

Excerpts From the Mole Chronicles

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The fog crawled out of the pond and clung to the air like a gray-white apparition. They appeared on the horizon like molten embers in silhouette, a thousand mole soldiers marching upright on two legs in medieval uniforms. Breastplates and leather helmets aligned in row after row that disappeared over the horizon. He came out of the morning fog, back-lit from the rising sun, on a spirited, snorting steed. Sitting erect with gold-linked mail and a silver helmet that had a blood-red ruby in the center, he was the Mole King.

His presence captured my eyes as I watched from a thicket behind an alder tree. A sad eloquence emanated from his regal bearing. When he looked in the direction I was hiding, I saw that he had no eyes, and yet he penetrated me with his awareness. I knew he could see me. There was peace in his countenance and wisdom in his smile.

The sun silently cleared the horizon and poured yellow brilliance down, filling the darkness with light, flickering and flooding through my eyelids, disturbing my dreams. It sliced through the edge of my lashes and exploded into a thousand-watt halogen awakening. I was lying on a gurney in an emergency room with several doctors in green scrubs looking down at me.

One of them said, "Nice to have you with us, Mr. Westgate." I winced and closed my eyes as it all came tunneling back to me.

I had recently moved to the country where I discovered I had a mole problem, and I was attempting to eradicate it. On a friend's suggestion, I tried flooding the moles with garden hoses. The water didn't work. Not only did I destroy part of the lawn, but also the little vermin simply continued to make new runs and mounds in the lower yard around the house. As I was standing, looking at the giant muddy caverns I had created, I heard a voice from the other side of the old barbed wire fence.

“Morning, neighbor.”

I looked up and saw an older gentleman with a tuft of white hair coming out of the side of his CAT DIESEL baseball cap.

I nodded, and he continued uninvited, “Looks like you got moles.”

I thought, “What is this guy, the king of understatement?” I just shook my head in bewilderment.

“I used to have moles, but I finally figured them out.”

I looked over at his field and saw plenty of molehills.

“Oh, these are my field moles. I don’t mind them out here, but around the house I don’t tolerate them.” He pointed back in the distance where a white picket fence surrounded his house. I couldn’t see his lawn, but I imagined he was lying, and he didn’t invite me over to look. He continued, “No sir, I finally got to their worst fear, and since then I had no more trouble with the varmints.” He paused, and I waited. He held the silence while looking over my ravaged back field.

Finally, I said, “Good morning, I’m Peter Westgate, your new neighbor with the mole problem.”

He smiled, pulled out an old brown pipe and began filling it from a pouch.

“Well, to control something,” he began, “you have to understand it.”

I cringed but continued to listen.

While packing his pipe, he struck a wooden match with his thumbnail, and began laboring like a steam engine to ignite his pipe. A blue plume poured over his head and dissipated into the morning sky. He turned back toward the fence with a faraway glassy look and signaled me to come closer. As I neared, he whispered, “They’re bleeders!”

I looked at him quizzically. “Bleeders?”

“That’s right son, their little secret is they’re bleeders. Hemophiliacs. The great unstaunchables.”

“Bleeders!” I echoed. “But how do I cut them so they will bleed?”

I must have radiated evil, because he stepped back and looked into my eyes saying, “It’s simple. Horse hair. It cuts them like a schoolboy with his daddy’s razor. Only once they start to bleed, they don’t stop. Like vampires that avoid the light, they avoid getting cut. So, when you put a clump of hair in their run, it wraps around their front diggers and gets stuck down deep in the nail; that’s when the blood rises to the surface and leaks out of their little bodies until they cease to be. The others that don’t get cut develop an aversion to horsehair and your property, and there you have it: a mole-free environment.”

“Now, all I have to do is get some horse hair,” I said.

“Not a problem, young man. But remember, use the hair off the tail. It tangles nicely around their little paws. In fact, up in the back forty behind my barn, you could get a little tail hair from old Rusty. Hell, that old boy has been with me for years.”

“Well, I don’t know how to thank you.”

“No need to thank me. I’d go up there and help you find him, but I’m right in the middle of something. But don’t worry, old Rusty won’t hurt you.”

Heading into the back forty, I pictured old sway-back Rusty nibbling clover in the shade. I took two carrots, six lumps of sugar, and an apple, just in case he declined any one of these fair treats. Although I had thrown back my shoulders and tightened my resolve, the truth is I am rather afraid of God’s creatures both great and small (not because I hate them, I just have a general discomfort with critters that drool, snap, urinate or begin humping each other, regardless of species, at the drop of a hat; they just seem to lack a certain refinement).

While looking for Rusty, these same feelings of the unpredictability of beasts flickered through my consciousness. When I saw him standing over on the far side of the field, he looked magnificent. He was the color of a red-glowing ember, and he moved with powerful grace. He held his head high, trembled and snorted at unseen forces, and pranced in circles, high-stepping like those Riverdance folks. I didn’t think he saw me, so I called out, “Hey, Rusty!” His ears twitched, and he

looked directly at me. I continued, "Hey good boy, do you want a carrot?" He glowered at me, put his head down, and began eating grass.

Beyond my better judgement, I tentatively moved toward him. His persona changed from a fiery stallion to a docile old gelding. In fact, his shoulders slumped and the slightest sway appeared in his back, along with a bit of a potbelly. I began to think my imagination had the best of me. Here was old docile Rusty having a bit of clover, and I had conjured up a fire-breathing stallion off in the distance. I reached the center of the field while saying things like, "Well, aren't you quite the Champion, old boy," and other endearing and soothing phrases.

When I again said, "Here boy, want a carrot?" another metamorphosis occurred. He sucked in his potbelly, squared his shoulders removing any trace of a swayback, and snickered at me. With big brown manic eyes he looked through me with silent wicked laughter, and the peaceful meadow was transformed into an arena. He became one of Caesar's minions.

Like many Christians before me, I froze while the beast roared. He began pawing the ground and snorting. Then he danced around in schizophrenic circling, threw back his head, and screamed some ancient demon dialect that left little for interpretation. Locking those brown eyes on to my soul like laser-guided tracking devices, he launched himself at me. I don't know if I first ran or if I first lost internal muscular control of my sphincter, but I ran and ran and ran. Flying hooves and thunder found me face down in a drainage ditch, stunned and silent.

Slowly, I raised my head from the ditch and looked through the summer-burnt, yellow and brown field grass. Rusty was nowhere to be seen. I rose on quivering legs and brushed myself off. Suddenly, I heard pounding hooves from a thicket two hundred yards to the north. I shot out of the ditch on three-minute mile legs and headed south, chased by a minion of hell.

Just as I was about to be trampled to death, I dove head-first into a black-berry patch. Lacerated and stained purple and red from juices and my own blood, I waited.

Old Rusty seemed to snicker for a few minutes and then retraced my path, dipping his head occasionally, as if eating. I checked my pockets and realized I had dropped the sugar, carrots and apple—he was having a little refreshment after his exertions. I managed to crawl about 50 yards from the blackberry patch when I began to feel clever. I was actually going to escape the beast. About 25 yards from the woods I rose to a crouch and looked up over the field grass. Old Rusty's back was to me, and I ducked back down with a smug chuckle, "Stupid horse." Then I felt a burning sensation on the back of my ankles. I looked back and heard buzzing, like Japanese Zeroes bombing Pearl Harbor. I surfaced from the field with a blood-curdling scream and ran flailing and cursing away from a swarm of killer bees.

When I finally stumbled back to civilization, the neighbor hollered, "Hey! Come over here!" As I approached, his enthusiasm was replaced with a subtle smirk *as he saw my scratched, swollen and stained* condition. I exuded a homicidal aura, *scented with dried-sweat adrenaline and fear (which can come across, to the non-professional, as madness)*. "Well, what happened to you, neighbor?" *he asked, with a humbler tone than I had yet heard from him.*

I just shook my head as I marched past him and saw old Rusty with slumped shoulders and potbelly eating his oats out of a wooden trough in a stall. His demeanor was one of an old lazy horse swatting flies until he looked over his shoulder at me, and winked as if to say, "No one will ever believe you, neighbor." And then he returned to his oats and his old horse routine. If I had a gun, Old Rusty would have been put off his oats and into a bottle of glue, neighbor.

It was then my neighbor handed me a bag of horsehair with a mischievous glint in his eye and said, "Oh, by the way neighbor, I found this in the stall." If I had a gun, I would have separated a 45-caliber-size swath of gray matter from just above his smirky eyes. I felt prison a reasonable compensation for such profound satisfaction. I took the bag of horsehair in a glowering silence and limped home.

When I got there, I noticed two more mounds and prayed a silent prayer: “Burn, you subterranean schmucks, burn.” I went inside to sterilize my wounds and disposition.

Four days later, I placed balls of horsehair in each burrow, pushing them with the handle of a hoe as deep into each run as I could. This took a great deal of effort. The next morning, when I found the balls of hair pushed out of each burrow, I began to feel the stark landscape of impending depression.

New hope arose from the ashes of my failures. Molehill mud and balls of discarded horsehair, like dry forgotten apparitions lifted by summer winds, cleansed my spirit of the thick struggle. A new day had come, and it stirred with new possibilities.

With telephone in hand, I began my research, and eventually, I was referred to Terry’s Landscaping Emporium. What I learned set my mind free. I was informed that gas was the preferred method of eradication and that they just happened to sell that very product. As I drove to Terry’s, I experienced a shudder that ran up my spine and tickled my spirit with truth. The truth resonated with every cell in my body as an epiphany ignited the darkness of my soul. At last, the long awaited light in my tunnel of despair. Gas! Of course, gas.

My mind filled with thoughts of World War I and the horrible effects of gas. I imagined men with gas masks, like gigantic apocalyptic insects moving in long trenches, with round glass eyes and trunk-like noses, rasping with disassociated inhalations. But what really delighted me was recalling the horrors of gas. Imagine an instrument of war so devastating and so catastrophic that people, who were willing to machine gun each other in half and firebomb cities, actually outlawed it because the effects were too debilitating and horrible to continue. Burnt, crushed, shot, mangled, drowned, sliced, garroted, stabbed, baked, fragged, exploded, imploded, suffocated, twisted, impaled and all the other modes of destruction were allowed, but not gas. My heart leapt, and I smiled from a place deep within.

Why hadn't I thought of it? Gas! Of course, gas. It ran off my tongue like the flavor of the day, "Gas, gas, gas, I am going to kick your little gopher gas, gas, gas."

It was only the blink of an eye and a couple of holocaustic fantasies before I was in the checkout line at Terry's, handing Sandy (I knew because of her name tag) a dozen packages of "The Giant Destroyer: The Effective Gas Killer."

She smiled and asked, "Do you have a mole problem?"

Before I could answer, a small crowd had gathered.

This was always the case when the subject of moles was tendered. Everybody seemed to have an opinion. Now that I was buying the gas cartridges, I had opened myself up for unsolicited advice and folklore. Sandy didn't disappoint me. She regaled me with a story that featured her 86-year-old grandmother pouring three-day-old urine into the burrows.

Another person from the fast-growing crowd interrupted our conversation by describing the judicious use of ammonia and garlic in various combinations and intensities. I just smiled, grabbed my plastic bag and departed quickly. My new enthusiasm for gas left me little time for those deluded by superstition and folklore. Personally, I had come back to the church of technology. I left Terry's with my purchase in hand, a maniacal smile, and one lyric, "Gas, gas, gas," building to a thundering crescendo.

At home, I headed directly to the yard. I pulled the wrap from the gas delivery devices and carefully read the instructions. I gathered several large boulders to use as plugs so the gas would not escape from the runs. I lit my first fuse and quickly thrust the burning, hissing device deep into a run. I waited a few seconds until I was sure it was not going to be extinguished then placed a boulder over the top of the burrow and filled in the edges with dirt. I repeated this process, with delight, in all the main runs.

While I was kneeling over the last molehill, my girlfriend Amy called from the porch, "Telephone."

As I looked up at her, gray-white smoke found its way to the open burrow before me. "Take a message," I replied. Then, as if looking through an inverted telescope, she grew small.

I heard her scream echo in the back of my head, "Be careful, the gas!"

The doctors said I was lucky because it appears I am all right. They insisted that I spend the night for observation. Amy went home while my ears burned from her scathing lecture on how much I changed since becoming obsessed with "getting the moles." I had to admit I became obsessed with the cretins, and I didn't realize how hard it had been on her. Before she left I assured her my mole campaign was over, and I felt deeply sorry for my recent behavior.

When I got out of bed to stretch my legs, I overheard the nurses laughing. One of them said, "Yeah, he was trying to gas the moles." And then I heard another one, "My mother-in-law said they had a really bad mole problem, and she found out that moles love Juicy Fruit gum. When they eat the gum, it gets stuck in their intestines, and they die of the obstruction." Like most mole-destruction stories, she went on to say, "And then when the other moles find the dead moles they move to greener pastures."

The next day, Amy picked me up from the hospital. She looked radiant, and I realized just how much I had neglected her.

"Have I told you how much I appreciate you?"

She looked over at me as she turned her Honda Civic into traffic, smiled and said, "Not since you starting trying to get those moles."

Something about her tone, or perhaps her use of the word trying, grated on my nerves. The mere mention of the word moles reminded me of my dream. The peaceful and wise countenance of the Mole King reappeared, and for a moment the notion of making peace with all my neighbors, including my moles, arose. I smiled and reassured her my mole days were over and wondered if she would stop at the store.

She smiled, reached over, took my hand and said she would be delighted to stop at the store. What did I want?

"Oh, just some chewing gum."