

# **Macabre Memories**

**Eclectic Tales to Chill the Soul**

**George Larson**

## Bert's Curious Dilemma

My awakening really began with the discovery of a severed arm with a gold, signet ring still attached to the forefinger on the owner's hand. But I'm getting too far ahead of myself in telling you about my curious dilemma.

My name was Albert Perry, or simply Bert to my friends and family. I'd been a crime reporter for the *Milwaukee Sentinel Journal* coming on thirteen years. My beat was a large one: the entire state of Wisconsin which kept me on the road for many days each month. I covered crime stories for the paper, the more sensational ones that seemed to resonate with our readers and sometimes for those living beyond our borders. I was proud to say I'd picked up a handful of journalistic awards over the years. While the kudos might be ego rewards, they didn't pay the bills. There was no serious money in journalism, but it was the profession I'd chosen and loved. My English degree from the UW in Madison set me on this particular life course and I'd never looked back in regret.

I hired on with the *Sentinel* straight out of college and was mentored by the paper's managing editor, Billy Donovan, for a number of years before he died of cirrhosis of the liver at fifty-five years of age. Yes, like many Irishmen, Billy was a serious drinker who reveled in telling bawdy stories at his favorite watering hole located a block over from the newspaper's offices. But he was one fine editor who was nationally recognized for his integrity and honesty in reporting the news, no matter the consequences. The *Sentinel* skillfully stole him away from the *Chicago Tribune* with the promise of journalistic independence and a healthy salary boost. But more than anything else, Billy was a father figure to me and someone I could implicitly trust. His guidance, advice and occasional admonishments of my work shaped me into the person and reporter I am today. A number of my early stories were ceremoniously spiked by him in front of me and the rest of the newsroom staff. I believed the spike was a gag gift from his colleagues when he left the Trib. It prominently sat atop his uncluttered desk. He would laugh loudly as he performed the ritual that had never gone out of style, at least in his opinion, and tell me what was wrong with it and how to make it better. I was always chagrined, but I learned my lessons about crafting a good story. I still miss him very much.

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One of Billy's constant, journalistic mantras concerned truth and accuracy in writing. He'd say truth was an iffy thing at best because readers were human and information was processed through differing prisms. Interpretation of a story would simply vary from one person to another. What was the takeaway message for the reader, he'd constantly ask. He'd say that truth was best left to the philosophers and not journalists since it was an impossible thing to determine. Accuracy, however, was another matter altogether. It was the one thing a reporter could control. Facts were facts and nothing more. There was no room for innuendo, speculation or bias as they were anathemas in the news business. But facts had to be parsed, logically weighed and presented in such a way as to approach, but never truly achieve, that illusive thing called truth.

As a cub reporter, Billy had me go through the paper's obits to see if any unusual death notices were posted that needed my follow-up. Of course, such things were rarely found and it was merely Billy's exercise of instilling the virtue of attending to detail while building self-discipline in me. It was a training regimen and really nothing more. Then I visited local police stations to review the crime blotters. It was another bit of scut work he assigned me to dry the wetness behind my ears. These onerous chores lasted through my probationary period and then I was cut loose to report on real crimes. But I had cut my baby teeth on those and other of Billy's lessons.

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Sure, real crimes, but typically after the fact. Robberies, kidnappings, serious assaults and murders were my meat and potatoes. Corruption cases were popular, but suicides less so unless it involved a prominent person. While Milwaukee was fertile ground for my articles, it was the suburban and especially rural settings that seemed to get the most attention from the readers. Why was that the case? I wasn't certain, but supposed it was about that old adage: "it can't happen here." But even the most bucolic, Wisconsin towns weren't immune from crimes and its criminals. And that fact of life kept me busy and gainfully employed.

Now I had an active case of serial killings that had baffled the authorities and piqued my interest. Truthfully, I was becoming obsessed with it and used my travels to piece together what

may or may not have happened to the victims. I wanted to solve it on my own and score a Pulitzer in the process. I couldn't let the cops beat me to the identity or identities of the killers. But I had to be careful not to step on any police toes in doing so or I could be charged with obstruction of justice and also risk being fired from my job. However, I was an investigative reporter to the core and couldn't help playing at least a passive role as a detective. My mind then flashed on the proverb about pride going before the fall. I simply couldn't afford to make any missteps, yet I was determined to bring the perpetrators to justice. It was a personal challenge and one I couldn't, wouldn't ignore.

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Denny St. Germain was a full-blooded Ojibwa born on a reservation in northern Wisconsin. His tribal name roughly translated to "Feather in the Wind." When he was about ten, the family moved from Lac du Flambeau to Milwaukee since his dad had a job offer to work the assembly line at the Harley Davidson factory south of the city. He was a bright kid by all accounts and liked by those who knew him. Denny decided to visit his great grandmother who lived in northern Wisconsin during his summer break from school at the UW, Milwaukee. He would begin his sophomore year with a generous academic scholarship no less. But hitchhiking to the northland wasn't something his parents looked forward to. He reminded them he was now an adult, legally of age and could do as he pleased without their permission. The naiveté and arrogance of the young had raised its contentious head within the family once again. Denny promised to call his parents every day and he did so on the first day of his trip. But he was then silent for the rest of his short life.

According to police, Denny was last seen at the Petro truck stop on I-94 just north of Madison. I knew it well from my travels and its fare was better than most, but maybe that wasn't saying much. The parents were frantic when he didn't call. They checked with his great granny, friends and anyone else they could think of to see if he'd made contact with any of them. He hadn't. His choice of routes made perfect sense to me. He likely hitched I-94 out of Milwaukee that flowed seamlessly into I-38 and then a direct shot north. A missing persons report was filed with the Milwaukee PD and a BOLO was issued statewide. But initially there was no locating of one Denny St. Germain, dead or alive.

Denny's mutilated body was found by a trucker behind the weigh station off I-94 North. While waiting in line for inspection, the trucker took a leak behind the building and noticed something strange at the edge of the woods. Taking a closer look, he discovered Denny's bloodied body, or what was left of it, lying in tall grass. The trucker was so traumatized by the gruesome sight he lost his breakfast on the spot. The state patrol from the Madison barracks then took charge of the death site and opened an investigation. It took the police a couple of days to confirm Denny's identity through dental records since his body had been badly mauled and eaten; 'beyond recognition' was the phrase the cops used to describe the insult it sustained. I took an immediate interest in the news clip and convinced my boss it would have commercial legs as a follow-up piece for our paper: local college student, Native American, Milwaukee resident. It couldn't miss. He readily agreed so I headed to Madison to investigate a horrific incident; one that would later reverberate through our state and far beyond. It would be the first of several murders and I couldn't foresee then how they would ultimately conclude. I wished now I'd left the investigation in the hands of the professionals.

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I started with interviewing staff and regular customers at the Petro station where Denny was last seen alive. Some were forthcoming and some not. It was simply the way things worked. Regardless, Denny's death was the number one talking point of the patrons and wait staff alike. So I sat back and listened while covertly jotting down some notes to refresh my memory later. A redheaded waitress recalled serving Denny: ham and two fried eggs with black coffee with toast on the side. That was how she remembered customers; by their orders. So Denny was Mr. Ham and Eggs to her. She noticed he was talking to a trucker named Ted or Ed or Fred, she wasn't sure which, a long hauler who regularly stopped at the station on his run from Chicago to the Twin Cities and return. So Ed or Ted or Fred was my first lead. I didn't bother to ask her what he typically ordered.

An older guy sitting at a table joined the conversation and speculated that Denny was attacked by a rogue black bear. He claimed there had been several attacks recently throughout the state, many attributed to mothers protecting their cubs. He said his brother-in-law was a police officer on the Sun Prairie force and the scuttlebutt among the rank and file cops suggested it was a bear attack. But they were at a loss to explain the savagery. That was what had the old-

timers puzzled. Bears typically didn't feed off humans or so he believed unless they came out of hibernation early. Then hunger might cause them to attack and feed. Of course, this was late summer and not early spring in Wisconsin so I dismissed his theory of Denny's death. I thought perhaps it was a rogue bear, but not necessarily a hungry one.

The guy went on to describe what was left of Denny's body when it was discovered. Again, he said his information came from a wholly reliable, unimpeachable source; his brother-in-law. It didn't amount to much, not what he said, but what was left of the body. According to the man, the body was dismembered with its throat ripped out. Limbs were left scattered about at the scene, except for Denny's right arm which went missing. At that point of the story, several patrons headed for the front door or the restroom. This was not a tale to be told over breakfast or any other time while eating. It was stomach churning in its gruesome detail. Being a wiseass at heart, I asked him how a cute teddy bear could do such damage to a human body. He laughed at my silly question and told me that large black bears can weigh-in at over 700 pounds. Those in the 500 to 600 pound range were pretty common in these parts. Well, so much for my knowledge of bears. I always thought they were cuddly creatures.

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As you could tell, I wasn't much of an outdoorsman having been born and bred in Milwaukee. My one woodsy encounter with an animal was when I was on a camping trip with my parents in the upper peninsula of Michigan or the UP to the locals. I was seven or eight years old at the time and playing at the edge of our campsite at dusk. As I walked along a path cut in the trees, a large dog rushed at me and bit me on my right forearm causing lacerations and copious bleeding. My dad heard my screams and came to my aid, shooing away the creature with his loud voice and a large stick. It took nine stitches to close the wound and a course of rabies shots afterwards which I will never forget. They hurt like hell! The dog was never found and to this day I'm not sure of its breed. Maybe it was from the Shepherd or Alsatian family of dogs. I didn't know which since I was just a young kid at the time. Oh, but I did remember those shots. And I still bore a star-shaped scar as a reminder of the encounter. I'd never seen my dad so frightened before. And he'd never mentioned the episode since. But that was a camping adventure I'd never forget. It was the last one I ever went on.

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Next on my itinerary was a stop at Denny's place of death. I didn't expect to find anything useful, but I needed to see it to add context to my story. Billy's admonition about accuracy in reporting had stuck with me all these years. I easily located the spot since the yellow police tape still remained attached to small stakes stuck in the ground which defined the perimeter around Denny's body. Fortunately, the weigh station was closed so I didn't have to ask for permission to poke around. The authorities likely wouldn't have agreed to my request even though all of the forensics work had been completed days before. So I got lucky. There really wasn't much to see other than a lot of dried blood on the matted grasses. I suspected that Denny had been given a ride to the weigh station by a friendly trucker and decided to spend the night before continuing his journey northward. Maybe it was Fred, Ed or Ted who dropped him off. Denny wasn't in any particular hurry to reach his great grandmother's home according to his mother and father. His only time constraint was making sure he returned to Milwaukee in time to start the fall term. And he had plenty of time to do so. After all, he was a responsible adult and free spirit at his age.

I took some photos of the site to bolster my story. They might or might not be used since it was totally the call of my editor. I searched the area for about a hundred yards in each direction looking for anything that might be amiss. The woods were dense here and I had trouble negotiating them without scratching myself on small tree branches that jutted out in different angles. I even managed to trip once on the underbrush. But my search was utterly useless, except for one thing: the scat of a large animal. I took a photo of it. It didn't look fresh and I had no clue as to what type of animal deposited it. It was larger than a dog's poop as best I could tell. It wasn't deer droppings since I had seen many examples along the roads over the years and these didn't resemble them in the slightest, but I couldn't deduce anything more. Maybe the bear theory was the correct one or perhaps it was the feces of a human.

It suddenly happened as I was about to start my car. I was damn lucky I hadn't been driving at the time. It was another one of my seizures. I'd experienced them since I was a kid, but with the new meds, they were now less frequent and shorter in duration. My brain controlled how my body moved by sending out small electrical signals through the nerves to the

muscles. My seizures occurred when abnormal signals from my brain changed the way my body functioned. At least that was the science behind them.

I knew seizures differed from person to person. Some people had only slight shaking of a hand and didn't lose consciousness. In my case, I became unconscious and my body shook or so I was told after each fit. Some people who had seizures briefly lose touch with their surroundings and appear to stare into space. Although the person was awake, he or she didn't respond normally. Afterwards, the person doesn't remember the episode. I fell into this latter category and it was a frightening experience. My only consolation was my Fitbit wristband that recorded my heart-rate and would tell me of any changes, but only after the fact. I'd constantly check the numbers to determine if I'd had another seizure. It was the only way I could keep track of them. Thank God they didn't happen often!

After resting awhile, I next visited the Wisconsin State Patrol barracks in Madison. I'd contacted Jim Thomlinson, the public affairs officer, before I left Milwaukee. He graciously agreed to a meeting, but told me he couldn't go into too much detail as it was an open, ongoing case. I had spoken to Jim several times over the years and I believed he thought I was a responsible reporter. I respected his role and situation and knew he had to be damn careful with what he released to the press. After the perfunctory greetings, I asked Jim about Denny's death, particularly about the bear theory. He acknowledged that it was the prevailing one, but more investigation was needed to confirm it. He commented that the coroner's report had just been received at the barracks and was presently being reviewed by the assigned investigator. With that comment, it seemed there was only one person assigned to the case and that made sense given the circumstances. Jim then confirmed some elements of the short blurb in *The Madison Times* weekly regarding Denny's death, the same one I'd read. Yes, it seemed it was a bear attack, and the animal fed off the body. Yes, Denny's right arm was missing and hadn't been found despite an exhaustive search. And yes, they were already aware of Ted, Fred or Ed and were tracking him down as we spoke. Then Jim dropped one tidbit of information that hadn't been mentioned before. Denny had a hunting knife with him, a ten inch one that he may have had for personal protection while on the road. His parents knew he was carrying it when he left home. It actually made his folks feel a little bit more comfortable regarding his safety. The knife was found next to what was left of his body with its sheath still in his backpack. The knife, like most everything close to his body, was bloody. So maybe Denny did put up a fight with his attacker. After a few



more questions that came to naught and an exchange of a few more pleasantries, I left for Milwaukee.

I put my car on cruise control and my mind on autopilot as I drove home. I'd taken I-94 countless times while covering stories in the southern tier of the state. As I mulled things over and over again, I was struck by an unsettling thought. I may have been at the Petro station the same time as Denny. I wasn't positive, but it was a possibility. I stopped there going north to Eau Claire to cover a story of a string of burglaries at pharmacies in the city. I did an overnight and returned via the same route and stopped once again at the station on my way home. The possibility that I might have seen Denny alive intrigued me. Kismet or coincidence, I wasn't sure which one.

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My story was shaping up to be a human interest one rather than a crime piece. But either would sell papers in my opinion. I'd tried to interview Denny's parents, but they were too grief stricken to submit to that type of intrusive journalism. I always winced when a TV reporter would thrust a microphone in front of a traumatized family and ask how it felt to lose their only son in a car accident. I couldn't bring myself to do such things so I respected the St. Germain family wish for nothing more than privacy. I didn't press them any further. I believed I still had a bright conscience and moral compass. I generally slept well at night. I wanted nothing more than continuing to do so.

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The story appeared in the Sunday edition of the *Sentinel*, starting below the fold on the front page. That was a prominent place that would grab the reader's attention or so I hoped. Well, be careful what you wish for as the saying goes because I was being bombarded with phone calls, e-mails and text messages unlike ever before. Since my name was on the byline, I took the brunt of the onslaught. I tried to slough off some to my colleagues, but they wanted nothing to do with them. They reminded me it was my story and to suck up the good with the bad. But many of the communications turned out to be bad. A number of them ran the gamut from A to Z: absurd to zany. It was just part of my job to field them.

One lengthy letter from a reader attributed Denny's demise to pure evil. Yes, that was what the sender asserted: evil. Not a bear, but unadulterated evil. He went on to explain his thesis. He posited that Denny's death and other horrific events were caused by ley lines that crisscrossed the state. He then explained that ley lines were spiritual, energy lines that transmitted both good and evil spirits along with their powerful communications. Those living along the paths of the lines were most susceptible to their effects. And the evil ones accounted for the state's history of abominations in the past. He asserted that there existed a distinct triangle of lines that pulsed evil along its route. He noted that Native American folklore contained many references to the lines and they served as mystical, magical signposts for many of the tribes.

He suggested looking at a map of Wisconsin to prove his point. He stated that the top point of the triangle of death was in Plainfield, the home of the infamous killer, ghoul and cannibal named Ed Gein. Gein was a well known figure in Wisconsin history by not only killing two women, but keeping their body parts as trophies to adorn his house: human skin lampshades, skulls mounted atop his four poster bed, then went on to grave robbing bodies from the local cemetery to make skin facemasks and bodysuits that he wore. It seemed Ed had a major, mommy problem back in the 1950's, among more serious mental issues, as I recalled. After he was adjudged to be insane, he was able to live out the rest of his life in relative comfort and obscurity at a state mental institution for the criminally insane.

The letter writer claimed the east side of his purported isosceles triangle ran from Plainfield to the Milwaukee area, specifically bisecting the small cities of West Allis and Waukesha. He noted the two were only thirteen miles apart. Well, at least that much of his fantastical story was true. He stated that Waukesha was home to the two girls who attempted to kill a classmate on the orders of the Slender Man, a tall, skinny, dark and mysterious figure who first appeared online as a game character. My writer insisted that the two attackers were under the negative influences and evil powers of the malevolent ley line spirits. That was his explanation anyway. But I remained skeptical. And I certainly wasn't ready to discard my incredulity.

As to West Allis, the writer correctly stated that the city was home to one Jeffrey Dahmer when he lived with his maternal grandmother for awhile before moving to the west end of

Milwaukee proper to continue his murders and cannibalistic indulgences. Of course, the ley lines were once again responsible for his aberrant actions. No doubt about it, at least in his mind.

And to the next leg of his triangle, it ran due west to Madison. It was none other than the spot where Denny St. Germain had died a horrible death. It was one that I was very familiar with and one that I'd never forget. He then told me to draw a line back to Plainfield and that would create a nearly perfect triangle, a Devil's triangle, as he called it. I did so by using an old roadmap I'd squirreled away in one of my desk drawers. Yes, it was a decent triangle, but only if you believed his story. And I didn't believe, but I researched ley lines nonetheless. I was nothing, if not thorough. I was nothing, if not anal retentive too. Why I bothered to waste my time on such things must have something to do with my innate sense of curiosity. I guess I was cursed with the attention to detail stuff that Billy always drilled into me.

It didn't take much research to determine what ley lines were. There was much literature about them on the internet and elsewhere. It seemed others, in addition to my pen pal, believed in their existence. Simply put, they were alignments of places of significance in the geography or culture of an area, often including manmade structures. They were, in an older sense, spiritual and mystical alignments of land forms or so the theory went. The most famous ones were associated with Stonehenge and the Druids in England. American ley lines were connected to Native American cultures, traditions and beliefs about powerful spirits moving along the lines and interacting with humans. I found little information about evil vibes or pulses or messages of a malevolent nature being transmitted along the networks. I guess if spiritual and mystical communications of various shades and stripes could manifest themselves along the lines, then why not evil energy as well?

I then pulled out the letter's envelope from my wastebasket. I was curious as to the identity of the sender since the letter was unsigned. There wasn't a name on the return address, only the words: Mendota Mental Health Institute in its upper left hand corner. It was postmarked at Madison. That hospital was the first insane asylum established in Wisconsin.

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The kooks, crazies and well meaning people often all came out of the woodwork at the same time when the paper hit the streets. I was deluged with these people contacting me at the

*Sentinel* and telling me things I should know. Mostly, it was easy to quickly separate the wheat from the chaff or, more specifically, the nutcases from the sane, sincere readers.

I received an e-mail from one reader suggesting that Denny had been mutilated by an alien being. He or she pointed out the strong similarity between the cattle mutilations in the western U.S. some years ago and the physical insults to Denny's body. I didn't see any connection and hit the delete button.

Sometimes readers do come up with plausible theories, or more likely suggestions, to explain the inexplicable. One caller thought it possible that a lion or tiger had escaped from Circus World in Baraboo and was responsible for Denny's death. She noted the circus was located less than twenty miles from where his body was discovered. I thanked her and immediately followed up on the lead. Baraboo had been the summer home of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus for several decades before permanently moving its operation to Sarasota, Florida. I knew at least that much about the Wisconsin Dells history and its attractions. I found that Circus World had been in business for over thirty years and one of its major acts included big cats.

I called the main number listed for the circus and after several transfers reached its managing director, Jim Rainey, aka, Mr. Jingles, the head clown. He laughed when I asked him about missing animals. I guessed clowns do that a lot. In any case, he said all of his cats were present and accounted for and, if one went missing, the local authorities would be immediately notified. He claimed it had never happened before. As I was about to hang up, Mr. Jingles pitched me about doing a cover story about the circus. I told him I did crime and not entertainment stories, but promised to pass along his request to the responsible editor for possible follow-up. I never much liked clowns as a kid and I still don't; especially pushy ones.

So, after a hectic time, things started to slowly wind down to a more normal pace, as normal goes at a busy newspaper. The interest in my story had waned. After all, it was now yesterday's news, merely paper for the bottom of the birdcage. But that lull would only last for a short while because another mutilation and death was about to happen. And this time I would be all over the case like stink on shit to put it crudely. I was still gunning for that Pulitzer.

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Gloria Rainwater was up in years to put her ninety plus years into polite perspective. She grew up on the Ojibwa Indian reservation outside of Lac du Flambeau and had only recently moved to town for health reasons. She was somewhat of a revered figure in the community; not because of her age, but because she was one of the tribe's shamans. She, like her kinsman, practiced an animistic form of religion as their forefathers had done from time immemorial. Truth, wisdom and the pathway to heaven were to be found in nature and all of nature was sacred in their beliefs. She was also the tribe's medicine woman, a healer who gathered natural ingredients from the woods and fields of the reservation and turned them into potions and lotions for her many patients. While she believed in modern medicine, she didn't turn her back on the old, proven and traditional remedies and cures of her ancestors. But she also was a healer of minds and spirits for those seeking her help. And such help was sorely needed by those suffering from chronic depression, chronic alcoholism and chronic poverty; all common, endemic problems on the Ojibwa reservation.

Lac du Flambeau was a town of about 3,000 souls, most of them Ojibwa. It was a down-on-its-heels one with modest, clapboard houses, a nearly nonexistent downtown and a smattering of mobile homes. Its only claim to fame and income producer was The Torch Casino that employed a few tribesmen, but mostly Anglos from surrounding communities. It was an Ojibwa tribal enterprise and a big moneymaker. The Indians didn't need to work there or elsewhere since the profits from the casino were distributed each month to members of the tribe. It was enough money to satisfy their modest lifestyles, but little more. Regardless, it seemed to meet their hardscrabble expectations that didn't envision any hope for a better future.

I was south of Hurley following an ongoing story about a poaching ring operating in both state and national forest preserves when I caught the call for police backup on my radio scanner. Many, smaller police forces couldn't afford advanced, encrypted communications so I was able to easily monitor their conversations. It was something I'd done for years and it had paid dividends in the past for scooping stories that others would miss. The call came from a Vilas County Sheriff's deputy who reported a murder, yes murder, in Lac du Flambeau and he requested immediate assistance. Murders were highly unusual in Wisconsin, except in Milwaukee and a couple of other, larger cities. My story about black bear poaching would have to wait. I thought it a good one. Poachers would sell the meat, fur and paws of the animal in the

U.S., but the real money was in the gallbladder trade with the Far East. Asians would pay dearly for bear gallbladder because they believed it to be an aphrodisiac, much like ground rhino horn. It was a nasty business and federal agents from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had been called to assist in the investigation.

I sped towards Lac du Flambeau and hoped I wouldn't be pulled over for speeding. Luckily, I hadn't been and arrived in the town in less than thirty minutes. It was easy to spot the scene of the crime; I simply followed the local traffic and soon arrived at Gloria Rainwater's trailer. There were many police cars and lookie loos at her home. I parked some distance away and made my way to the crowd that had already gathered in large numbers. It was obvious that a couple of stringers were present from other news media outlets given their aggressive questioning of the baby-faced police officer manning the barrier to Gloria's residence. He remained mute despite the onslaught of questions from the reporters. He'd been taught well by his superiors.

It was evident from where I was standing that the storm/screen door and the metal clad entry door to the trailer had been pulled off their hinges and now lay in front of it. The body of a dog, a large Malamute, it appeared to me, was lying dead next to the discarded doors. I later learned his name was Edward and its throat had been viciously ripped from its body. He had been Gloria's constant companion, friend and minder for the past seven years. She called him Eddie as a name of endearment and affection. But a Malamute wouldn't give ground or quarter in protecting its turf and mistress or so I believed. It would fight to the death before that would happen. Whatever or whoever must have overpowered the dog and killed it on the spot. It had to have been tremendously powerful to do so. I snapped a few photos of the trailer and a couple of Eddie's body before calling my editor and reporting the incident. Yes, I used the word incident, but I was already thinking crime. And yes, my mind was already drawing a nexus between the deaths of Denny St. Germain and Gloria Rainwater.

Gloria was not a random victim of a violent crime; at least that was the quick conclusion of the cops. Someone or something had targeted her for death. But why and who or what were the questions that needed answers. The county sheriff had requested assistance from the state's authorities, especially its forensics lab. Even Vilas County, and those surrounding it, lacked the resources to handle an incident of this magnitude by themselves. They typically dealt with

highway accidents, drunk & disorderly cases and domestic violence calls. This was something well beyond their collective expertise.

I stayed a few extra days up north trying to piece together a story, maybe, just maybe a much bigger one than simply the death of an old, Indian woman who lived alone in a trailer in the north woods, despite the horrible way she died. A neighbor had called 911 to report that “all hell was breaking loose” at Gloria’s trailer. When the first police cruiser arrived some twenty minutes later, the officer observed about a dozen people standing outside the trailer, some crying and some standing in stunned silence. The officer took one look inside and immediately called for backup. That was the call I heard on my radio scanner.

According to the official, police report, the first responder noticed blood everywhere, pools on the floor, splatters on the kitchen cabinets and walls, along with a long blood trail down the hallway leading to Gloria’s bedroom where her body was found. And it was her body that told a gruesome tale. It had been mutilated beyond recognition. Her face had been torn or bitten off, she had been dismembered, torn limb from limb, as the report stated, and her right arm was missing. It was as if Gloria had been drawn and quartered like in medieval times. Or maybe my imagination was getting ahead of the facts as Billy might have reminded me. But the similarities between the St. Germain and Rainwater cases were obvious, at least to me. But I don’t think the local cops had yet made the connection between the two deaths. I didn’t plan to tell them since the knowledge gave me some advantage in solving the mystery first. They’d eventually make the connection, but not before I’d finish my story and publish it on the front page of the *Sentinel*. I envisioned follow-up stories to that one and I’d be busy for weeks. I couldn’t wait to receive my prize.

But the similarities and connections between the two deaths didn’t stop there. I soon learned that Denny St. Germain was the great grandson of Gloria Rainwater. Oh my God! The deaths weren’t coincidental. I didn’t think so and now I had proof positive. Through my talks with the locals, I uncovered this intriguing fact. A couple of them had connected the dots between the deaths of the relatives and attributed them to an old vendetta, a blood feud between the Rainwater and Wolf clans many generations ago. The story had been handed down for many years in the manner of the tribe’s oral history. A monster was responsible in their superstitious minds. It was plain and simple to them, but certainly not to me. It was a mythical, mystical

explanation, but wholly plausible to these Ojibwa. I didn't understand, at least then. I would learn the truth much later. And it was truth, despite Billy's claim to the contrary. You could, in fact, find truth where you least expected.

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Several of the tribe's elders related the origin of the vendetta as handed down over the years. It was a tragic, sad story and one that continued to be played out to this day or so they claimed. In 1851, the Ojibwa fished, hunted and farmed the lands of northern Wisconsin, the upper peninsula of Michigan and the far eastern portions of what is now Minnesota. They peacefully coexisted with the relatively few white settlers in the region. On a fateful day in the late spring of that year, three, young Rainwater tribesmen came upon a twelve year old girl of the Wolf clan. Her Ojibwa name was "Water Springs" and she was a favored child of her clan for her beauty, both physical and spiritual. For reasons unknown, the three boys brutally raped her and left her for dead, but she didn't die and was found later by a relative. The matter was reported to the tribal council with her father demanding justice or, more specifically, retribution for the horrific crime. The council initially voted to have the boys shunned for a period of one year as punishment, but there was such an outcry from most of the tribesmen the council ordered them banished for life. That was a fate considered worse than death, but it was the one ultimately imposed on the young men by the elders.

So, the three left the tribe to find their ways in an unfamiliar world. One, reportedly, joined the U.S. Army cavalry as a scout. The others were never heard from again. But Water Springs' father believed that justice was not served and that his daughter's attackers were treated too leniently by the council. In a dramatic pronouncement in front of his clan, he made a blood oath, a curse that he placed on all Rainwater descendants to avenge the terrible rape of his beloved daughter. And the curse remained in effect today or so the story was told. That was the gist of the legend and cause of the brutal murders by a monstrous, supernatural being: a Wendigo. The descendants of the Rainwater clan were now paying for the long ago sins of three of their ancestors. Even today, members of the two clans avoided each other like the plague. Each knew the history and each kept a distance from one another, even though they lived in close proximity. It was an awkward situation to say the least, but one fully understood by every Ojibwa in Lac du Flambeau.



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A Wendigo, how could that be? It couldn't, could it? I had to suspend my disbelief to even consider such a preposterous story. What the hell was a Wendigo anyway? Here's what Wikipedia had to say:

*In Indian folklore and mythology, a Wendigo or Windigo is a cannibal monster or evil spirit native to the northern forests of the Great Lakes Region of both the United States and Canada. The Wendigo may appear as a monster with some characteristics of a human, or as a spirit who has possessed a human being and made them become monstrous. It is historically associated with cannibalism, murder, insatiable greed and the cultural taboos against such behaviors. The legend lends its name to the disputed modern medical term Wendigo psychosis, which is considered by psychiatrists to be a form of culture-bound syndrome with symptoms such as an intense craving for human flesh and a fear of becoming a cannibal. In some indigenous communities, environmental destruction and insatiable greed are also seen as a manifestation of the psychosis.*

OK, I can't make this stuff up, even if I tried. It was all too bizarre. But there was more:

*The Wendigo is part of the traditional belief system of a number of Algonquin-speaking peoples, most notably the Ojibwa and Saulteaux, the Cree, the Naskapi, and the Innu people. Although descriptions can vary somewhat, common to all these cultures is the view that the Wendigo is a malevolent, cannibalistic, supernatural being. They were strongly associated with the winter, the north, and coldness, as well as with famine and starvation.*

Basil Johnston, an Ojibwa teacher and scholar from Ontario, gives a description of a Wendigo:

*“The Wendigo was gaunt to the point of emaciation, its desiccated skin pulled tightly over its bones. With its bones pushing out against its skin, its complexion the ash gray of death, and its eyes pushed back deep into their sockets, the Wendigo looked like a gaunt skeleton recently disinterred from the grave. What lips it had were tattered and bloody, unclean and suffering from suppurations of the flesh. The Wendigo gave off a strange and eerie odor of decay and decomposition, of death and corruption. The Wendigo is seen as*

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