



TWO LONE STARS

Central Texas in January, 1986.

Walter leads an old brown mule across the unplowed field. He approaches Frank who stands beneath a big, knurly live oak, winter bare. "Howdy Frank."

"How do, Walter."

"Frank, my Margaret sent me on over t'see if'n you n' your Emma wanna come visit this Saturnight? We gonna watch shootin' stars."

"Shootin' stars?" Frank said. He raises his dark eyebrows. "Must be Bootide time."

"Yup," Walter said, "Bootide time 'tis. Yup. My Margaret's gonna be baken' cookies `n afixn' up hot chocolate."

"Cookies? Ya mean, Margaret's maken her *special* blackstrap moe-lass-us cookies?"

"Yup."

Frank pulls his long beard, "Them's those spicy cookies with the pee-kans?"

"Yup. N' plump raisins too."

"Well, now, Walter. Sounds like plenty o fun to me. But, I'll hav'ta ask mah Emma if'n we can come."

Directly above them, a crow gives a sharp caw. The two Texas farmers look up through bare branches to see the black bird silhouetted against winter sun. Not a cloud in the perfect blue sky.

Crow caws again.

"When they gwana shoot that purty school marm up? The one gwan 'n'ta outer space?" asked Frank, somewhat thinking aloud and now stroking his long beard.

"Well," replied Walter, taking his time, and tugging at his own long beard, "y'see, they all goin up in jus a couple o weeks. Six of 'em. Plus the purty school marm. Makes fer seven. Total."

Frank adds, "Yup, grand total ... seven."

"Did y'notice, Frank, how the Columbia crew look like they're off one of them tellyvision shows."

"Except, ain't no Columbia that's goin' to go, it's the Challenger."

"They got all differnet colors and ages and sexes. Have they got an Injin and an Israelite on board, ah can't recall."

"Don't worry Walter, everone'll get their chance in time. This ain't no Noah's Ark."

"Well Frank, all the kids in the USA 'll be watchin'. They're gonna t'affect a lotta little minds when that ol' skyrocket blasts off."

"I'm guessin' our government has a big message they wana send to all the little children."

"Huh?"

"Frank, the last space thing the kids got to see wz the Man on da Moon. When our guys landed up there. With the purty school marm on boad this is a shot the kids will remember this forever. A real chalenger for their impressionable minds and their growin' minds."

"We gotta celebrate with a neighborhood watchin' party. "

Sho'nuff, have us a real whoopty-do. "

The two farmers stand in a field long ago bared by the cotton harvest, but now re-growing green. Young rye set in sparse patches surrounded by the dried husks of last fall's

harvest. Old brown mule lowers head, long ears flop forward, and begins to munch the tender shoots. At high noon the Texas air is absolutely still.

"Too warm fer January, way too dry," Frank said, watching a worm move for shade under a dry oak leaf.

Sniff, sniff. "Smells t'me like a lot cracklin' tinder gowin to powder," Walter said, before he spits, "Shucks, t'wouldn't take nary a firefly fart t'ignite them windbreaker cedars." Walter nods toward a brown grove of thick scrubby trees along the far edge of the barren field, and spits.

"Well," Frank says, "we got one hellacious drought workin'.

"Shoot, 'n I just got mah flood relief check. Damn." Walter spits again but nothing comes out. He's temporarily gone dry. "Texas weather."

Frank leans over and fidgets with a long piece of rusted iron on the ground by the old tree. The object is placed between two large roots. It has a single bar on one end and twin prongs the other. The prongs are flushed-up against the base of the oak.

Walter tries to spit again.

Silence. The munching mule is busy and pays them no mind. A mockingbird is heard chattering from the direction of the cedars.

"Frank? What'n sam hill is that?"

"Is what, Walter?"

Walter points down to the iron object. "That thar rusty awron thang."

Frank swells with pride: "M' battree."

"Y'r *battree*?"

"A storage battree," Frank said. "Got the idea when I's out dowsin'. The iron prongs be draining 'lectrical essence outta the oak. The oxidation process itself plays catalyst an' da rusty by-product be da insulator."

"Be durned," responded Walter.

"Yup. 'N in just a little while longer the whole oak tree energy will be in there to call up. Right from mah battree."

"Be dag'nibbit," Walter sputtered. "How much longer ya gonna charge it?"

"Till the night before Easter, 2000. Battree might charge a mite faster if'n ah'd put a loadstone up again' this open end. But I'm taken' it slow fer this special tree."

Walter appears perplexed. "Fifteen years is a long time to be chargin y'r battree, Frank." Spits a unexpected wet ball past Frank's left boot. "Whacha think ya gwan do with it, then? Frank?"

"Wulp, Walter. I love this ol' oak. And I'm gonna take it with me in my pickup. So I'll always be with this tree the rest of my life wherever. My favorit tree. This here's a magic tree. I'd ever tell you that, Walter?"

"Frank, you only been talkin about this here bein' a magic tree sin' we were knee-high grasshoppers."

"Humph." Frank spits toward Walter.

"Keeey-rap." Walter spits back toward Frank. "That battree ain't got a bat's chance in hell o' workin."

"Wull I'd shore like to know why."

"The wayed I'd kno'd it ain't gonna work is ... I saw Doctor Carl Saygone from Princeton. Er, maybe Cornell."

"No matter, same thing."

"Well anyways, he was a-talkin on the TV about the cowsmoz and everythin'!"

"Talking on the TV? Don't you mean Shogon."

"Nope. Say-gone. Carl Saygone."

"Carol Say-gone! Ain't she the one sendin pornography out to the aliens?"

"Pornography? sheeet," Walter spits past Frank. "Shows what you knows 'bout art."

Frank spits on the dirt between he and Walter ... "And juz whaddez *she* know?"

"Wha yu dab burned fool. Doctor Carl Saygone ain't a she; he's a *married-man*. And Doctor Saygone must know somethin' or he wouldn't be talkin to us on the TV."

"So?"

"So? --so for one thing Doctor Carl Saygone says that that Russian history teacher is full-o-bull. Venus twern't never no comet. Didn't pop outta no Red Spot." Spits.

Frank is looking intently at the ground. "So. Velicowsky is full o bull, heh?" He kicks at the ground. His boot raises a small dust cloud.

"Yup," Walter continued. "N' that's not all, neither."

"Oh yeah?" Frank said. "Whell now..." Frank shuffles his feet in silence. The crow above caws three times. Noontime stillness. "So what else Carol Shogon got to say?"

"Welp," Walter said. "Don't ya know Doctor Saygone done told everone how Broca's lobe t'weren t'even a teeny weeny bit bicameral. Carl got right down, by gwad."

"Whattabout Wernicke?"

"Din't hear nothin' o' Wernicke. But, ah did find out all about *pseudo-science*."

Frank spits real hard. "*Sue Dough's science?*"

The crow above them is grown irritable and displeased with these two noisy animals.

Caws!

Flys off to find a peaceful tree.

Paying no mind to the crow, Frank takes a blue and white polkadot kerchief from his back pocket. Honks his nose into it. Stuffs the kerchief back in his overalls. "Who n tarnation is this here Sue Dough, anyway?" he said looking right at Walter, "She ain't 'nother one o dem tellivangelists? I sure n' hay-elle hope you didn't send her any o Margaret's hard earned money. --Did ya?" Spits. Looks hard at Walter.

Walter guides a slow strungout spit wad down to the dust next to Frank's boot. Not a word.

Frank and Walter stare intently at each other. Long long silence this time.

Frank audibly draws his breath ... "I'd jus' like ya t'tell me jus one thing, right now."

"What's that, Frank?"

"Jus, you tell me what Sue Dough's science got to do with mah battree?"

Walter takes off his ten-gallon straw and scratches his head. "Shucks." Shakes loose his long red hair. Puts his hat back on his head, red hair out. "Shucks, Frank. Bustin' all them clods with y'own bare feet plumb bruised your left-hemisphere. Don't ya get it? Doctor Carl Saygone says: *dowsing* is pure pseudo-science."

"So?"

"Well Frank," said Walter in his slowest Texan drawl, "it don't take no rocket scientist. It jus' logically follows, if'n your baahtree is based on the principles of dowsin', why ... shucks, Frank ... then it's *gotta* be pseudo science too!"

"My battree?"

"It don' even amount to a runny pile of bullsheet."

At this Frank coughs up a huge wad of yellow phlegm, he lobs it to the ground by Walter's dusty right boot. Frank wipes his hairy mouth on his red flannel shirt sleeve. Scuffles his feet, and covers the glob of phlegm with a pile of loose dust.

The two farmers look each other long in the eye.

Finally Frank shrugs his red flannel shoulders and saunters over to Walter's mule munching on the winter rye. He slaps the old mule loudly on its hindquarter.

"Walter," said Frank in an exceptionally long drawl. "If'n y'aaask me ... it jus' goes to show howz you can crowd your head with too much fancy learnin. Y' always had them straight A grades." Frank spits right.

Walter spits, left.

Old brown mule eats young green rye.

They hear a distant crow caw.

A special thank you to Jak Brand for her editing advice and review.

Two Lone Stars from *ChronosomeCircular*

Copyright 2006 by Oris Bracken