

Paradiso
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From *Gulf Coast*

Grimm was in the atrium of Paradise Mall when the timber wolves took down their first dachshund. The breeding pair, released in the hardware department of Sears, had begun adapting to their environment, learning to forage on its fauna. Sweet vindication: The clock *could* be turned back—to a time when indigenous peoples patronized indigenous malls, before Europeans arrived with their diseases and chain stores. (Grimm planned to prove that the shopping mall was an Iroquois invention, the cultural root of their current success in gasoline and cigarette retailing.)

The timber wolf initiative had been a big first step. Every morning now Grimm sprang from his bunk in the ranger station on the food court mezzanine and crept to the atrium fountain. The thrill was fresh each time he found paw prints on floors mopped the night before. The stream that fed the fountain made a sad contrast—a barren sluiceway that, if only it were freed, would be thronged with salmon. Grimm had at least put a stop to bridge repairs. Shoppers could ford at low water: Paradise was a wilderness mall.

Shoppers understood, he thought. He loved to watch them dart across the food court—wary, yet alive for the first time since childhood to sounds and smells and predators in the shadows. He felt vicarious thrills when they spotted feral employees.

Grimm left the ranger station and picked his way along the mezzanine, one eye peeled for fresh scat. A commotion was bubbling down below. Grimm leaned over the railing and shouted, “Chuck!”—then blew his whistle and shouted again. Hi-I’m-Chuck of the How-May-I-Help-You clan was wrapped around the calf of a flustered senior citizen. Chuck knew Grimm’s voice and looked up guiltily, then uncoupled and loped away.

Ferals were a unique feature of the Paradise shopping experience. If you asked one for assistance, as newcomers often did, he might lead you to the requested aisle—or he might start humping your leg. The bush made them strange.

Grimm rappelled from the railing and touched down beside the victim. She had been feeding Chuck, of course, but Chuck would get the blame. Grimm tried to explain: balance of nature, culling the herd, healthy fear of people. Chuck would be relocated if he got addicted to food court snacks—and, separated from his clan, would pine away. (Chuck qualified for a clan with his old RiteAid name plate. That was the usual way.)

The lady didn’t care. She’d be lodging a complaint with the “owner.” Grimm shook his head. How could anyone *own* a mall? It would be like owning the sea or the stars.

Another senior citizen tugged at his sleeve: a wolf, she said, had run off with her lunch; the “owner” word again, and a reimbursement request for two dollars and sixty cents. It would do them good, Grimm thought, to live before they died, to meet some Iroquois.

“Ma’am, wolves have as much right to patronize the Friendly’s as you do. They ‘steal’ food,” he drew quotes in the air, “because their culture doesn’t support a cash-based economy.”

A small crowd had gathered. Mothers held their children tight—though Grimm had brought back every youngster ever snatched. These moms didn’t care what made the Mall special. They wanted it to be like every place else, which didn’t bode well for his future

initiatives.

A spokesman installed himself and stepped forward. “You’re a safety officer,” he said. “Your job is to make the Mall safe.”

But Grimm didn’t think so. We should die in the old ways, he thought, the ways we evolved to die in—the jaws of an animal, not a pickup’s bumper and grill.

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Higher authority decided: There would be no new initiative (no bear, no lynx, no wolverine) and the dams would stay (no salmon in the stream). Paradise was going to hell. When the wind was from the North Grimm could see the smoke of cabin chimneys. Homesteaders were clearing fields and planting crops; and there was talk of a land grant college.

Grimm took to the sweat lodge: he needed peace. He fed the coin slot with quarters and stewed in his customary visions: proud wolves patrolling bounteous retail space, ghostly Iroquois shoppers. When Grimm reopened his eyes a man was seated on the other side of the fire. Small and fat, with sturdy black-framed glasses.

Grimm pointed to himself and said, “Wolf Who Walks the Mall,” his sweat lodge handle. “Mighty Deed.”

Odd name. Odder that a man that chubby didn’t seem to sweat. Oddest that he should be here after hours.

“The Great Mall is closed,” Grimm said. “You can shop today no more forever.”

“To me it is not closed always. I own this.”

The owner of a mall. Grimm had never seen such a thing, even in dreams. Was it a vision or could the man, if it was a man, be touched? The gas valve banged shut, choking the flame. An exit sign now shed the only light. Grimm groped his way around the fire pit but found no one—or, at least, touched nothing. He peered out the exit door: the Customer Service Center was empty.

Grimm bought quarters by the roll. He sweat with John Channel Changer, Eats Many Nachos, Ralph Who Bowls—and others, less glorious—but Mighty Deed did not return. Grimm was granted visions of his death, a noble one, embraced by wild beasts (different species in different versions).

On the third day he arose and wobbled back to his station. A wolf-watching caravan would be leaving for the Radio Shack uplands. Grimm had tried, but failed, to stop these circuses—half a dozen jeeps, dragging bait. Worst of all, he had to lead them.

Through the mezzanine railings, Grimm’s eye was attracted by the swift traverse of a short fat man—heading for the quickest entry to the backcountry, a steep pass just beyond the multiplex. By the time Grimm touched bottom the man was out of sight.

Grimm ignored the idling jeeps and their ticketed passengers. Hours later, breathing hard, he stood on top of the pass, scanning the high basin spread out on its other side: a handful of discount stores, a shuttered arcade. Past the shops and their untended burial grounds hurried a solitary figure. Grimm followed to the standing stone that marked the spot of the aboriginal mall. Here his knowledge stopped. Beyond, for all he knew, be monsters.

He entered a dim hallway lined by stores that made no sense—items, prices, ads all random. As if someone had forgotten the point of selling but still went through its motions.

Grimm felt his way to the end and emerged in a vast atrium, unroofed and heavily landscaped. He took a few steps forward and looked back. Undergrowth made the entrance invisible. Beside the path lay a pair of sturdy glasses, half buried in forest litter. They might have been there for years. But the ground beside them was scuffed and fresh footprints led into the bush.

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Wolf-Who-Walks-the-Mall, founder of the Ranger clan, reached into a tangle of brush to pull out a fluffy blanket scrap and add it to the load in his sack. To Trainee-Kit of the Have-A-Nice-Day he said, “Item JK 23245.” Kit took this down. She still remembered how to write. “Luxurious merino wool seat cover keeps you warm in winter, cool in summer, comfortable any time.”

“Available in Tan, Charcoal, Pine, and Oatmeal Heather,” she added. Then the feminine touch, “Imported.” She and Wolf had reached the final phase of courtship, setting up shop. Breeding would be next, or perhaps a pet.

Wolf-Who-Walks-the-Mall picked up a barely chipped ceramic tile and brushed away a smear of dirt. “Our favorite trivet,” he said, “makes a handsome addition to any table. In Forest Green or Matte Black.”

Kit gave this some thought. “Item JK 26795.”

Hi-I’m-Chuck, hauling his load in a mailbag, overtook them. He liked to flirt with Kit. “Very sales event.” He was pointing to her sneakers, an almost-new pair Wolf was said to have snatched in the Great Mall. “Classic.”

It was closing time, when shopper-gatherers hailed the end of day. Chuck loped ahead to claim a seat in the multi-faith chapel. The elders sat frontmost, on folding chairs, invested with signs of their authority: eye-glasses in differing states of repair. Few remembered how to read.

The jabbering creole of English and ad-copy quieted when Wolf arrived. He had donned his splendid spectacles—black-framed and sturdy, both lenses intact. Reverently he opened the Book. (L.L. Bean, Spring 19__, the cover torn, the final digits unknowable.) He declaimed the day’s page.

When Wolf finished there was always a demand for more—a part of his work in progress, or a vision, or a tale of the Great Mall. Many had been to the Mall, or thought they had, or had seen it in a dream. The distinctions were fading, even for the founder of the Ranger clan.

Wolf-Who-Walks-the-Mall sang a vision of his death and all joined in, gazing through broken skylights at the stars. The same stars shone on the Great Mall and on the high basin—where travelers, leaning into a dusky corridor, would cup their ears and strain to hear monsters howl.