind. Our encounters with, as Cumberland had put it, "the side that once was," had taken a lot out of us.

The stick went into the chest, and everyone went home bewildered — Bob and Neal no doubt taking a cavalier attitude, thinking that Frank and I were pulling the year's most sophisticated practical joke.

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In the week that followed I felt invigorated, no, liberated from my troubles with my ex-wife. It was as if it was resolved and didn't matter any more. My body felt fifteen years younger, like I was eighteen again. I had energy to burn. As the week wore on, my thoughts turned more to the stick. What had happened? My personal feeling was that the stick had some kind of power to transport a person to a lower level of life, something else on the evolutionary chain, giving the recipient a taste of what used to be: hunting, feeding, surviving, and living a nomadic life.

On Wednesday I talked with Frank, and he corroborated my feelings. We decided that the four of us should gather again soon, so that the others could share the experience the stick provided. That night, Frank and I went out for dinner and both ordered rare steaks.

We gathered on Saturday at my house, both Neal and Bob expecting a climax to the joke. We had dinner, a few beers each, then settled out around the fire in the back yard. The night was unusually warm, and we were all dressed in Bermuda shorts and sandals.

"Remember the rules?" I asked.

"Sure, let's get started, Houdini," smiled Bob as he took the stick out of the chest. "Aaahhh... Ack!" Bob feigned extreme pain and vomiting, doing his best Captain Kirk imitation, and the heaving soon turned to laughter. Neal was killing himself, but Frank and I could only manage vague smiles.

"Are you going to try it, or are you going to be a dinkus?" I asked, probably looking too serious.

"Chill out and take a joke," Bob jabbed with a hint of annoyance in his voice.

Bob returned to his seat and, grasping the stick, started to talk. "I'd like to talk about you two guys getting a little too wrapped up in this piece of wood." He looked carefully at the stick; he was silent for a long time, then looked up, and trained his eyes on the fire.

"I've been having some troubles making ends meet lately, what with Jen in school and the kids. I guess I've been tilting the bottle a little too often, and I can't say I spend enough time with the family, either. And then there's Joice."

Frank and I exchanged glances. He was THERE. Right now, as he spoke, he was in another world, somewhere stalking his prey, although to us he was explaining the guilt over his infidelity. I watched Bob carefully as he spoke of his problems, looking for any betrayal of his encounter.

Within minutes, Bob dropped the stick and fell to his knees. "Holy shit." The words squeaked out of his throat as if he had just inhaled a puff of grass. He did not vomit, but it was clear he was sweating profusely as he pulled himself to his feet.

"You're not gonna believe where I just was," Bob sputtered, regaining his breath.

"You'd be suprised," challenged Frank.

In watching Bob, I had forgotten about Neal, who sat quietly in his seat with a beer in his left hand (if one of us was ever caught drinking with the dominant hand, the punishment was to down the rest of whatever was in the glass or bottle — sort of a male-bonding thing).

"I am not going to do this, at least not tonight," said Neal, looking rather pale.

"I'm not sure that I don't blame ya," said Bob. "I'm not sure that I ever want to go through with that again."

"Why, what happened?" I asked.

"It was just like you said, I was some sort of animal, hunting.... But it was like I was really there!"

"No shit, Sherlock! Why do you think I was puking my guts out? I don't normally kill an animal and eat it raw." Frank was practically yelling.

"OK, I think Bob needs some time to sort things out; let's just leave him alone," I mediated. "Neal, wanna give it a shot?"

"Forget it. Not tonight, I gotta go." Neal stood up and walked toward his car. "See you guys tomorrow," he said, sliding into his Camaro.

"I think we should all call it a night," said Frank. With that we parted, each with knowledge that would make for wakeful sleeps.

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Work went without a hitch that week, and Neal expressed an interest in using the stick. However, on Friday morning Bob was late picking me up (Bob was never late); his phone was constantly busy, so I got on my motorbike and rode over. I found Bob sitting on his front porch, head in hands.

"Hey bud, what's up?" I started, sensing that this was not going to be pretty.

"She left me. I got home from work last night, and she was gone along with the kids."

It was clear as I sat down beside Bob that he had indulged in a beer or twenty through the night. We gave up on work that day, and all of us agreed to meet at my house that night to talk and console Bob.

That night we assumed our positions around my fire pit, all wearing jackets and jeans, as it was an unseasonably cool night and there was a stiff breeze from the west that made the fire bend and flicker.

"Guys, I don't feel much like talking. Why don't we let Neal try the stick?" Bob said somberly.

"OK, give it here," Neal offered, his face anxious.

Neal took the stick and said nothing for 30 seconds; then, with the familiar glazed look, he began to speak: "I told Jen about Bob fucking that hooker. I've always wanted her...I guess I thought by telling her I could get her as my own."

Bob just stared in amazement, dumfounded. Neal continued to talk about the clandestine way he went about sabotaging Bob's marriage. His voice became increasingly strained, his brow beaded with perspiration, despite the cold. His speech became choppy and loud, and I was getting up to take the stick away from him when he screamed:

"GET THEM OFF ME! I want to go ba...."

He was cut off, his face contorting in pain as he fell forward out of the lawn chair onto his face. Frank and I rushed up and turned Neal over; his face was frozen in a fearful sneer, his skin as grey as concrete.

"He's not breathing!" shouted Frank. "Call an ambulance!"

Bob ran into the house to do just that. Neal lay on the ground with that ghastly sneer on his face, his eyes cold and dead, staring past me, and the talking stick still gripped firmly in both hands.

It took the paramedics ten minutes to pry the stick from Neal's hands. They said they had never seen anything like it before.

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We buried Neal three days later. The official cause of death was a ruptured cerebral aneurysm. The Talking Stick rests in its chest (complete with a new lock) in my attic, where the three of us boarded it up.

Perhaps one day it can be used to bring my friend back. •

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