



## Evolution: Episode One

It was a dark and stormy night, of course it was, somewhere in our vast universe, but not here. The big brash moon chased away the dark, hiding the stars under dazzling skirts, holding sway over the still, brooding night.

And I was butt naked, on my back, staring at the moon, and wondering just how the hell I'd arrived here in the still warm dirt, when the last thing I remembered was sliding off to sleep, in my safe little trailer house parked deep in the Carolina woods.

I couldn't be far, as Dumb and Dumber, the two dogs, ugly even for mongrels, who'd showed up one day and assumed doggy command of the place, were doing that sniffing, whining thing they did when they weren't sure if I was going to feed them this week.

I relaxed, stared the moon in the face, put my hands behind my head and attempted to figure this one out.

Easing into a softened sleep, just over the precipice, just before plunging into deep slumber, and what? I moved? Or was moved? Like a shimmering visit to Dorothy's World everything was there but none of it looked right. Shimmering tendrils, light borne wisps of filmy tentacles, and these waving like goodbye's but beckoning, and in some way there was a response, deep within, a place I'd never suspected, and then I moved.

And then I was naked, on my back, in the still warm earth.

Dumb, or maybe Dumber, sniffled, whined, pawed the ground beside me whilst radiating that con-job pitiful dog look.

Must be hungry.

"What?" I growled roughly, and like a courtier at a rather blood soaked king's court the dog moved away, his feelings hurt.

I sat up, OK so far, then after a minute or so I pushed myself off the ground, standing seemed to work out OK and with hands on hips I surveyed the moon drenched terrain. I hadn't gone far, driveway a few feet off to my left, my darkened home gleamed in the moonlight less than a stone's throw away.

There was no night light; I knew my land, intimately; no need to surrender a tactical

advantage to an intruder.

Easy enough to shower the mud off my flanks, harder to explain, if only to myself, what happened.

I was old, old enough to have aged past all the wicked and wonderful things that had, at one time, seemed the normal state of my life. Years had passed, rather peacefully, since I'd taken strong drink, smoked illicit substances and popped pills that contained powerfully unknown ingredients.

Like I said: Peaceful years.

In other words I wasn't drunk, spaced, stoned, wiped slick or in any way fucked up.

So how and/or why did I wake up naked in the dirt?

After showering I eased warily back to bed, and this time slept a happily stationary sleep, awakening to the full day, bright with sunshine.

As a life-long, confirmed, reaffirmed and comfortable bachelor about the only conversation that really worked for me was with my mirror. So after a quiet moment or two I asked that unshaven worthy, the one with graying sideburns and thinning hair, the one that seemed to always hang out there the question:

"OK, was all this a dream, or was it real? Did I fly from my bed to the yard, or did I just dream the whole thing up?"

I stood back, raised my eyebrows in my favorite intellectual quizzical expression, folded my arms and awaited the answer.

The idiot didn't say a word, just mimicked my expression, and allowed the silence to stretch beyond just plain bad manners.

But then the thought occurred that maybe, just maybe, I should go look at the yard. I did, and sure enough, there was enough of an imprint of my ass in the ground to convince me that sure enough, it was real.

I stared at the imprint long enough to feel silly, then, lacking any further inspiration I muttered something to the effect that it is what it is and I'll deal with it later.

I had other things to do.

The old Ford, mud spattered, faded blue speckled with rust, has been there, done that and was still a good ride. Fired up, I allowed the kinks to idle out then aimed the old pickup out onto the dirt road and we went to town. Town wasn't much, a convenience store that serviced the US 17 trade and a ramshackle diner that managed, somehow, to hang onto its class "C" cleanliness rating. The tiny post office basked in the hot sun, wood frame peeling paint and staffed by the meanest old woman in three counties who hated life and then me, and not always in that order.

It wasn't always like that, there was a time when Miss Rebi thought I was the best thing since sliced bread, and was comfortable in the knowledge that I was her future son-in-law. But then came the fuzzy period of my life, awash in the strong drink and lost in the storms of smoke, coke and pretty little pills. Like all the other threads of my life the daughter unwound then faded into oblivion.

Then she married a guy from out of town, then came the car crash, then the funeral and somehow her mother blamed me for all of it. The old woman lost her husband early on, the daughter was her only child and the focus of her life. Her eyes, on the rare occasions when we met, seemed a glance from hell, a cocktail of empty sorrow, regret and hatred seared to a burnt

crust by the years.

I stayed away from the post office.

Like the rest of the beat up little town the local convenience store was a beat up old concrete box with a couple nondescript gas pumps, a coin operated ice machine and a few illegal poker machines in a back room.

Jay McHenry was the owner, he'd inherited it from his dad, P.J. McHenry. Jay was a faded sixtyish with a genial manner and as non-threatening as they come, but there were a few would be armed robbers who could tell you a different story. Jay had spent a lot of time scouting behind enemy lines in a little shit-hole called Vietnam where he'd picked up a few tricks that, even after all these years, he still knew how to use.

I pushed through into the air conditioned space, Jay was making change for a traveler and nodded me through to his office. I spent a lot of time in Jay's store, doing odd jobs, mooching sandwiches and/or just hanging out. The closest thing to an anchor in my life.

Back in my muddled youth I was a bright up and comer, heavy into computers, punk rock and various mind blowing substances. At the time it seemed just all good fun, before addiction's heavy grip tightened and I plummeted into a fiery death spiral where my future sort of ablated itself away into a burnt and lifeless past. Eventually I dried out, helped along by six months spent hard laboring at the county farm, after driving a friend's borrowed car through a liquor store. But there would be no tech school, no big time IT jobs, nothing but feeding on the scraps, little odd jobs here and there.

Like now.

Finished at the register Jay followed me into his office, already pointing at the ancient, scarred computer case I'd rescued from the local garbage dumpster, packed with shady pieces parts, most from the same source as the old box. Sam didn't need nothing fancy, most of his business was cash, some of it would be frowned upon if the wrong people found out about it, about all he really needed was a couple heavily coded spreadsheets for the stuff he couldn't remember.

"That old computer been doing a pretty fair job." Jay smiled a pathetic little smile, more a grimace, so I knew we had some issues.

Like I said, little odd jobs.

"What's it ain't doin'?"

"Says no boot disc, insert boot disc. I ain't got no damned boot disc, what's a boot disc, anyways?"

"Don't worry about it, you won't need one when I'm done."

"You sure?"

"Trust me."

Jay laughed, "OK, man, whatever."

"You back this shit up, like I told you?"

He pulled a little USB stick out of his pocket, brandished it like a weapon.

"Yean, man, every night."

"OK, we're good to go."

I opened a cupboard door, sorted through the pile of old hard drives until I found one that declared, in heavy, handwritten black script, "OK."

From there it was just a bit of tedium, swap out the drives, re-install the bootleg O/S that had been through this a hundred times, re-install the few applications Jay used then load the backups.

Piece of cake.

No money changed hands, it never did. But my trailer was actually his, the electricity was off his pole and within reason, hot dogs and cold drinks were on the house.

And Jay would, once or twice a week, check my mail.

"Nothing in your box, I just checked it a little while ago."

"Thanks, no news is good news. But I like reading the junk mail, damn."

"You can have mine." Jay smiled.

"Naw, ain't the same."

Serious.

"Jay, you ever have weird dreams?"

He looked at me, quiet, and his eyes carried the briefest glimpse of wartime horrors, and then he smiled, but it was a hard smile, a smile that could have been the last thing an enemy had ever seen.

And I wished I hadn't asked the question.

But Jay answered.

"I did two and a half tours in 'Nam, Sam, and they brought me home on a stretcher. Yeah, my dreams get really weird, but here in the last few years they've begun to calm down a bit, the shit don't bite near as bad as it did."

He looked a little closer, deeper in my eyes.

"Sam, why do you ask?"

"Jay, I shouldn't have asked you, of all people, a question like that. Hell, man, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking, I just had a weird little dream and for once it wasn't a wet one."

We both laughed it off, but I felt Jay's eyes on me as I walked out to my Ford, cranked it and headed home.

There was an old analog TV in my place, with a digital converter and outside hung an old antenna that I'd scrounged from somewhere. I didn't watch it much, especially since most of what I used to watch had migrated to the pay TV services and the rest of it didn't make a whole lot of sense to me, anyways. Most of the time I just sat in my scruffy old recliner, reading or just sitting there thinking.

Like now.

Something happened last night, something outside the normal come and go of my admittedly humdrum life, said humdrum path chosen intentionally. There'd been way too much drama in my life and I wasn't looking for more.

But I hadn't awoke naked in the yard for quite a few years now, since I'd quit doing all the wild shit I used to do, and I needed to know why. Was it some sort of flashback effect from all the mind altering substances consumed in the past?

Or was I going bugfuck crazy like a few of my former partners in self-destruction?

Outside it was warm Carolina fall and the sunlight pouring through the windows gradually faded into evening's gray as I sat, thinking, in my chair.

There was the occasional bird chirp, leaves moving in the wind and far off sounds of traffic

and a distant thunder boomer but silence ruled the darkened interior of my home.

And I felt something. Not something I could hear, smell, taste, touch or see, nothing from the five senses. But something was vibrating, something inside, inside me and I could sense the strength, the power.

The question, caustically sarcastic, loomed in my thoughts: The Force?

Not likely, but I could feel a building strength, spreading, not through my body, not through my nervous system but something else, like another "system", dormant until now, but beginning to awaken.

I'm one of those folks who must talk with their hands, chop them off and I'd most likely go mute. This new found force, this power, whatever it was, worked off the mind, no fingers or hands needed. But I reached out with my left hand and somewhere in my mind I touched: Something.

Palm up I lifted my hand and I felt myself rising from the chair.

And promptly folded up and fell back into the same chair.

"Ummm" I mumbled intelligently.

After a few minutes of deep thought and analysis I reached out once again, not trying to do anything but scout this deal out.

I needed intel.

A sphere, semi-transparent shades of moving gray, a little larger than a softball and I knew I could manipulate, move, expand and dive deeper into...what? There was a sense of yearning, a yearning for power, that seemed, incongruously, attracted to my rarely used TV remote.

The tiny triple A batteries seemed not so much to add power, but somehow helped control the power, smoothed the waveforms, extended its range and it's, uh, grip. Or something like that.

This time I reached out, expanded the sphere so it enclosed both me and the chair and with a finer sense of control than before raised me and my chair a few inches off the floor. And with a gentle diminution of power barely kissed the floor on landing.

But there was another dimension, dimensions? I could sense the axis vectors, up/down, right/left, forward/back and I knew how to move through three dimensional space. But there was another *something*, another depth, calling.

I answered the call and the world went fuzzy, out of focus. I looked down and I could see not just my lap, but the chair, the ground under my house, a little deeper. There were rocks, water, and although I could only "see" about twenty feet down I could sense unseen empty caverns and way deeper, our own aquifer, gently flowing from its source in the far off mountains of North Carolina.

I gathered the TV remote to my lap, then with palms down, with out of character daring, I allowed my recliner, along with my own corpus, to descend into the depths. Not too deep, maybe ten feet below ground level. I had no clue what I was doing, no clue how I was doing it, and not much faith in the TV remote.

So I just hung there, looking around. I could feel the cool earth and sensed that my bubble had captured enough air to breath for a few more minutes. With an unnecessary wave of a hand I turned the bubble, chair and me ninety degrees to the left then moved from under the house trailer. Looking up, to the "surface", I brought the bubble clear of the ground, shrunk the

bubble, made sure the chair was on the ground, then slowly allowed the bubble to collapse.

I stood up, stepped away from the chair, and just stood there in the last of the fading light, thinking of how contentious the damned chair had been going into the house, and how easy it was to get it back out.

"I could go into the moving business, if I was a real working man." I more or less mumbled to myself.

The dogs had hauled ass at the first glimpse of me coming out of the ground; I could hear them whimpering in the bush.

Worried over their meal ticket, the uncharitable thought passed through my consciousness.

"OK, get the chair back in the house."

On impulse I walked away, about ten feet. I reached for the bubble, it was there, with me, always in the center. I spread my arms to open the bubble and it expanded a few feet, but not to the chair.

Not enough power, I thought.

The batteries in the TV remote weren't much to begin with, and weakening fast. I tossed the remote to the chair, reached for the bubble and yes, it was there, but jittering, bouncing through all its' dimensions. I collapsed the bubble, walked back to the chair, picked up the remote, wrapped the bubble around me and this time took the short route, off the ground then through the wall and in but a moments I was landing softly on the living room carpet.

OK, there were limits, power limits, range limits and quite possibly limits due to my inexperience.

I stood, walked to the kitchen, drew a glass of water from the tap then headed for the porch, the night and my old rocking chair.

I had to think.

Creaks, from chair and porch, as I rocked in time with my thoughts. One old dog lying beside my rocker, the other snuffling through four day old food, pan rattling as the mutt nosed it across the porch. He stopped pushing close aboard my rocker, then looked at me through the gloom with that pitiful doggy con-job look.

Let'em go chase rabbits, or somebody's cats, hell, I had other stuff on my mind.

OK, I had something; hell, I got that, but just what did I have, and was it a good thing or a bad thing? The tech seemed simple: more, bigger batteries, a platform of sorts, maybe a couple seats out of an old pickup. Basic instrumentation, altimeter, airspeed indicator, compass, all digital and hooked into a tablet or even a smart phone, the tech was easy. A little work, but easy on the brain.

No problem.

Of course, I had no tablet, computer or smart phone, those icons of a life gone sour, and felt better off without.

But the question hung like an angry, black cloud: What was this, and what was I to do with it? The second part was easy; I wasn't going to do much but play around, learn what I could, and maybe figure out the first part. Neither the world nor I was ready for me to go public, and somehow I doubted I ever would.

In my mind I could see the results of me the idiot telling the world I could fly underground. Disbelief at first, then locked away in whatever institution "they" needed to take me apart and

learn the secrets so that somebody besides me could wax obscenely wealthy. And after taking me apart, would these assholes be considerate enough to put me back together again?

No, this was my close held secret, for now, anyways.

Then came the scary question that asked why should I be the "Special One"? Were there others out there, flexing their new found wings? I doubled down on my resolve to keep this just between me and the dogs.

Now that I sort of knew what I was doing there were no further unplanned night flights.

The uneventful tenor of my nights returned while my days were filled with exploring this strange new world of flight/not flight. I could move about without the chair but I preferred to be sitting whilst navigating my yard. The neighbors didn't mind as I had no neighbors and Jay was as predictable as the sun in his comings and goings. One night the dogs disappeared, scared out of their little mooching minds after I "surfaced" under them a couple times.

I did not miss them.

There was progress of a sort, the old recliner and I had touched the sky, or at least as high as the several treetops that inhabited my place. I could go up, fly around, shift into whatever that was that wasn't regular space then move through walls, dirt or my old house trailer with some degree of certainty that I wasn't going to fall from the sky or become entombed underground.

Dropping underground it seemed the daylight sky "leaked" down to about twenty feet or so then it got real dark real fast so I took to carrying my monster torch, the one four batteries long, and that's how I discovered the cavern. A small open space between the rocks and dirt, gushing water rushing from wherever to the ocean and me the only human to ever lay eyes on the place. A cool place to hide if I ever needed it, but did not stay long as I was ever aware of the tiny amount of air I captured in my wandering sphere.

One afternoon I found myself sketching something I wasn't sure what to call it on old printer paper leftover from the days when I actually had a printer. There was a wooden platform, four wheels, fixed, no steering, a place in the rear for a couple deep service marine batteries, a couple chairs side by side and something like a combination windscreen and desk for gauges, a laptop, and whatever. I sketched in something that resembled an umbrella but that was a bit tentative, maybe a bit much for my basic whatever it was.

I really needed to develop some terminology for whatever it was I was doing, whatever it was.

And maybe do a little research.

Jay McHenry's drive angled off Briar Patch road, the same dirt road my smallish drive connected to but a few hundred yards past mine. But his drive was a long one and it wound back until his house was not quite a hundred feet from mine. A couple years ago the local Telco had finally trenched fiber DSL along Briar Patch road, Jay asked me to set him up and I made sure to use a high strength wireless router, with optional hi-load antennas, that made it possible for me to piggy-back on his internet connection. I never had, as I did not actually own a computer, but I figured one of these days I might actually, for whatever reason, get one.

And yes, I told him what I'd done and why. He chuckled but I could see it meant something that I had.

And yes, there is an occasional amazing synergy about life that can cause one to wonder

about all sorts of things.

Pete Johnson had a little place a mile or so off Mako Junction, and the day after I'd finished my sketching we, along with a bunch of other locals, were spaced around the bed of his pickup enjoying one of those redneck bullshit sessions. The truck was parked at McHenry's Store, Jay was in the bunch and we were all laughing at something somebody had said.

Pete was short, wiry, unshaven with short whiskers turned to gray, not a tooth in his mouth and dressed in his customary overalls. He'd been farming all his life, never making big money but, as they all say, "getting by". His best friend had been Missy's dad and over the years he'd been a sort of ersatz father, and grieved for her as much as her mother. Unlike Miss Rebi, he never blamed me for her death, although he'd made it plain that he was disappointed with my loony-toons life decisions.

"Sam," he said to me in his gravelly cigarette voice, "My old laptop quit working, I can hear it cranking up but the monitor stays dark."

I figured he was wanting me to fix the damned thing, and I knew I would, as I had before. Pete was a good friend, and more than once he'd picked me up passed out on the road, pulled my old Ford out of the field or ditch or wherever I'd sort of parked it, threw me in the back then parked my pickup, calling his wife Mildred to come pick him at "that crazy boy's house."

But then he surprised me, saying "Mildred called and was talking to the daughter, ya know how that goes, but then she said she'd just bought a new computer and I could have the old one." Pete shook his head, slowly, then grinned. "That ain't way it normally goes, she's usually wanting money for something, but this time, well, hey, what the hell, I told Momma to tell Cynthia to bring the damned thing on over."

A few knowing chuckles and smiles worked their way around the bed of the old pickup while Pete fussed with his John Deere ball cap.

"I knew I was coming by Jay's so I tossed the old computer in the truck. You the only boy I know that can fix a computer but don't have one." He fussed a bit more with his cap, then continued, "I asked Momma and she says yes, so if you want it you can have it."

Smiling, "Now I ain't gonna fix it for you, that's on you. But if you can use it it's all yours."

Along with all the other good old boys I laughed, then said "Well, Mr. Pete, it's been years since I even wanted a computer, but you know, maybe I could stand to have one in the house again. I'm more than glad to take it off your hands, and hell, I'll even fix it."

That drew another round of subdued amusement, as everybody there knew me and how I'd major league screwed my life up. And maybe I wasn't the only one thinking the healing was taking another step.

End Episode One

Why? Mainly because I haven't a clue as to what comes next and if you the reader or me the writer wishes to ever discover what comes next then I guess I'll just have to write the damned thing. I gotta think about this for a while.

