

# THE FLIGHT OF THE BARBAROUS RELIC



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To  
My family – here, there, and everywhere



## PROLOG

The man approaching him in the August twilight was tall and thick through the chest, though nothing in his movements suggested a threat. He strolled with a hand slipped casually in his pants pocket, even stopping once to pick up a piece of litter and toss it in a nearby barrel. He could almost pass for one of D.C.'s tourists taking a late walk through a public park.

Yet, on seeing him Ricky Sawyer's stomach churned. This was no casual meeting taking place. He had known this moment would come and had dreaded it, and Sawyer was not prone to unnecessary fears. As he waited under one of the many security lights in the area, the man stopped abruptly in the shadows, kneeled down and retied a running shoe that was properly laced. Sawyer took the hint and moved all 282 pounds of himself over to join him.

"What's with the cloak and dagger?" Sawyer asked.

The man stood up. "I need the favor returned."

Sawyer chuckled nervously. "What do you want me to do? Hack the president's PC?"

"Nothing that easy, my friend. I need you to set up a website. Over time, you'll be supplied with content. But I need the site established now, to make sure the name is available."

"You could go to anyone for a website."

"Not this one."

Sawyer hesitated. "What's going on?"

"How much do you remember from Professor Stefanelli's class?"

"Everything. Paper versus rock. Paper won. We lost."

"Right. I want to put an end to paper. Permanently."

Sawyer chuckled. "Sounds like you're going to blow up your office."

"More along the lines of a crash course in hoax awareness. That's why I need your help."

"Where's the danger come in?"

"The content. The power holders won't like it."

"There are a lot of things they don't like. Why—"

"—I guarantee this will upset them beyond anything you can imagine. You'll have to keep a low profile. Make that no profile. You'll have to disappear."

"Tall order for a whale, chief."

"Any taller than breaking into the Eccles Building network?"

"No, guess not."

"I think you'll be okay. But listen, this won't work unless you understand what's at stake. Do you?"

Sawyer thought for a moment. "Yeah. Civilization. Under paper, little guys like me lose their wealth, liberty, and sometimes their lives, while government grows more bloated, corrupt, and oppressive."

"And the cause?"

"Paper. Inflation."

“What’s inflation done for us historically?”

“According to Professor Stefanelli, without inflation we have no World War I, no Great Depression, no World War II, no Cold War, no Viet Nam, no taxpayer-funded bailouts, no bubbles, no war on terrorism, no Iraq. Without inflation Cindy Sheehan is just another mom with a son. Without inflation, instead of endless acres of white crosses marking the battlefield dead, men are left free to live. Imagine that. And when those men are geniuses like me or Google founders Page and Brin, the whole world profits. Without inflation to build up militaries, we might’ve had nuclear power without nuclear bombs. She also said something to the effect that if inflation were a disease, it would be considered the number one killer of human life. There was more. Give me time and I’ll remember it.”

“Do you agree with any of that?”

“Too simplistic. But then, where would the computer age be without electricity? Pull the plug and the computers go away. So it was hard to argue with her.”

“But you did.”

“Of course. But the truth is, without massive amounts of money the First World War doesn’t go far – four months, according to a writer who was around at the time. And nothing beats the printing press for producing large amounts of money in a hurry – paper money. And if World War I is aborted, the rest of the century looks a little brighter. I would say she’s not far from the truth, at least.”

“Not bad for a hacker. You talked about inflation but didn’t define it. Can you?”

“Paper.”

“More precisely . . .”

"I didn't expect a quiz. The going definition is a rise in the general price level."

"Do you accept that definition?"

"No, because you can have inflation without price increases. Productivity improvements work against rising prices."

"Any other reason not to accept the definition of inflation as rising prices?"

"Yeah, it obscures the cause."

"Which is?"

"More paper. More money. An increase in the money supply."

"How is the money supply increased?"

"Through treachery. First the snap," Sawyer said, snapping his fingers, "in which the Fed creates money from nothing. Then the crank," he continued, rotating his right arm in a cranking motion, "as the banks multiply that amount through credit expansion. Then the pop" – He slapped his hands – "when the bubble bursts and everyone gets fired. Sawyer's theory of the business cycle in three words: snap, crankle, and pop."

"But isn't that how prosperity is funded? By increasing the money supply?"

"No. That's how the inflationary boom is started or prolonged."

"Is that a good thing?"

"It is if you're one of the insiders. Without it, the military/ industrial/ congressional/ welfare racket takes a big hit. Governments would have to rely mostly on taxes to pay their bills."

"What would that do for war if governments had to pay for it with taxes?"

"Make it an endangered species."

"So if you're a government bent on war—"

“Inflation is a sacred cow.”

“And who causes inflation?”

“Who?”

“Yes.”

“I’m looking at him.”

“I think you understand what we’re fighting.”

“I do.”

They shook hands.

“I’ll be in touch,” the man said.

Later that night Sawyer received an email containing a web address only. After confirming the site didn’t exist he set about to create it, as agreed.

In the weeks that followed, Sawyer would find it difficult to believe their conversation was at all serious. Nothing had been added to the website, and other than the terse email there had been no contact between them. The topic they had discussed seemed weird at the time and even more so as time passed. Perhaps their meeting was a brutal prank, a form of payback for the hack he had pulled. It seemed like it was. He began to feel like a fool for trusting him.

But Sawyer was wrong. The day finally arrived when all doubts were forever removed.

Preston Mathews wiped his brow and tried to ignore the rumbling in the distant sky.

Now 51, he was engaged in a long-shot undertaking that was for him a rare instance of honest labor, even though it entailed such sterling qualities as theft, deception, and willful destruction – and probably worse, if you counted what it would bring in its wake.

This part of the project – turning the front of his barn into a billboard – had tested his patience for the last three months while he took care of his professional life. It had put him at odds with tape, templates, subtle hues of paint, bugs, foul weather, and nosy neighbors. But the phrase *labor of love* was something he could sing from his heart now.

Mathews had been detailing his barn with the likeness of the product he managed, a mass-produced item popular the world over. His painting resembled the product in every respect but one.

And he was about to tell the world what that one difference meant.

He was kneeling on a scaffold supported by charred burn barrels, applying the paint with a turbine-powered spray gun. Flecks of paint gave his black hair a prematurely gray look. A respirator covered his nose and mouth, and soft cotton gloves pampered his hands. With a flick of his finger he gunned the paint onto the barn surface, using the High-Volume Low-Pressure applicator in non-bleeder mode for better rendering of detail.

Thunder came again suddenly, this time directly overhead, but it was only the owl beating its great wings as it landed in an opening near the peak of the barn. Mathews stood and leaned back from his waist, stretching his muscles. He watched the ghostly predator peering out at fields of withered corn and perhaps the shoreline of the pond, waiting for the right movement that would signal food.

“Hope you like your new home, Chief,” Mathews called out, his words muffled by his respirator. The owl twisted its neck to gaze down at him, its heart-shaped pale physiognomy looking like a mask of its own, worn perhaps to terrify its prey. “This one won’t be around much longer,” he said quietly. “A day, maybe. Maybe less.”

His old friend flew down to him, and Mathews offered it a gloved hand. It perched there about two feet from his face, its talons a sharp reminder that he needed better protection. “You suffer from chronic insomnia or are your nocturnal wires just crossed? Either way, I can’t help you . . . I’ve got work to do, buddy. Can’t stand here chatting, especially with these gloves.” He raised his arm to launch the bird into flight but it refused to move. “Come on, it’s time to break with the past. Up, up!” As if understanding his command, the owl unfolded its wings and flew back to the loft. Mathews dropped to one knee and went back to work.

He was about to beat a self-imposed deadline, leaving him plenty of time to be in the air before dark. And he hoped something – the approaching storm, perhaps – would scare his little friend away by then.

When the last of the paint was on the barn he ripped his mask off and flung it over his shoulder. He hopped off the scaffold and backed away haltingly, unable to tear his eyes from his work. Even at six-foot-three he had needed his ten-foot Husky stepladder for the upper regions of the image. He wanted the picture to be imposing, yet connected to Americana. A barn ad was the answer.

He kept easing away from the image until he reached a white-rail fence about thirty yards distant. He laughed. “Not bad for an unskilled laborer,” he said aloud. “If only Mount Rushmore had a sculpture like this.”

He grabbed his hi-res Samsung from a nearby fence post and took a few pictures. The owl remained poised above his masterpiece like a lookout on an old ship. “It’s a work of art, Chief!” Mathews shouted. Then quietly, as he faded into thought: “An unmoved mover. . . We’ll see, won’t we?”

He recalled reading about Harley Warrick, who spent 55 years of his life painting MAIL POUCH chewing tobacco ads on some 22,000 barns across Appalachia and the Midwest. The government finally put him out of business by banning outside tobacco advertising. He tried to imagine government’s reaction if copies of his image adorned the roofs and sides of the country’s barns.

Or their reaction to just one barn – a certain barn in eastern Virginia.

Mathews stepped out of his '76 Ford Ranger at the Cedar Airfield parking lot, tucked a bulging duffle bag under his arm and made a dash for the office some fifty yards distant. With his plain black sweatshirt, old jeans, and paint-streaked running shoes, he almost looked like the second shift janitorial help arriving late. There was nothing janitorial about his stride, though, which was still remarkably graceful in spite of the gravel surface. The airfield itself was a two-runway hybrid affair, with most of its acreage devoted to cedar tree farming, the chief component of its paltry revenue.

As he arrived at the door, Mathews thought briefly of the remark Nina made years ago about his running style being so athletic, adding that it had been wasted on an academic. Given that she had nerd qualities herself, her remark had to be heavily discounted, but it was still comforting to think that *just maybe* some part of his high school quarterbacking days were still in evidence. How easily the good memories came, with a fateful flight looming.

“Greetings, men,” he called out to the two attendants as he came into the office. He immediately began filling out a log book at the counter. The attendants had been killing the remainder of their day talking about a possible UVA upset of Michigan State tomorrow at Spartan Stadium. Seeing Mathews put ink to the log doused all talk of football.

“Happy Halloween, Dr. Mathews,” Wes Sutherland said a little too cheerfully.

“Hey,” Mathews replied absentmindedly without looking at him. Sutherland was in his early forties and lean as a blade. His younger and beefier coworker Ed Ramsey was too dumbstruck to speak. Sutherland’s mouth hung open as he watched Mathews finish his entry.

“How are you, sir?” Sutherland asked.

Mathews set the pen down. “Almost perfect, Wes. Almost perfect. Know what that’s like?”

“Not without a hangover trailin’ after it. Dr. Mathews—”

“Ever race a train at a railroad crossing?”

“No, sir, I haven’t.”

“Neither have I. Don’t ever plan to. But this storm coming in will be pretty close. Can I get a flight in before it hits? Yeah, I think so.”

“The storm could be here any minute, Dr. Mathews. You’re not serious, are you?”

“Never been more serious in my life.”

“You’re also betting your life, sir.”

“Then I better get moving.”

Mathews turned and went back outside.

Several minutes passed before Sutherland and Ramsey decided they really ought to be more insistent. They hustled outside past an arch-roofed hangar to the spacious shanty where Mathews kept his personal airship, a harvest gold 1941 Waco (“Wah-Ko”) UPF-7 biplane. What could be worse than seeing a man fly an old relic into a storm? Seeing him nonchalantly spray-paint it first.

They had stopped just inside the hanger and stood watching him alternate between shaking a paint can then spraying black letters on the back of the fuselage. He went about it in cavalier fashion, like a vandal scrawling graffiti.

He turned and saw them. “Think long shelf life, men! Things that people will always want. Grand pianos, fine jewelry. Gold! If you have a good place to hide it. Don’t store it in a goddamn bank.” Then he stepped back to look at his lettering. “How ‘bout it, guys? Catchy?”

They were too dumbstruck to speak.

Mathews went on. “And don’t tell anyone you own it. No one, not even your mothers. If some nosy bureaucrat inquires about a sudden depletion of your cash holdings, make something up. Tell him you blew it at Vegas, but don’t tell him you bought physical gold. They will take it from you, if not now, someday.”

He frowned at the lettering on his biplane. “I hope I spelled ‘barbarous’ right. Oh, damn! Hang on.” He stepped to the rear cockpit and reached down inside it. When he turned back he was holding two bundles of money bound with mustard-colored straps. He threw one to each man as if tossing peanuts to squirrels. “Some advisor I am! Tell you what to buy but leave you empty-handed.”

The two men looked at the wad of money in their hands with complete idiocy. Then they stared at each other, their eyes seeming to

spread across their faces. Sutherland stuck a hand in Ramsey's chest: "Go back and call nine-one-one. I'll try to hold him." He had to shove Ramsey to get him moving.

Mathews was pushing the plane out of the hanger from the right side of the rear cockpit when Sutherland came up to him.

"Dr. Mathews, I can't let you do this. Something's not right."

Mathews kept working. "I know. That's why I've got to do it."

"I mean with you, sir. You're not yourself today. Why don't you ride this storm out with us? I'll put on a fresh pot of coffee."

"Any other time I'd love nothing better. Give me a hand here, will you?"

Wes shook his head. "Sir, I can't. It's - it's suicide. If I let you go I'll get shot a hundred times over. And I couldn't blame them."

Mathews stopped, slapped the fuselage and let out a long sigh. "You're a good man, Wes." He moved over to Sutherland and dropped a hand on his shoulder. "I need you to listen very carefully."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not going up in the air to get my kicks challenging Mother Nature. If I were, your case against my sanity would be unassailable. You might say I'm challenging human nature, but without details that's just empty rhetoric. So let's just say this is a mission, a very critical mission." He removed his hand and stood back. "Now, tell me what you just heard me say."

"I heard you say . . . the hell with the weather, you're going on a very critical mission."

"Well put. Think Paul Revere, okay? In a loose sense. Right now, I need you to help me get started." Sutherland looked scared to death. "Now what's the problem?"

He held the money up. "*This.*"

“Consider it a tax rebate,” Mathews said. “That’s all I can say. If you feel uncomfortable accepting it then don’t spend it. Now, let’s get going. I really don’t like that thunder.”

“I have a young daughter to support, Dr. Mathews. She depends on me.”

Mathews yanked a bill from Sutherland’s cache of loot and scrawled a note on it, his hand racing, using the fuselage for support. Watching Cedar’s most distinguished client scribble a message on one of the banknotes didn’t help Sutherland breathe any easier. When Mathews finished he held it up to the attendant’s face.

Sutherland struggled with the handwriting. “This cer . . . certifies —“

“— ‘This certifies that Wes Sutherland made a conscientious effort to stop me, Preston Mathews, from taking off with a God-awful thunderstorm approaching.’ You’re covered.” He stuffed the note in Sutherland’s hand. “Krista won’t miss any meals. Now, let’s get moving.”

Sutherland looked at the note, then cast a pleading glance about the hangar. “God help us.”

“Oh! One more thing,” Mathews said, heading for the rear cockpit again.

Moments later Ramsey came rushing into the hangar and stopped. Sutherland was holding a camera to his face taking aim at Mathews, who was standing next to the inscription on the back of the fuselage. Mathews smiled like a proud papa.

“I made the call,” Ramsey said.

Sutherland lowered the camera to his chest and looked at his co-worker with tortured eyes. “Call them back,” he said.

The wind cut through him, had he bothered to notice.

He was flying from an open cockpit in the rear of the plane, with a heavy tarp stretched over the seat in front. He had added aviator goggles and a white scarf to his attire. The wind had picked up, and he could feel the double-winger straining under the control stick. The struts and wires shook and howled. Sixty weight oil from the 220 hp Continental 670 engine was forming a faint film on his windscreen. Need new gaskets, he concluded, and laughed at his own dark humor. His venerable Waco had no business dueling with thunderstorms.

Morrisville was only a few miles distant but it meant flying into one massive cumulonimbus formation to get there. He kept his airspeed at 110 mph, his altitude at 200 feet. The duffle bag squeezed between his legs and seat felt reassuring, but visions of disaster played in his mind.

For one thing, he had never flown in foul weather. He imagined coming in low and catching a sudden crosswind that would send him

spinning into a pasture nose-first. And he could only hope it would be a pasture; he would be mostly buzzing a town, with houses and children and cars. Thumbing his nose at a storm was the kind of hubris the gods love to punish. He could end up in ashes before he even reached Morrisville, turning his trip into a fool's final errand.

But even if he survived Morrisville, there was still a more critical jaunt to make.

The town rolled toward him, the dark sky looming behind it like the shadow of an avenging giant. He brought the plane down lower and dropped his speed until he could read road signs. He was coming up on Main Street. He was so low he was almost part of the scant road traffic, a moving violation with two wings. He loafed by the town's Arby's then the lone KFC. Two boys were helping their dad pump gas at an antediluvian BP station, and he circled leisurely around it, wanting people to notice him. One of the kids appeared to shout and mimed shooting a bow and arrow at him. Some weapon. Biplanes get no respect.

He passed over a little church and graveyard on the north side of town, then made a grand sweep over a farm and came back for a second pass. The storm had turned the world black, and wind rocked his plane like a dingy in a gale. Lightning lit up the buildings and houses ahead, and got his heart racing. Then the rain hit, turning his cockpit into a cistern, and a world of limited detail suddenly disappeared. His cockpit was filling up. He imagined the ultimate folly – not crashing, but *sinking*.

He looked down. Rooftops and trees passed under him, then something suggesting the tarmac of the BP station. More bodies had joined the dad and his sons. He thought he could make out the fast food joints. A storm of this intensity usually cleared the roads, but

two cars were moving right along a little behind him. Were they hoping to catch a view of the inevitable? Hell, yes. Why else would Morrisville send high-speed reconnaissance out in weather like this? Had to be a fool up there, and sure as heck there's money to be gotten. Be there with a camera when he crashes and make yourself a good buck. Wes Sutherland could join the act too, with a photo showing off the bill Mathews signed, which he could post for a ransom on eBay, assuming the government didn't confiscate it first.

As suddenly as it had arrived the deluge disappeared and became a drizzle, and the world began to take on shapes with hard edges. Ahead of him was the most beautiful landing strip he had ever seen – the highway he had followed coming into town. He would set the *Barbarous Relic* down there, get out and hug the earth.

That's what he desperately wanted to do. He circled back into the storm cell instead.

There was nothing like a madman to draw a crowd's attention, or a town's, and the storm was an unexpected asset if it didn't kill him. The wind buffeted him, and now the rain was turning white and bouncing. He was being pummeled with frozen balls of ice. Not to be distracted he reached down and grabbed bunches of strapped hundred-dollar-bills from his duffle bag. And of course he forgot to remove the damn straps and immediately put his teeth to work tearing them off. He flung the bills over the side. Along with the hail, Morrisville was being bathed in a classic handout to a certain few, who would naturally use their good tidings to fertilize the global economy.

"By the power vested in me," he screamed into the maelstrom, "I hereby anoint you privileged insiders, Morrisville! Come and get it!"

He weaved as best he could through town, leaving a trail of Franklin-faced notes fluttering behind him, then swung out over the farm on the other end of Morrisville and laid some Fed fairy dust on it. A small funnel cloud was coming up on him as he moved across the farmer's field. His heart hammered in his chest. He had never seen a twister before, except in the movies. He gave it a wide berth and doubled back for another pass through town, marveling at his relic's stubborn refusal to disintegrate. "Twisters and greenbacks, folks – a double whammy!"

He wished mightily he could watch them as they gathered up their loot. But he had promises to keep . . .

He finished his second S-turn through town and exited the womb of the storm. Without prelude or ceremony he found himself on the final leg of the trip, the part most critical to his plan.

He had flown this course nine days earlier on a sun-drenched fall day and had flown it many times before then. Nine days ago his intestines rebelled thinking about these next few minutes. He had done the calculations. He knew what airspeed, altitude, and angle of approach he would need. Those were the known quantities. What bothered him was the unknown, for which his instruments were of no use.

Everything had seemed so clear last night and earlier today. If his conscience had tapped him on the shoulder and asked him what the hell he was doing with all this barn business and the biplane, he would've had an articulate answer. He could say he wanted a different world than the one he lived in and was one of the few people who could possibly start the painful process of reshaping it. But that was last night's answer. Now, with his life spinning on a roulette wheel, he couldn't produce a single goddamn reason why he

was in this flimsy aircraft. All he could think of was the unreal task ahead of him and how he might talk himself out of it. Rationalization was the only thing that might save him.

But was it really wrong to consider the fabulous life he was giving up? And for who, exactly, was he throwing it all away? Most Americans didn't care about this issue and nothing he could do would make them care. They're busy with their kids' soccer team or struggling with another plumbing leak – don't bother them with esoteric exercises. The big shots didn't want some idiotic boat-rocker threatening their revenue stream. Don't tell them about truth – truth is what keeps them on top and gets their kids into the snottier schools.

No, this idea he was pursuing might be seriously flawed. If he goes through with it, politicians and talking heads will cast pity on him for having caved to the stress of his office. The simple messages he would be leaving could never overcome generations of carefully delivered indoctrination. His plan was futile. Where was his incentive? Had he forgotten everything he knew about economics? He needed to turn his plane around.

His farm rolled into view, a terrifying sight. He never imagined his peaceful little spread could inspire so much fear. Where other men of his means might have bought a villa in some exotic locale to complement their rural estate or urban suite, he throws down his cash on an attention-deprived 27-acre corn farm with a resident owl. It made perfect sense at the time. Now it seemed more like a funny farm, reflecting the character of its owner.

He should be back at the airfield having coffee with the guys. They didn't want him to do this. Who the hell are you to do it for them?

He slowed and came in low, the wheels almost skimming the pond and a few stray stalks of corn. The barn's graven image rose in his face. His masterpiece, his gift to the world, destined to be destroyed. *You're not yourself today, Dr. Mathews. And this barn of yours – Jesus Christ, what have you done?!* He laughed and *vroomed* over it.

Chief, he had noticed, was still resting on his perch at the top of the barn. He never budged, didn't take off flying like a smart bird would when the plane roared past, probably because he knew the pilot so well. Maybe he stayed to make sure Mathews didn't chicken out.

He circled back for a second approach to the barn, swinging past a stand of yellow pines. The barn was headed straight for him, growing bigger. The bottom fell out of his stomach.

His only impulse was to scream. Yet somewhere in his mind was a little procedure he had to follow. If he came up short on nerve now

—

Preston Vincent Mathews screamed.