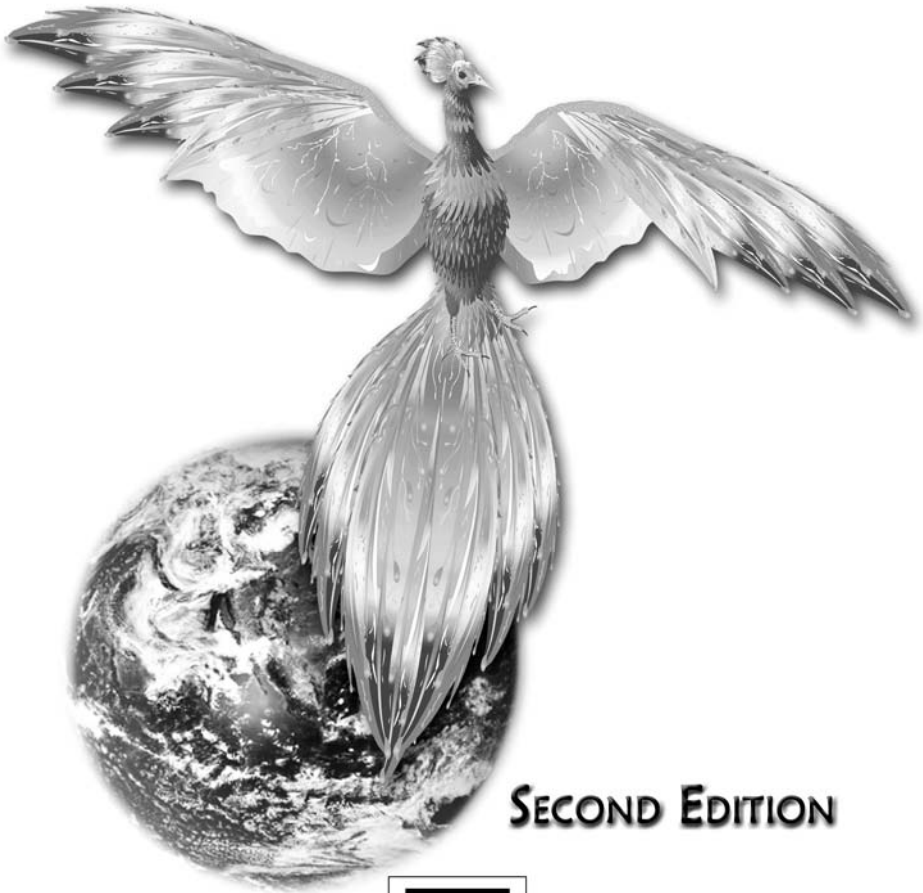


GREGORY BERNARD BANKS

PHOENIX TALES

Stories of Death & Life



SECOND EDITION



Stockbridge, GA

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ESCAPE VELOCITY

Previously published, in a slightly different form, in Creative Brother's Sci Fi Magazine #1 (debuted August 2003).

“ALLOW ME TO get a wheeler for you, Mr. Myles,” said Attendant 31415 of the Caring Hands Nursing Facility, whom Jory had nicknamed Pi. The whine of her joints filled the hallway as she strode alongside him. Although “she” was one of the more functional ANA’s (Autonomous Nursing Assistants) in the facility, she still looked like a stylized astronaut’s suit from the 1960s.

“I don’t need no damn chair!” Jory wheezed as he shuffled along the catacomb-like halls. He ran a hand through his thin, cottony hair. He shivered from the draft permeating the seam in the back of his antiseptic-white hospital gown. His old war-wound began to ache, and absently he reached back to rub the thick scar.

The facility’s walls were mostly naked, except for a few pictures found here and there. Jory’s favorite, over on Hall G174, reminded him of Tallulah Gorge. His late wife loved to stand on the suspension bridge overlooking Hurricane Falls, dreaming of one day spreading her arms wide, leaping from the bridge, and being carried away by the winds. When she’d died in 2023, just before his 81st birthday, Jory had taken her ashes and tossed them into those winds. His only regret was that he hadn’t kept his promise to join her.

Jory paused at the lone corridor to his left, which led to the outside world. Its floor, narrow and white like a dense row of cotton, seemed to go on for miles. He sighed as he knelt to begin picking, sighing because he knew that this backbreaking labor would take him all day. His fingers hurt

at just the thought of the task before him, yet as always, it had to be done. “Cotton don’t pick itself, boy!” he heard Paw Paw say.

He ignored the pain in his joints as he reached out to pluck the first boll—

“Mr. Myles?” said a voice. A firm hand grabbed his arm. Jory stared into Pi’s mirrored face. “Have you injured yourself?” she asked as she pulled him to his feet. “Should I get your medicine?”

“No,” Jory said as he shook his head to clear his dementia-ravaged mind. One hundred and one years of living were finally taking their toll on him.

“But,” said Pi, “Rule 129 clearly states—”

“Screw the rules!” Jory shouted, taking a last glance toward the hallway leading outside. He wondered if his once athletic legs could carry him to freedom if he built up enough speed. He squinted. The light from the distant doorway was like the first glimpse of sunrise over his grandfather’s Sapelo Island farm...

“Paw Paw?” young Jory whispered, as if afraid to disturb the old man whose battered frame lay before him. His grandfather’s right eye was open, while his left was swollen shut. Drunken shouts echoed across the cotton fields. The hooded invaders from the mainland were running back to their boats after finishing their mischief. The first peek of the sun lit the horizon, while the flames from his family’s home were tickling the sky.

“Weh yo Daddy, Boy?” Paw Paw asked, his Gullah accent even thicker on his bloodied lips.

“He and Mama’re fighting the fire. I’ll fetch ’em—”

“No,” the old man replied as he gripped Jory’s wrist. “Jis’ listen rale careful, okay?”

Jory nodded.

Paw Paw slowly reached inside his torn shirt, pulling out a chain with a gold-orange stone dangling from it. Jory’d seen the precious heirloom before, but had never touched it.

“This should’uh gone to yo daddy, but I spec after t’night you’re man nuf to handle it now.” He pressed the necklace into Jory’s hand.

Its shape reminded the boy of a tear. The small bubble in its midst was like a tiny pearl. Jory held it up. Light from the fire was sucked into its depths. He put it around his neck. The weight of all the others who'd born it seemed to fall on his shoulders. He turned to ask Paw Paw a question when someone grabbed him from behind. He felt a sharp pain in his chest—

“Mr. Myles!” Pi said loudly, her voice sounding as if she were underwater. “Are you all right? Can you speak?” Jory was on his back. Blurred lights sped by like rectangular suns. He felt pain and wetness on the back of his head.

“You will be fine, Mr. Myles,” said another ANA, who ran beside the stretcher to his left. “Just remain calm. We will reach the infirmary shortly.” The second ANA pulled out an injector and pressed it against his neck. Jory’s limbs immediately went limp. His hand crept to his chest. Instead of the amber pendant, he found only wispy chest hair. His skull felt as if it were about to explode.

“Please let me die this time,” he muttered as he took his last breath.



“Captain, we need more speed—”

“Hold your course, Mabler. One more orbit and we’ll reach escape velocity...”

JORY OPENED HIS eyes. The antiseptic odor of the Commons area only flavored the stench of stale urine and musty bodies. An old “B” movie played on the wall-sized screen before him. Around him were rows of society’s discards who, like himself, had been filed away by the authorities and, for the most part, forgotten by the outside world.

He lifted his head from his shoulder. Every joint throbbed despite the supposed painkillers he received every day. Jory’s thoughts were scattered and his memory fuzzy, but he assumed that he’d been “vived” again. A dark shape loomed over him, mercifully shielding him from the

viewscreen's glare. The figure leaned close and kissed him lightly on the cheek. She smelled musky and warm.

"Patti...?" he said under his breath.

"Excuse me?" the woman asked.

"Nothing," Jory replied with a sigh. He looked up into Melanie's face. Her hair shone silver in the room's dim lighting, though the slightest hint of red clung to its roots. A shadow obscured her minimally wrinkled face.

"Are you all right, Jory? I mean, are you—"

"Still here," he replied. "Guess I'm like an old watch. Just wind me up good and I start ticking again."

Melanie laughed, her hazel eyes displaying relief. "I thought they'd finally fried you. You know that Dave went last week?"

Jory shook his head at the vision of Dave sitting in the corner with the others, his eyes peering wildly into the emptiness of his own mind; his mouth slack and drooling, constantly spewing senseless chatter. Jory'd seen many loved ones die in his lifetime, including his beloved Patti. But seeing people treated like human yo-yos, vived over and over like frayed strings until their minds finally snapped, was torture.

"How many times has it been?" Melanie asked.

"Don't remember. Lost count long ago." Jory had died numerous times, of various things such as strokes, heart attacks, etc. He'd even managed to break his own fool neck once. But these mechanical bastards kept bringing him back. The genetic treatments that might cure many of his afflictions, including Alzheimer's, were banned in the U.S. And so was his choice to die in peace. He often wondered if this were some kind of cosmic joke. Maybe he'd died after all only to discover that there really wasn't such a thing as Heaven. Maybe the afterlife was just one never-ending hell.

Jory saw Pi approaching out of the corner of his eye. Melanie moved aside as the ANA drew near.

"You have a guest, Mr. Myles," Pi said in her faux-cheerful tone.

"My granddaughter?" Jory asked.

“Yes. She’d like to speak to you at once.” Pi moved behind his chair and pulled a skullcap over his head. Melanie leaned close and gave his hand a squeeze.

“Talk to you later,” she said before walking away.

Jory barely heard her as he thought of Jade. His granddaughter had spent much of her time, money, and influence as a civil rights lawyer trying to get Jory out of the facility. But as a ward of the state, his rights were nonexistent. Jade had also been his lone contact with the world beyond the facility walls for the last fifteen years.

Pi dropped the cap’s visor in front of his eyes. She touched a button near his forehead, and Jory found himself face to face with his granddaughter.

She still had the same puffy cheeks and gentle eyes from her childhood. Her long braids encircled her head like a dark crown. Wisdom and confidence shown in her face. She’d long left the little girl who was searching for her place in the world behind.

“Hi Grandpa,” she said, her voice soft and deep.

“Hello Darling,” Jory replied to the disembodied virtual head floating before him. The darkness in which they floated pressed in on him, reminding him of the oppressive nights in Vietnam, when every breath was dogged by the bark of gunfire and the screams of those falling before it. The scent of charred flesh often grew so strong that he puked. Other times, he just wished his turn before his maker would come so it’d all be over. Who would’ve believed that a land so lush and green could drip with so much red—?

“Grandpa?”

“What...?” Jory looked around, quickly remembering where he was. He refocused his thoughts on Jade, hoping she hadn’t noticed his brief confusion. Her moist eyes were questioning.

“I said, how are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m fine, Darling,” Jory replied between silent gasps. “And how ’bout them children of yours?”

“Keeping me busy as always,” Jade said with a hint of a smile. “They ask about you all the time.”

“Wish they could visit.”

“Me too,” Jade replied, “but they barely let *me* have these televisits now. Some garbage about keeping the patients isolated for their own well being.”

“I know,” Jory replied. An awkward silence followed. Jory knew it was useless to ask if she’d made any progress in busting him out of the care facility, and he assumed she was just as reluctant to give him the bad news.

“Look, Grandpa—”

“It’s alright, Darling. I know you tried your best.”

Jade stared into the endless void below. “I can’t stand seeing you like this.”

“It’s not so bad.”

“Have you had any more...incidents?” she asked.

“No,” Jory lied. “I haven’t kicked the bucket in quite a while now.” He displayed a forced grin. “Looks like I’m finally getting the hang of this living thing.”

“I have a complete status report on you right here, Grandpa.”

“Dammit,” Jory muttered under his breath.

“I’m getting you out of there,” Jade said flatly. Jory noticed the lines marring the corners of her eyes and mouth.

“It’s no use, Darling,” Jory replied. “Ain’t no lawyer in the country that can bust me out of here now. Not even you.”

Jade stared at Jory. “No, Grandpa. I won’t leave you there a day longer.”

“But—”

“I can’t say more right now, but promise me you’ll be ready to go when I come for you.”

“Jade—”

“Just promise me, *please?*”

“Okay,” Jory said.

“Good. See you soon, Grandpa. Love you.”

“I love you too, Darling.”

There was a flash, and the sights and smells of the Commons area assaulted Jory once more. He stared at the blank walls, the blank floors, the blank faces of the other patients, and the faceless blanks tending to them. He thought of the determination in Jade's voice, in the set of her jaw. Hope had been something he'd forsaken long ago.

And he wondered if he should dare to have some now.



JORY CLUTCHED THE sheets to his chin as Pi carefully tucked him in.

"I'll be in my charging cubicle, Mr. Myles. The MoniLert on your wrist—"

"Will wake you if there's an emergency," finished Jory, who'd heard the same mantra every day for a decade and a half. "And if I need anything at all, just press the big red button on its side."

"Correct!" replied Pi. "So sleep well, Mr. Myles. Do not allow the bedding insects to pierce your skin with their teeth." Pi's laughter sounded like the cry of a canned hyena.

"Nighty night," replied Jory with a wave of his fingers.

The lights went off as Pi strode out of the room. As soon as the door closed, Jory threw off the covers to expose his flannel shirt, worn denim overalls, and dirty white sneakers. He tugged and scratched at various parts of his body. He hadn't had on decent clothes in years, and was thankful the ANA's hadn't seen fit to take them away altogether. He stood up, pausing to let his legs get used to bearing his weight again.

He dragged his small duffel from under the bed. He checked the few contents: assorted clothing items, the Purple Heart he received for being lucky enough to get shot in the ass five months into his stint in 'Nam, and a flashlight whose ancient batteries still gave off a faint glow when he switched it on. He reached into his front pocket and pulled out a picture of Patti. He shined the light on it. Her face was angular, her brown eyes burning with a passion for life. He never understood why "Spitfire," as he

often called her, had been attracted to him. But she always said that from the moment they'd met, she'd known that the little "Geechie" man from Georgia was the only one for her.

Jory stumbled back against the bed when he heard a noise at the door. Many nights he'd imagined footsteps in the corridor, envisioned shadows darker than the night darting around the room. He groped for a weapon, but finding none, gripped the flashlight with both hands and held it high. He crept toward the door, his heart rhythms stumbling. He held his breath to keep from wheezing as the lock gave way. The door swung inward. A beam of light enveloped him as he prepared to lash out.

"Grandpa," a voice whispered.

"Jade?"

"It's me. Are you ready to go?"

"How the hell—"

"I'll explain on the way," Jade said. "Now come on." She grabbed him by the arm.

"Wait!" Jory slipped out of her grasp and shuffled over to the bed. After retrieving his duffel, Jade rushed him toward the door. As soon as Jory crossed the threshold, an alarm went off. All the lights in the facility came on.

"Patient 685 has left his room," said an ambient voice. "Attendant 31415, please investigate."

Jory glanced down at his wrist. His MoniLert blinked. "Dammit!" he said. "This thing must've warned them."

"Let's go!" Jade shouted, dragging Jory behind her. She led him through a confusion of hallways that Jory still couldn't navigate even after his 15-year long stay.

"How did you get in here," he gasped as they ran.

"A friend got me the building plans."

"But what about the alarms?"

"There are none, at least not to keep people out, anyway. Guess they figured no one in their right mind would want to break *in*."

"They're right about that," Jory said. Jade looked back at him. They exchanged grins.

They passed the painting reminiscent of Tallulah Gorge. Jory glanced at it fondly. He heard the shrill whining of mechanical joints coming up from behind.

“Stop, Mr. Myles,” said Pi, rapidly approaching. “You should not be out of bed. You could injure yourself.”

Jory saw Melanie standing in a doorway ahead. She reached out to him as they passed, and he paused to look at her.

“Grandpa!” Jade shouted.

“Mister Myles!” cried Pi.

Melanie stared at Jory a moment longer, then her knees gave way. She tumbled to the floor with a loud smack. Pi nearly trampled the woman as she—it—stopped beside her.

“Miss Roberson, are you all right?” asked the ANA.

Melanie turned her head to glance at Jory. Her eyes grew wide and her mouth moved. Catching the words “go” and “jackass,” Jory got the hint. He smiled at her before turning to run.

“Patient down,” said a voice in the ceiling, “in Hall C19—” The rest of the message was lost on Jory as he staggered forward.

A few moments later, he heard Pi’s deliberate footfalls once more. He glanced back. The ANA appeared around one corner as he and Jade turned another.

“Just a little farther, Grandpa,” Jade said.

Jory stumbled and fell. Jade hauled him to his feet and urged him on ahead of her. Jory’s lungs burned, his legs felt on the point of giving way, and his head spun.

“Run!” Jade shouted...

“Run!” shouted his commander as the ambush was sprung. Jory ducked, weaving from side to side as he hauled ass, praying that the “Charlies” aim was poor. He flinched as bullets whistled by his ear and smacked into the ground at his feet. He ignored the shrieks of those falling around him. All he could think about was getting the hell out of there and returning home to Patti and his newborn son.

Jory suddenly cried out when something struck him from behind—

“Go!” shouted Jade as she shoved him forward. He staggered through the door into the sticky August air. Sweat immediately poured down his face. The sky, dark but aglow with stars, was almost too much to conceive. The enormity of it all nearly crushed him to the ground.

“This way,” Jade said, taking Jory by the hand. She led him to a small olive green car that looked like a combination between a Volkswagen Beetle and an old computer mouse. Jade spoke and the doors swung open. She stuffed him into the leatherish passenger seat, which immediately conformed itself to his body. As the door closed, instead of a seatbelt automatically embracing him, some sort of suction took hold of his torso to keep him firmly in place. He looked back toward the building as Jade climbed in the other side. He saw Pi’s silhouette inside the doorway, her faceplate and palms pressed against the glass. As the car sped away, he almost felt bad for the ANA.

Almost, he reminded himself.



THE HYDROGEN-FUELED AUTO cruised along, disturbingly silent, at 115 miles an hour. Despite the firm grip his seat had on him, Jory clutched the armrests and held his breath as they whipped around the slower traffic, which passed like Crayola-colored blurs. The sun had just risen, giving a warm blush to the sky.

Jory took a French fry from the carton in his lap and popped it into his mouth. He chewed slowly, savoring the taste. After years of the bland foods at the facility, even fake, overly salted potatoes were a heavenly treat.

“So what’s the plan now?” he asked, glancing at Jade. He was tempted to ask if he could hold the teardrop pendant dangling from her neck, but then thought better of it. His turn as its keeper had ended years ago. It belonged to her now, and she would pass it on to the next generation when she felt it was time.

“First,” Jade said, “we get you out of Georgia. Then we’ll borrow a car from a friend of mine in Anderson, S.C. and head for the Canadian border.”

“Look, Jade—”

“No, Grandpa!” Jade shouted. “I won’t let them take you back. I *can’t* let them take you back.” A tear rolled down her cheek.

“Thank you,” he said.

Jory stared ahead. Information popped up on the windshield overlay, displaying their current speed, location, upcoming exit numbers, and more.

“Get off here,” Jory said.

“What?”

“Just do it!” Jory screamed, looking at Jade. “Please?”

She turned off Interstate 85 onto I-985, and then a while later onto Highway 441. They shortly arrived at the entrance to Tallulah Gorge State Park.

“Go up past the lake and turn right,” Jory said.

Jade followed his instructions, and soon they were sitting in front of the old Jane Hurt Yarn Interpretive Center.

“Grandpa, we need to go.”

“I’m old, Darling. If I have to leave the state, let alone the country, you and I both know I ain’t never likely coming back, except in a box. I just want to say goodbye.”

Jade reached out and squeezed his hand. “But we need permits to go near the gorge, and I don’t think the center is even open yet.”

“You go check,” Jory said, “while I finish my fries.”

Jade sighed. “Yes, Grandpa.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek before climbing out of the car. As soon as she was gone, Jory got out and forced his cramping legs to carry him around to the back of the building. He followed the north rim trail, pausing at the top of the 400 steps leading down to the bridge. He glanced over his shoulder, then took a deep breath and began the long descent.

Jory quickly tired, his knees nearly buckling several times. He clutched the railings, his head light and his breath coming in ragged gasps. He kept reassuring himself that he didn't have far to go.

"Grandpa!" Jade cried from above.

"Mr. Myles," boomed another voice alongside her.

Jory didn't dare look back for fear he would stumble and fall. Besides, the weather-battered bridge was now within sight. Despite the hot season, the gusting breeze cooled his face.

Jory almost collapsed from exhaustion when he reached the bridge. He stayed on his feet by holding on to the railings, his arms bearing most of his weight. He eased along the bridge, oblivious to the approaching footsteps and shouted pleas. He looked down at the silvery spray from Hurricane Falls...

"Isn't it beautiful," Patti asked as they strode along the bridge. They were nattily attired in 1920's vintage garb, one of the cherished hobby/obsessions they both shared. The couple stopped in the very center of the bridge and leaned over the railing. The spectacular view mesmerized them, as always. Jory looked at his wife. He put his arm around her, pulling her close to revel in her scent. They'd only been married a year, and yet already he'd forgotten what his life had been like without her.

Patti inhaled the clear, autumn air. "Don't you wish we could jump into this wind and let it carry us away?"

"And where do you want to go?" Jory asked.

"Does it really matter?" Patti replied with a smile.

Jory kissed her on the lips before sliding his mouth over to her ear.

"Then one day we'll do it," he whispered.

"Promise?"

"Yes--"

"Grandpa! No!" screamed Jade as she reached the bridge.

Jory straddled the railing. He peered at his granddaughter. Sunlight glinted off the amber jewel at her neck. She stopped, her eyes flitting between him and the gorge. She grabbed hold of the ranger as he tried to push past her. Jory smiled. Jade nodded, then dropped her head and

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closed her eyes. He saw her hand slide up to grasp her teardrop-shaped pendant. He turned away from her and spread his arms wide. After taking a deep breath, he grinned as he slid off toward the depths below.

“Give her a kiss for me,” Jade whispered as Jory gave himself to the winds.