

THE DEAD ZONE

"THE MOUNTAIN"
(fka "MOUNT THUNDER")

by Michael Cassutt
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When do you tell the kid?

It's a question everyone faces at some time in his life. When do you tell a child a disturbing fact that will turn his universe inside out? Mom and Dad are separating. Uncle Brent's blood work came back bad and that he won't be visiting any more. When Mom goes off in the afternoon that she's seeing a shrink.

When do you tell the kid that the man he believes to be his father . . . isn't?

Every state has one place where strange things happen.

Where Bigfoot roams free and college students disappear and maybe water runs uphill. A place with a name like the Bridgewater Triangle or the Wisconsin Vortex.

Maine has Mount Thunder, a rocky peak in the Longfellows where, according to Aroostook legend, the Old Man lives. Half-human, half-beast, he is said to sleep in a secret cave, emerging every few years to snatch a careless hiker. Or is it the strange lights that flash around the peak on winter nights? Or is it the vein of radioactive ore that simultaneously causes compasses to spin and airplanes to vanish?

Shin Lake drains into a branch of the Penobscot River. Here we find the unlikely quartet of JOHNNY SMITH, WALT and SARAH BANNERMAN and J.J. in the rowboat of awkwardness.

They have come to Shin Lake to, uh, fish. Walt is no stranger to the locale: he fished here with his father. He and Sarah even visited before J.J. was born.

In hiking boots, vest and fishing hat, packing a rod and reel, Walt looks the part of the Compleat Angler. Sarah wears her outdoors ensemble. J.J. has been similarly outfitted.

Then there's Johnny . . . he's made a game effort by bringing an old Boy Scout backpack and buying a pair of sneakers, but his black leather jacket and silver-topped cane make him stand out like Dennis Rodman in Amish country.

Don't think J.J. hasn't noticed. He turns to his parents and asks, not quietly enough, re Johnny: "Why is *he* here?"

As Johnny gets a weird vision off a worm wriggling on a hook -- here comes a big mouth bass that looks like freaking Moby Dick! -- Johnny asks himself the same question.

The answer is that, after the horrors of the plague episode, Johnny and Sarah and Walt are trying to help

Johnny bond with J. J. They know that eventually he will learn that Johnny is his father. The fishing trip is one way to soften the impending blow.

The fatherhood business, though it looms, is not on the agenda today. No, what Johnny, Walt and Sarah are talking about -- as the trout bite, or fail to -- are the creepy legends of Mount Thunder.

Until they see that J.J. is really disturbed by the whole idea of strange beasts and mountain vortices. Returning to shore, the adults start reassuring J.J. that these stories are just legends, made-up crap. Then Sarah picks a shiny metal chunk out of the mud and hands it to J.J. What do you suppose that is?

A squashed beer can, J. J. says, handing the fragment to Johnny.

Who flashes into a shocking vision of a Federal Express plane being tossed around by a storm . . . the wing departing the structure . . . the whole vehicle rolling insanely to the right and diving into the forest beneath Mount Thunder . . . It leaves Johnny shaken, and J.J. more convinced than ever that his parents' friend is just weird.

News travels fast. News that Johnny Smith has had a vision gets around Shin Lake at the speed of light.

Ranger RANDY TURMAN is the first to put in an appearance. Turman is an old, if distant, buddy of Walt's. They used to play football together, Walt as a linebacker for Cleaves Mills, Turman as a promising running back for Orono. Now Turman is mid-thirties, forty pounds heavier and a lot further down the road to Unfulfilled Potential.

(What Walt doesn't know yet is that Turman is currently facing bribery charges and about to lose his job.)

Turman knows all about Fed Ex 233. It was a cargo plane that crashed in a storm near Mount Thunder three years ago. Only pieces of the plane have been found. The bodies of the crew members are still up there and so, rumor has it, is a cargo of \$10 million dollars in gold or cash.

Turman wants the famous Johnny Smith to use his power to help him find the "lost treasure" of Fed Ex 233. The ranger and his girlfriend, PAULINE, and her brother, SCOTT, are planning to take a hike up Mount Thunder today, just like Johnny, Walt and Sarah J.J. Why don't we join forces?

Knowing that J.J. is already weirded out by his powers, and seeing Sarah's reluctance, Johnny says "No thanks."

Turman and his associates are disappointed, but Scott jokes, at least we won't have to split the money seven ways!

The next morning, Johnny, Sarah, Walt and J.J. head out on the trail to a viewpoint way up Mount Thunder. ("Nowhere near the Old Man or the vortex," Sarah assures J.J.)

The trail soon proves to be too steep for Johnny. His leg is bothering him. Knowing the trail, Walt suggests an easier, alternate route that will still deliver Johnny to the viewpoint. Johnny is reluctant: the idea was to spend time with J.J. Sarah wants him to stay. But her touch gives Johnny a vision of the immediate future, with J.J. completely disgusted by Johnny's inability to keep up.

Good idea. See you at the viewpoint.

He hasn't gone far when he catches up to Pauline Qualls, who is heading the same direction. Have I mentioned that Pauline is 24 and the hottest thing in northern Penobscot County? Granted, the competition isn't much - but she looks good in cut-off shorts this hot summer morning.

Johnny asks her what she sees in Randy Turman. She says she's always open to a better offer . . . and a touch

of her hand shows Johnny a wildly passionate and immediate bout of outdoor sex with Pauline.

If they turn back now. But Johnny is committed to the rendezvous with the Bannermans . . . he and Pauline start walking.

Turman is waiting around the next rock. He pulls a gun on Johnny. He's going to help them find that treasure.

Major moves of the story:

Johnny asks about Walt, Sarah and J.J. They're with Scott at the moment, Turman says. *Let them go, and I'll help you,* Johnny says. It's fine with Turman and Pauline; it's Johnny they want—

But then Scott shouts for Randy's help. Turman leaves Pauline to cover Johnny.

SCOTT QUALLS, 26, is the Shin Lake tinkerer and oddball. He was the original searcher for Fed Ex 233's wreckage, spending long, frustrating hours in the mountains with a metal detector. He knows exactly how he would spend his share of a \$10 million prize.

Scott is also the expert -- such as it is -- on Johnny's powers, having warned Turman not to let Johnny touch him. (When they met, Turman made sure to have his hands full, so no handshake took place.)

But he's not a hard guy. And he's got problems with Walt Bannerman, who is. Walt and Sarah are both out of their minds with anger, because they're at gunpoint and their son is missing. (Sarah and Walt sent J.J. to take a hat to Johnny, in the hopes that the two of them could make the easier hike together.)

Turman slugs Walt and shoves him off the path. Walt lands hard in the stream below. Then Turman subdues Sarah, leaving her bound by the side of the trail. *No wonder you can't find shit*, he snaps at Scott. *You can't follow simple directions.*

Meanwhile, J.J. has found Johnny and Pauline. (J.J. has not seen Pauline's pistol; she hid it as she heard him coming through the trees.)

Confronted with this seven-year-old addition to the treasure team, Johnny has two choices: he can tell J.J. what's going on, triggering disaster in the immediate future (he sees it in a vision) when J.J. tries to escape.

Or he can play along with Pauline and Turman and Scott, who are happy to pretend that Johnny is helping them out.

What about Walt and Sarah? Turman has another effective answer. "If you ever want to see him alive, you'll work fast."

The five of them head up the mountain, leaving the hiking trail to follow Scott's map of debris.

Johnny touches a fragment that came from Fed Ex 233's cargo. The loot isn't cash or gold. It's computer chips.

No problem, Turman says. They'll be just as valuable, once the trio gets over the border into Quebec. (Johnny's vision shows Turman, Pauline and Scott whooping it up in some fancy hotel room.)

Touching Scott also shows Johnny that once the trio gets the chips, they are going to kill Johnny and J.J.

But Johnny is stymied, as much by his reluctance to endanger and disillusion J.J. as by the odds against him.

He tries to exploit the personal differences between the kidnapers. His vision shows him Turman's looming legal problems -- no wonder the guy is ready to pack down the other side of the mountain range and take his chances in Quebec. With or without Pauline and Scott.

He sees Scott's tragic situation -- too smart for the trailer park family he was born into, lacking the resources, connections or simple ambition that would get him out of there.

Ah, yes, then there's Pauline, who is drinking an awful lot for a 24-year-old girl. A brush of her thigh

gives a horrifying glimpse of her potential future - strung out, beaten by an abusive boyfriend.

As Johnny and the others close in on the Fed Ex treasure, we see that Walt is stalking them. (Sarah freed herself, then helped Walt, who sent her down to Shin Lake for help. Even though he is injured, he has tracked Johnny and J.J. and their captors.) It's killing Walt to see J.J. in the hands of Randy Turman and his sick crew--

But Johnny brushes against a tree moments after Walt has touched it. He gets a vision that Walt is near. He is able to use that knowledge to divide and conquer . . .

Turman dies reaching for the bag of computer chips, which is caught in a tree over a ravine. He didn't need to die -- but his greed literally drove him to over-reach.

Pauline and Scott surrender.

Oh, yeah, those chips? They're Pentium IIs - worth ten million bucks three years ago, nothing but cheap hunks of plastic now.

A final twist of the knife . . . J.J. thinks his father Walt is the one who saved the day.

And Johnny can't bring himself to correct him.

The End