

Two Pairs of Shorts

By Bill Russo

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Foreword

Here are a few brief tales, from the upcoming book titled “A Pair of Shorts”. It started out with just a pair of stories, hence the original title; but after driving an 11 year old car 1500 miles through blizzards and falling trees in the winter of 2018 to get from New England to the only tropical part of the ‘great 48’, the stories just started growing wild like the Hibiscus trees outside my Florida retreat. When the volume expanded to four stories I changed the title to “Two Pairs of Shorts”. By the time it’s published in mid-summer there could be 24 or more narratives in it, so you might look for a title called “A Dozen Pairs of Shorts”.

The Ghost Writer leads off this mini-collection followed by a ghost story first told by the great American huckster, P.T. Barnum.

The third tale in this volume, “The Observer” originally appeared as a stand-alone short narrative on Smashwords where it received some acclaim. One reviewer who gave it Five Stars said.... **“This is one of the most unusual stories I've ever seen on Smashwords, and that's saying something. It's certainly an interesting take on the themes that it represents.”**

Another reviewer in his Five Star rating said, **“This author has the skill to bend storylines that seem totally unrelated into a plot that grips you from beginning to end.”**

Whether “The Observer” lives up to these generous assessments is for you to decide. Please let me know if you like it. My contact information is at the end of the book. At present there are a total of five stories included in this free sample version of the book. Check back here once in a while for an updated version because I intend to add a few more.

1. The Ghostwriter

You're undoubtedly familiar with the term "Ghostwriter". The word generally refers to a person, often a journalist, who is engaged to be the actual author of a book that will be credited to someone else, usually a famous person of the arts, sports, or politics. But during my college days in Boston during the 1900s "Ghostwriting" literally meant just that, a work written by a ghost!

Because the hands of ghosts are barely visible and have no substance they require considerable help getting their words down on paper. They need their own "Ghostwriter" – a flesh and blood person. Students from the 1960s made excellent scribes for specters, as you'll find out in this story from the pen of an aspiring author, in his room on the third floor of a Boston University dormitory in Kenmore Square.

"I got two more rejection slips today Jim, one from Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine and the other from The Old Farmer's Almanac. I couldn't even get into Readers Digest with my funny story about almost getting into a fight with legendary Boston Celtics Center Bill Russell over a comment I made about him and Wilt Chamberlain."

"Keep at it Will. Take it from your old pal and roommate, you've got talent. Eventually one of your stories will be accepted and you'll be on your way."

"Thanks Jim. I don't get it. I've read Jack Kirouac, Kahlil Gibran, and Ernest Hemingway. I stay up all hours of the night smoking an endless chain of cigarettes and drinking from a bottomless cup of coffee. This method worked for those great writers, why not me?"

"Maybe they used liquor instead of coffee. Why don't you try some rum?"

"No Jim. Remember what happened to me at that party. I drank four Rum and Cokes just to get up the courage to ask Norma Scallini to dance with me, but I ended up being 'ossified' – I was in a stupor, frozen to the couch. I couldn't move. Booze just isn't for me. I'll stick with coffee."

"Okay Will, whatever you say. I'm going over to Becky's tonight. Her roommate is away for the week so if things work out right you won't see me back in the dorm for two or three days. Good luck with the writing."

"Luck won't do it. I need some other kind of aid. Remember last week you told me about something you studied in your Psych class; Ghostwriting."

"Yes we did study it Will and many people claim it really works. It's actually called automatic writing. Why don't you give it a try? Sit down with a pad of paper on the desk and a pencil in your hand. Put yourself in a relaxed state, like a trance. Start writing but don't think about it. Just keep scribbling on the paper. According to those who believe in it, after a while some unseen force, perhaps a ghost, will take over and write something for you."

“Thanks Jim. Nothing else has worked so tonight I’m going to attempt to let a ghost whip up a yarn for me.”

After his friend left, Will Stander brewed a pot of coffee in the large ten cup percolator he bought at the five and dime. When the coffee was done, he tore the cellophane wrapping from a fresh pack of unfiltered Lucky Strikes, took a sniff of the aromatic tobacco, drew one out, and lit up.

As the smoke from the lucky circled his head, he sang the jingle used on television to advertise his favorite brand - ‘Cleaner, fresher, smoother. Luckies taste better. L S M F T! Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco. Then he laughed as he recalled what his roommate always said about the letters, L S M F T – “Loose Sweaters Mean Floppy Tits”. He was a card that Jim.

Before he could get started on the automatic writing, Will needed to finish an assignment for his creative writing class: write a gripping story using just one or two sentences.

The example given by Professor Nelson was the 1948 classic by F. Brown: “The last man on earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door.”

Will tried a variation on the theme: “The last man on earth opened the door after hearing a knock, before him stood the last woman on earth.”

Crumpling the paper into a tiny ball he shot it at the nearby wastebasket. “Two points!” he said when the tiny orb landed cleanly in the bucket. “And that’s about all professor Nelson would have given me for that.”

He tried another, “God created the world in six days. Man will create a weapon that can destroy it in six seconds.”

“That one’s no good either,” he told himself. “I can hear Professor Nelson now...”

“That is not a story Mr. Stander. It is merely an observation,” he will comment, pushing his glasses from his nose to his forehead, then he’ll scratch the grey whiskers on his chin before adding, “Though I do tend to agree with you.”

In frustration Will poured another coffee, fired up a fresh Lucky Strike and wandered over to the living room window. It was just past midnight. He looked down and noted that there were few cars on the street. Boston never was an all-night town like New York, although Ted’s Diner, just around the corner, was open 24 hours a day. You could always meet a few fellow students there, even at three or four in the morning.

Shifting his gaze towards Fenway Park he felt the warmth of familiarity when he saw the giant illuminated, red and white Citgo sign hanging high above the ballpark. A famous Boston landmark, it was even better known than the iconic Swan Boats of Boston Common.

Memories of Ted Williams, Dom Dimaggio, Yaz, Tony Conigliaro, and other great Red Sox players came flooding back to him.

Ted Williams, the last 400 hitter. In the early 1940s just before the 'Big War', he batted an amazing 406. Almost 20 years later, in 1960, he belted a home run in his final at bat before retiring at the age of 41. Ted blasted 521 'bombs' despite being out of baseball for three prime years while dropping bombs of another kind as a fighter pilot for the U.S. Navy and the Marine Corps during World War Two.

When the Korean conflict came along about a decade later, Ted answered the call one more time and spent the best part of two more prime years out of baseball, again flying fighter missions for the American armed forces.

Will's mind wandered as he recalled the career highlights of the heroes of his youth. Without realizing it, he drifted back to his writing desk and picked up a pencil, absent-mindedly doodling on a pad of paper.

Much later, when the lamp on his desk was outshined by the rays of the morning sun, especially strong for mid-March, Will blinked his eyes repeatedly, trying to force himself awake. He hadn't really slept, but on the other hand, he hadn't been conscious for over six hours.

"There's a stack of a hundred sheets or more piled up in front of me with writing on them and I don't remember putting a single word on paper!" he said in amazement.

Will picked up his flattened pack of Luckies and fished around inside it. "I can't be out. I just opened this pack last night. Ah there's one."

He drew out his last cigarette and crumpled the pack, holding it in front of his face while lining up a shot. The balled-up pack sailed from his hand and bounced off the rim of the waste basket before landing inside the bucket. "Two more points," smiled will. "I'm up to four now."

He dragged a match across the striker on a matchbook from the Lobster Claw on Huntington Avenue, where he had scored his first illegal drink of Seagram's and Seven-up three years prior as a Freshman.

Igniting his last 'Lucky' he put what was left from the 'ten-cupper' into his mug and settled down to read the pages written by him, or perhaps by a ghost.

"This is good. This is good stuff!"

Thrilled after reading just six pages, Will knew that the tale he, or the ghost concocted, was top quality adventure fiction. It was a fantasy of love and war set in a mythical kingdom at the dawn of civilization.

After reading through to the last page, he grabbed the pile of papers and headed for the nearest subway station to make his way to Beacon Press, one of the oldest publishing houses in Boston.

“This is fine work,” extolled the junior editor Jim Pearson when he finished the first chapter. “I’m going to get Mrs. Annassus to have a look at it. She’s the head of fantasy fiction. We don’t publish a lot of that genre, but this looks special.”

Mrs. Annassus quickly agreed and signed Jim to a contract on the spot which gave him a five figure advance as well as a deal for five more books. She typed an order for 15,000 copies hardcover, and 40,000 paperbacks - a huge press run for a first-time author.

The book took off and immediately shot up the best seller lists. Fans of the sword and sorcery niche compared it favorably to the work of Robert Howard, the twisted genius behind dozens of great horror classics as well as the Conan the Barbarian series.

In June, a few days before the now successful author, Will Stander, was due to graduate from Boston University, his wonderful new life began to crumble to pieces because of the following item published in Boston’s largest newspaper, The Globe.

“The Boston Globe ‘Searchlight Team’ has uncovered evidence that B.U. student Willard Stander did not actually write “Grave Valor”, the adventure book which recently placed him on the New York Times Best Seller List.

“The investigative team headed up by Howie Barnical, learned that the book credited to Stander was part of a series of articles published in pulp magazines in the early 1900s shortly after the turn of the century. They were written by Lloyd Larson, who was an imitator and admirer of Conan the Barbarian author, Robert E. Howard. Unlike Howard, Larson’s work received little notice during his lifetime and has been mostly ignored by contemporary readers.”

Beacon Press immediately cancelled his contract and Boston University expelled him. With no degree and the shame of being called a plagiarist by the Boston Globe as well other Boston daily newspapers including the American Record, things looked very bleak for Will Stander.

Before leaving the school for the final time, Will was summoned to a meeting with his former Professor, Herman Nelson.

“Will, I called you in here because you’ve been a hard worker in my class. You are only a C student when measured by actual grades, but if I could grade you on desire and hard work, you’d get an A.”

“Thanks Professor Nelson. All I ever wanted to be was a writer. From the time I could read, and even before, I just wanted to tell stories. I guess I simply don’t have the talent. But I swear to you Professor I did not steal Grave Valor. It just came to me when I was practicing Ghostwriting.”

“Yes, Will I learned that from your roommate and I do believe you. What I think happened is that you read the story long ago and forgot about it. When you were in your trance you subconsciously and unintentionally copied Lloyd Larson’s original work.”

“That is possible professor but I’m sure I’ve never read anything by him nor had I heard of him until I read that story in the Glove. I have learned since, that his writing is not in print anymore. There’s no way I could get access to his work even if I wanted to.”

“That’s true Will. I tried to dig up some of his stuff and even I couldn’t find anything by him. Only a few of his works were ever actually published and most of them were in tiny publications. It was just by chance that the Glove investigative team happened upon a copy of an obscure pulp magazine from 1917. In it, word for word, was the story that you claimed to have written.”

“I never saw that magazine Professor. There’s no way I could have copied it.”

“It doesn’t matter Will. The damage is done. But I do have some good news.”

“I could use some good news. Not only am I not going to graduate and get my degree, but also the publishing company is suing me to get back the money they’ve paid me.”

“That’s the good news Will. They can’t recover a penny. Lloyd Larson’s work is in the public domain. You had the legal right to publish the book, even under your own name and to profit by it. Hire a lawyer and have him go to the publisher. You’ll be able to keep your money and since there’s now a lot of interest in Larson’s work, they’ll probably republish the book, keeping your name on it. They may reduce your royalty rate, but you’ll still make some money from it.”

“Well that takes some of the sting away Professor. Thanks very much, you’ve certainly helped me way more than I ever expected.”

“There’s one more thing Will. I’m not supposed to say anything about this, but since you had every legal right to publish that book, you should also have your lawyer meet with the university’s board of directors. A little pressure from the attorney might yield positive results.”

It did. Three days later Will Stander stood with his classmates and received his B.A. from the university. Five days after that he got a new contract from the publishing company that gave him a reduced royalty rate, but also commissioned him to produce five more books of Lloyd Larson’s work, with his own annotations to the original stories.

Seven days later he received a final piece of advice from his friend Professor Nelson.

“Will, you want more than anything to be a writer. You’ll do well financially by annotating the Larson books, but I don’t think that’s going to be enough to satisfy your creative writing urges. I want you to consider this: there are different types of writing. You may not possess the imagination of a fiction writer like Stephen King, but you’ve got more than enough skill to be a

very competent journalist. You might find that investigative writing and reporting will be satisfying as well as challenging. I know some people at the Glove. Why don't you let me set up a meeting?"

Will happily took the suggestion and interviewed the very next day for a spot on the Boston Glove. Taken on as a cub reporter he advanced so rapidly that in five years he replaced Howie Barnical as the director of the "Searchlight Team", the very group that once had nearly destroyed his career.

For the end to this short tale we turn to another Will, considered by many to be the best writer ever. In the year 1604, the other Will wrote...

"All's well that ends well".

2. P.T. Barnum's Haunted House Tale

This next yarn comes from none other than Phineas Taylor Barnum himself, the great American 'Hoaxster' of the 1800s and the subject of one of 2018's most successful Hollywood films, a 427 million dollar blockbuster called 'The Greatest Showman'.

Here is an adaptation of the story Barnum told hundreds of times to the great, great grandparents of those of us living in the soon to be 2020s.

P.T. Barnum's Ghost Story

Though many people scoff at the idea of haunted houses; a great many of their number would probably immediately turn down the chance of spending the night in one.

In every village, town, and city in the United States there is some building that has a shrouded and questionable history. This is also true of communities in every nation of the world.

Perhaps just a few miles from where you live, there's a structure, be it a house, store, factory or farm where the humans have been frightened away – leaving the premises to new tenants; the rats, bats, owls, fowls, and perhaps paranormal creatures and ghosts.

In my own experience I had a life changing encounter with a hairy 'Littlefoot' being called a Puckwudgie. People who have seen the "Bridgewater Triangle Documentary" or who have read my books will be familiar with the hairy little thing that beckoned me with the cry, "Keer, Keer, ee wahn chu. Keer."

For the present, I want to pass along a ghost story from the 19th century. Be forewarned the source is the legendary huckster, P.T. Barnum.

The great showman started telling this tale in the late 1800s, claiming that it was related to him by the very man who experienced it, Actor Charles Kirby of the Chatham Theater in England.

One week after the haunting, Kirby met Barnum and told him the story. Barnum said that he knew Kirby fairly well and believed him to be an honest and truthful man. Barnum claimed he remembered the man's exact words, which Kirby assured him on his word of honor that to the letter, is true.

“I heard scary and wonderful stories about a strange house in Yorkshire,” said Kirby, “and I was very glad to get a chance to enter it, although, I confess, the next morning I was just as glad to get out of it.”

“It was an old country estate — a solid, stone mansion which had long borne the reputation of a haunted house. It was watched only by one man. He was the old gardener, an ancient servant of the family that once lived there, and a person in whom the family reposed implicit confidence.

“Having had some inkling of this wonderful place and having a few days to spare before going to London to fulfil an engagement at the Surry Theatre, I thought I would probe this haunted-house story to the bottom. I therefore called on the old gardener who had charge of the place, and introduced myself as an American traveler desirous of spending a night with his ghosts. The old man seemed to be about seventy-five or eighty years of age. I met him at the gate of the estate, where he kept guard. He told me, when I applied, that it was a dangerous spot to enter, but I could pass it if I pleased. I should, however, have to return by the same door, if I ever came back again.

“Wishing to make sure of the job, I gave him a sovereign, and asked him to give me all the privileges of the establishment; and if his bill amounted to more, I would settle it when I returned. He looked at me with an expression of doubt and apprehension, as much as to say that he neither understood what I was going to do nor what was likely to happen. He merely remarked:

“‘You can go in.’

“‘Will you go with me, and show me the road?’

“‘I will.’

“‘Go ahead.’

“We entered. The gate closed. I suddenly turned on my man, the old gardener and custodian of the place, and said to him:

“‘Now, my friend, I am going to sift this humbug to the bottom, even if I stay here forty nights in succession; and I am prepared to lay all “spirits” that present themselves; but if you will save me all trouble in the matter and frankly explain to me the whole affair, I will never mention it to your injury, and I will present you with ten golden sovereigns.’

“The old fellow looked astonished; but he smirked, and whimpered, and trembled, and said:

“‘I am afraid to do that; but I will warn you against going too far.’

“When we had crossed a courtyard, he rang a bell, and several strange noises were distinctly heard. I was introduced to the establishment through a well-constructed archway, which led to a large stairway, from which we proceeded to a great door, which opened into a very large room. It was a library. The old custodian had carried a torch (and I was prepared with a box of matches.) He was acting evidently ‘on the square,’ and I sat myself down in the library, where he told me that I should soon see positive evidence that this was a haunted house.

“Not being a very firm believer in the doctrine of houses really haunted, I proposed to keep a pretty good hold of my match-box, and lest there should be any doubt about it, I also provided myself with two candles, which I kept in my pocket, so I should not be left too suddenly and too long in the dark.

“‘Now Sir,’ said he, ‘I wish you to hold all your nerves steady and keep your courage up, because I intend to stand by you as well as I can, but I never come into this house alone.’

“‘Well, what is the matter with the house?’

“‘Oh! everything, Sir!’

“‘What?’

“‘Well, when I was much younger than I am now, the master of this estate got frightened here by some mysterious appearances, noises, sounds, etc., and he preferred to leave the place.’

“‘Why?’

“‘He had a tradition from his grandfather, and pretty well kept alive in the family, that it was a haunted house; and he let out the estate to the smaller farmers of the neighborhood, and quit the premises, and never returned again, except one night, and after that one night he left. We suppose he is dead. Now, Sir, if you wish to spend the night here as you have requested, what may happen to you I don’t know; but I tell you it is a haunted house, and I would not sleep here to-night for all the wealth of the Bank of England!’

“This did not deter me in the least, and having the means of self-protection around me, and plenty of matches, I thought I would explore this mystery and see whether a humbug which had terrified the proprietors of that magnificent house in the midst of a magnificent estate, for upward of sixty years, could not be explored and exploded. That it was a humbug, I had no doubt; that I would find it out, I was not so certain.

“I sat down in the library, fully determined to spend the night in the establishment. A door was opened into an adjoining room where there was a dust-covered lounge, and everything promised as much comfort as could be expected under the circumstances.

“However, before the old keeper of the house left, I asked him to show me over the building, and let me explore for myself the different rooms and apartments. To all this he readily consented; and as he had some prospect before him of making a good job out of it, he displayed a great deal of alacrity, and moved along very quick and smart for a man apparently eighty years of age.

“I went from room to room and story to story. Everything seemed to be well arranged, but somewhat dusty and time-worn. I kept a pretty sharp lookout, but I could see no sort of machinery for producing a grand effect.

“We finally descended to the library, when I closed the door, and bolting and locking it, took the key and put it in my pocket.

““Now, Sir,’ I said to the keeper, ‘where is the humbug?’

““There is no humbug here,’ he answered.

““Well, why don’t you show me some evidence of the haunted house?’

““You wait,’ said he, ‘till twelve o’clock to-night, and you will see “haunting” enough for you. I will not stay till then.’

“He left; I stayed. Everything was quiet for some time. Not a mouse was heard, not a rat was visible, and I thought I would go to sleep.

“I lay down for this purpose, but I soon heard certain extraordinary sounds that disturbed my repose. Chains were clanked, noises were made, and shrieks and groans were heard from various parts of the mansion. All of these I had expected. They did not frighten me much. A little while after, just as I was going to sleep again, a curious string of light burned around the room. It ran along on the walls in a zigzag line, about six feet high, entirely through the apartment. I did not smell anything bituminous or like sulphur. It flashed quicker than powder, and it did not smell like it.

“Thinks I: ‘This looks pretty well, we will have some amusement now.’ Then the jangling of bells, and clanking of chains, and flashes of light; then thumpings and knockings of all sorts came along, interspersed with shrieks and groans. I sat very quiet.

“I had two of Colt’s best pistols in my pocket, and I thought I could shoot anything spiritual or material with these machines made in Connecticut. I took them out and laid them on the table. One of them suddenly disappeared! I did not like that, still my nerves were firm, for I knew it was all a sham. I took the other pistol in my hand and surveyed the room. Nobody was there;

and, finally half suspicious that I had gone to sleep and had a dream, I woke up with a grasp on my hand which was holding the other pistol. This soon made me fully awake.

“I tried to recover my balance, and at this moment the candle went out. I lit it with one of my matches. No person was visible, but the noises began again, and they were infernal. I then took one of my candles out and went to unlock the door. I attempted to take the key out of my pocket. It was not there! Suddenly the door opened, I saw a man or a somebody about the size of a man, standing straight in front of me. I pointed one of Colt’s revolvers at his head, for I thought I saw something human about him; and I told him that whether he was ghost or spirit, goblin or robber, he had better stand steady, or I would blow his brains out, if he had any.

“To make sure that he should not escape I got hold of his arm, and told him that if he was a ghost he would have a tolerably hard time of it, and that if he was a humbug I would let him off if he would tell me the whole story about the trick.

“He saw that he was caught, and he earnestly begged me not to fire the American pistol at him. I did not; but I did not let go of him. I brought him into the library, and with pistol in hand I put him through a pretty close examination. He was clad in mailed armor, with breastplate and helmet, and a great sword, in the style of the Crusaders. He promised, on condition of saving his life, to give me an honest account of the facts.

“In substance they were, that he, an old family-servant, and ultimately a gardener in charge of the place, had been employed by an enemy of the gentleman who owned the property, to render it so uncomfortable that the estate should be sold for much less than its value; and that he had got an ingenious machinist and chemist to assist him in arranging such contrivances as would make the house so intolerable that they could not live there. A galvanic battery with wires were provided, and every device of chemistry and mechanism was resorted to in order to effect this purpose.

“One by one, the family left; and they had remained away for nearly two generations under the terror of such forms, and appearances, and sights and sounds, as frightened them almost to death. And furthermore, the old gardener added, that he expected his own grand-daughter would become the lady of that house, when the property should have been neglected so long and the place became so fearful that no one in the neighborhood would undertake to purchase it, or to even pass one moment after dark in exploring its horrible mysteries.

“He begged on his knees that I would spare him with his gray hairs, since he had so short a time to live. He declared that he had been actuated by no other motive than pride and ambition for his child.

“I told the poor old fellow that his secret should be safe with me and should not be made public so long as he lived. The old man grasped my hand eagerly and expressed his gratitude in the strongest terms. Thus, I have given you the pure and honest facts in regard to my adventure in a

so called haunted house. Don't make it public until you are convinced that the old gardener has shuffled off this mortal coil."

According to Kirby the gardener kept up his charade for decades. Even after his daughter married and moved far away. After his death, no further ghosts or spectral apparitions were manifested but still the house remained unoccupied and may still be so to this day more than 150 years later.

The End

3. The Observer

Prologue

There is a dark chamber in the mind of every person where their deepest secrets are hidden away from friends, neighbors, and even themselves.

For some individuals the door to this secluded room is slammed shut and locked tight by the conscious mind – never to be revisited.

For others the gateway never fully closes and the horrors revisit them with increasing frequency until they take a rope, a knife, a gun, or perhaps too many pills in a fatal attempt to seal the portal.

The tale that follows is of a man whose dark compartment of unforgiveable sins is firmly locked – even to himself.

AN OBSERVER MUST OBSERVE

“By definition an observer must observe, but not get involved. So when I saw the white squirrel atop a drift of new fallen snow, I knew that I was supposed to ignore the hawk that was flying above it in ever decreasing circles. With only 95 years on the job, I had little rank or privilege to do otherwise.

You could argue that saving a tiny rodent-like creature hardly qualifies as interference and I would agree, but does not mean the Boss would.

True, I did save that scarlet cardinal without consequences - the one in the cage in my room. It had fallen from the nest and had broken a wing. For weeks the baby's valiant parents stood guard and brought it food in anticipation of the time when it would be developed enough to fly back to the nest it had shared with three siblings.

While one parent tended to the trio above, the other was constantly at the side of the injured one. Tenderly, the offspring was fed sustenance transferred from Mommy or Daddy's loving beak, depending who was on duty.

Danger arrived one morning in the form of a five pound osprey, which had ventured from its usual lakeside feeding grounds. With its grappling claws extended, it was swooping towards the fledgling cardinal. The voracious predator was poised to carry off the little bird with its four sharp hooks on each murderous claw - two in the front and two in the back.

The mother bird in the nest saw it first.

“Chep, Chep, wheet, wheet, deet-adeet-adeet-ADEET-WHEET-WHEET”, she screamed in alarm and zoomed down to the side of her mate.

They stretched their wings out as far as possible and puffed up their feathers to make themselves appear larger. Together their wing span of two feet matched that of the predator, but their combined four ounces of weight didn't even qualify them for a bantam weight fight, let alone a death-match against a massive 80 ounce monster!

And yet when the male redbird thrust out his chest, and the onyx mask on his face was highlighted by a sharp beak twisted into a grimace: the keen eyed osprey took notice and slightly checked the speed of its dive.

A second twinge of doubt quickly followed, when he noticed that the gray mask of the female cardinal also had the same corkscrew shaped beak.

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