

*The*  
BOOK *of*  
DAYS

*Steve Rasnic Tem*

SUBTERRANEAN PRESS • 2002

***The Book of Days***

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**FIRST EDITION**

**ISBN**

1-931081-39-5

**Subterranean Press**

P.O. Box 190106

Burton, MI 48519

**email:**

subpress@earthlink.net

**website:**

www.subterraneanpress.com



For the folks who read it first on Genie  
and, of course,  
for Melanie.



SEPT. 1

He arrived in the small country town in the morning. He immediately went to the local stationery shop and bought all the calendars he could find, over \$300 worth. The young clerk's hands were shaking when she handed him the bags full of his purchases. He was particularly interested in the sixteen month calendars which began on September 1, his birthday and the first day of his new life here.

Calendars were arbitrary constructions anyway—why not one that began on his birthday? Linda would have said he was crazy.

*He* would have said this trip was meant to keep him from going crazy. If he had been able to talk to her.

He didn't want to think what his children might have to say.

He went back to the cabin and spread his calendars all over the floor of the largest room. Art and photography calendars went along the outside edges of his collection, "On This Day In History" and "Peculiar Facts" types of calendars went on the inside.

He picked up the two that looked most interesting and gazed at September One. 1875: Edgar Rice Burroughs is born. His favorite author when he was a boy. Now Parker's favorite. During the long summer the twelve-year-old had read a third of the Tarzan books. 1916: Congress passes the Owen-Keating Act. The child labor law. Child labor had been a horror, especially in the southern mills during his grandfather's time. Little kids mangled by machinery—that's the photograph that should have gone on the September page, not some flower or movie star. 1983: The Soviet Union shoots down a South Korean airliner, killing 269. How many children? He used to know, but now he couldn't remember. Bad things happened to children all the time, and there was nothing he could do.

The worst thing a father can do is abandon his children. There is no excuse. The absolute worst thing. But that's what he'd done. Continued to do.

No excuse. But he'd frozen up. He couldn't do it anymore. Afraid of the risks, all the things that might happen, afraid of life. Afraid to let them go anywhere, do anything. God knows afraid to discipline them in any way. All the things that might happen. Afraid of what might happen to Linda if either Parker or Jennie died. Afraid of what might happen to him.

So he'd left his wife and children, taking just enough of the savings to live on, and come here where his mother and her old friend had raised him that first year.

His mother had believed that all the important things in life could be learned from stories. Her own father had told stories to her every day, and after she'd run away from that little country hospital the first day of his life, scared and all broken up inside, she'd told them to him, one each day even though he was too young to know what she was talking about. One each day, like some backwoods Scheherezade, afraid of what her drunken husband would do to her if he ever found her, afraid of what he'd do to the baby he'd never wanted. Terrible things happened to children. Even in fairytales. So the first story she'd ever told him was a nightmare. A nightmare about how he'd been born.

Not that he'd been aware. She told him all these things years later: about his father, about that night, about the stories. She said she shouldn't have told a baby such a terrible story, but that night it had been the only story she knew. She'd forgotten all the others. But she would apologize to him, again and again. He couldn't have heard her, could he? He couldn't have known. It was just his first day.

His mother had never understood. He'd known because he'd *lived* the story. It just took him a while to remember it. She'd only reminded him of it. So it wasn't strange at all that the first story he tried to tell himself after he ran away from his wife and children—the first story out of all those he remembered, made up, or retrieved out of some dark somewhere in order to repair himself—was this story. The story of September One. The story of his first day.

His mother had a neighbor lady take her to the hospital in the middle of the night. She'd walked three miles to the lady's house, not having a phone and besides she didn't want her husband knowing. He was sleeping it off thank god because if he'd been awake he would have killed them both, pulled that monster right out of her and thrown it in the creek he'd promised it a hundred times.

The hospital there only had one doctor and he was asleep with a bottle in his hand and when they dragged him into the delivery room he turned pale and shook his head because he'd known her all her life he was a good man a kind man but he drank too much like almost every other man she knew. Including her father.

The baby started coming out and the nurses were all excited. "Look how big he is!" one of them cried (ten pounds she found out later) and there was so much blood she couldn't believe it and the doctor reached down and pulled and she could feel herself breaking inside the baby was so afraid to come out.

The doctor stepped back and one of them said, "Don't drop the baby!" and she could feel him slipping out of her, slipping away from her forever when the nurse stooped down and caught him before his head hit the floor and scattered his dreams across the delivery room (and wouldn't those be a chore to clean out of linoleum!).

He'd cracked her pelvis in two places but lucky for her they got the bleeding under control. She was in a lot of pain but she left the hospital anyway in the middle of the night headed through the woods to her friend's house who knew a little nursing. Her husband would be awake soon. She could feel his eyelids lifting like two scabs peeling off an infected wound and no way was she going to let him catch up to her in that hospital bed.

So it was through the gray woods with her husband wrapped in his shadows waking and her baby sleeping, falling headfirst into nightmare as she passed the black animal shapes she knew she would be telling her son about in story after story after story.

## SEPT. 2

1917: Cleveland Amory is born.

1969: The final episode of the "Star Trek" TV series airs.

Strange how the events in these calendars were always presented in the present tense, as if they are happening now, are continuing to happen.

Every year around his birthday he got a headache. It never failed. Every year as the anniversary of his mother's death approached he experienced cold sweats, chills, and a shortness of breath. Every year as the season neared in which Linda had miscarried the child who would remain forever nameless, he found himself crying as if for no reason. He knew that some day he would have to tell that child's stories, just as he would tell the stories of his other children.

The important events in his life were like tuning forks, resonating through all the years of his life. Were historic dates similar slices of time which echoed, however faintly, at varying strengths through the strata of a society?

Dates were ghosts. Pulling. Annoying. Nagging.

That first night after his mother had fallen asleep she dreamed that her baby had suffered irreparable injury. His head had been damaged—fluid had accumulated. She dreamed he became a hydrocephalic like her cousin Emily's child, but more so. His head grew and grew until she was sure it would explode.

Other children with injured, swollen heads came to her bedside and stood with her son. Her son couldn't speak for fear his head would implode, but his thoughts slipped between her thoughts without effort. *If these children cannot let go of their unused lives a cataclysm may occur*, he told her.

*Momma, do something.* And he began to cry. The other children with swollen heads cried with him.

"I'm here. It'll be all right, babies. I'm here," she would have told them. But she could not speak because it was a dream. Terrible things could happen to children, she knew. Their heads could explode. And yet there was nothing she could do.

Finally the pressure of their unused lives became so great that their noses, their ears, even their little anuses began to screech and whistle. Their eyes grew wide and pupil-less and still the screeching grew in volume.

Eventually their bodies faded until only the screeching remained. And eventually the screeching stopped, leaving a thin line breaking through the sky, the vulva which would lead them into another world.

**SEPT. 3**

**1939:** Britain and France declare war on Germany.

**1943:** Italy surrenders.

When he was a boy Cal had spent hours with a collection of toy soldiers and a mound of dirt in the back yard. There were traces of this mound, and the trails and bunkers carved into it, in the land behind the cabin today. His solitary red soldier, larger than the rest by a third, played a pivotal role in the scenarios he played out here hour after hour, day after day. The red soldier was always leading his troops into danger, then leaving it to someone else to get them out of it. “Things turn out,” the red soldier might say. “You have to be ready. War is hell and duty is hard.”

Every afternoon the red soldier was killed. Usually at the hands of his own men, with Cal facilitating. Sometimes he was stabbed, once strangled by two tiny plastic soldiers who climbed his back to get to that thick red neck. More often he was shot, his body pierced by so many bullets daylight might shine through. A few times Cal imagined the red soldier’s head taken off by a mortar shell, and so wrapped up had he been in his play he brought his mother’s butcher knife out to the battleground to make things realistic, but he always stopped himself, because he just could not give up the pleasure of killing the red soldier again and again, day after day.

Often his mother came out of the house and sat in a lawn chair by the battleground and watched Cal act out the various fates of the red soldier. He tried to ignore her, but she insisted on telling the war stories her husband had told her, droning on and on with these countless, grim tales of war, until finally they became an almost necessary background narration for Cal’s plays.

“He and some of his buddies came upon a barn in a rural part of France. They thought there were German soldiers inside. Your father was sure of it—he said they had no choice. So they burned the barn. A French farmer and his two children perished in the fire. There were no Germans there, you see? Your father used his mistake to illustrate to me how things happen in war, how you never can tell. You had to be prepared for the unexpected. I could have told them—you get my husband around, and someone’s bound to die.”

Cal had never been in a war, so he didn't have war stories to share with his children. He didn't know for sure if they were better off because of this or disadvantaged. At least he was incapable of glorifying war. But he also understood a child's need to experience what the parent has not. In that case, he may have encouraged an increased danger in their future lives.

It was maddening. There was no *right* thing, no fool-proof way to provide a healthy example for his kids. Everything he did—whatever his intentions—had the potential to turn out badly.

War stories. Everything he did in order to protect and preserve his children became just another war story.

#### SEPT. 4

1908: Richard Wright, author of *Black Boy*, is born.

It was ironic, in view of his father's legendary prejudices, that the major reason he was never able to find Cal's mother was because she had moved in with a black woman named Cora, an old friend she'd never dared tell her husband about.

The cabin had been in Cora's family since just after the Civil War. She told his mother that she was to consider it her own, that she and Cal were family now, and they did, but knowing deep down the cabin and the surrounding land were Cora's, and always would be.

Even now the place felt like Cora's, despite the fact that she had died when Cal was only ten years old. The walls still smelled faintly of the roasted pigs and deer that the old woman had practically lived on. And the colors, the curtains, were still the kind—if not the same ones—Cora would have used. And the storage shed by the back yard—the one that still had a few of Cal's old toys in it: wind-up cars and figures that moved jerkily as if trapped in an explosion of nerves—was a structure Cora had ordered built.

"Real families gots storage. If this family, you and me and Cal is gonna be a *real* family, then it's gots to have storage. You ain't gots storage, then it means you always ready to leave."

Cora was almost as important a presence in his early life as his mother. She was broad as the refrigerator and her hair was the silver of dew in the dawn. Practically from the moment he could talk he'd called her "gramma," and neither Cora nor his mother had ever bothered to correct him. In that small southern town it had invited comment, of course, but Cal had never paid much attention. Even the last few years before Cora's death, when Cal was certainly old enough to know better, he chose to call her Gramma.

"Grammas ain't blood, just like mommas and poppas ain't blood," Cora would say to anyone who might ask for some explanation. "Family's all in the treatin'. Guess that's why they calls it a tree, you know? It's what gives you the shade. Don't much matter where the roots go."

Two weeks before Cora died she had a stroke. Cal saw her fall, and she was like a tree in the falling. Hard and slow and final. He would never forget it, and he cried when his mother told him Cora was going to die, that he was going to lose his Gramma. Then his mother told him that Cora had given the land and the cabin to them, so that they might stay away from "that monster of a man who calls hisself a daddy" forever.

Cal and his mother stayed by her bed, but she never woke up again. The doctor said there was no point in taking her to the county hospital. And it was like waiting for a fallen tree to get up—Cal just knew it wasn't going to happen.

For months after her death Cal would wake up in the middle of the night and see her standing there in his room, tall and silent and just watching. Funny how it didn't scare him at all. He guessed she was just shading his dreams was all.

Cora would be ashamed to see him now. He was a poor excuse for a tree. How could he just stand there and watch, and shelter, knowing the teeth and the claws that surrounded his children wherever they went, the animal eyes out in the dark woods waiting? He was a monster, calling himself a daddy.

**SEPT. 5**

**1975: Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme attempts to assassinate President Gerald R. Ford.**

At sixteen Cal took the hunting rifle Cora had left his mother and set out to do what he'd dreamed of doing for the past four years: to track down his father in his hometown and murder him. Years later he would recall this trip as a quest for assassination, for his father was the king, the emperor, the monarch in absentia.

Why that particular September he wasn't sure. But his mother had been increasingly paranoid that year, speaking of what might happen if her husband ever found them, imagining that he watched them from the woods at night, or that a distant figure in town was him. Cal thought it also might have something to do with his getting older, looking more and more like his father each day, and getting ready to leave. He'd done well enough in school that he was going to be able to graduate a year early, and as guilty as it made him feel, he was more than ready to leave this town. He didn't want to hurt his mother, but there were too many ghosts and too much pressure—he was afraid he'd go crazy if he stayed much longer.

But he owed her something. And that particular fall he was thinking he owed her his father's death, a surgical removal of the source of her fear. It had made perfect sense at the time.

Now, he couldn't help but think how leaving his own wife and children had seemed to make such good sense in the beginning. If he'd stayed he would have gone crazy; more importantly, he would have made his children crazy. Too much to be frightened of. His wonderful children to be frightened for. It had made such good sense at the time. A surgical removal of the source of his fear. Now he was far from sure.

That day in another September he had taken the bus the twenty-five miles to the small town where his father was supposedly living, the rifle wrapped in colored paper like an unusually long-stemmed bunch of roses. He'd gotten the idea from a movie. He'd even gotten the idea of the bus ride, he thought, from a movie.

When he got to the town it wasn't all that hard to find his father. He tried a bar, then a poolhall, then a poolhall over a bar. His father came staggering down the outside staircase. Cal had no trouble rec-

ognizing him: he hadn't changed from his mother's pictures of him. But just to be sure he pulled one of those pictures out of his pocket. Badly creased, but the face was intact. He held it up to the light, and compared it to the figure of his father staggering his way. He did look like him, he thought, appalled. He looked more and more like him every day.

"Hey," his father said, slurring his words. "Hey!" he shouted, stopping, pointing. "I *know* that picture you got in yer hand!"

Cal ripped the paper off the rifle. He held it to his shoulder. He aimed.

"Hey!" his father shouted. "I *know* you." Incredibly, his father smiled.

"You don't know anything," Cal said with a bad taste in his mouth. "You don't know." His finger trembled against the trigger.

His father laughed. "Oh, I know *you*. Yer just *like* me. Just *like* me."

Cal closed his eyes and lowered the gun.

He went to the bus station and waited until he could leave. Not surprisingly, his father didn't follow him. He never saw his father again. He couldn't remember what he had done with the rifle, but he never saw that again either.

Now Cal sat on the narrow front steps of his, his mother's cabin, Cora's cabin, and shook.

## SEPT. 6

1991: The Soviet Union grants independence to the Baltic republics.

The first time he'd left this cabin, to go away to college, had been such an exhilarating experience that for a long time he would feel guilty about it, as if he had somehow betrayed his mother.

He'd felt no such excitement, no such sense of freedom when he left his family. He knew some men would feel such things, and he held on to that perception so that he might feel different from those men. But he knew he had done a terrible thing, continued to do a terrible thing.

His kids had seen enough made-for-TV movies to think that their dad had left so that he might have his freedom again. And he couldn't really expect Linda to correct that impression. They might even think he was having a wonderful time.

Freedom to castigate himself over his lack of moral courage. Freedom to be alone.

No schedule except the one driven by his own guilt.

Sometimes he would wake up in the middle of the night after a dream of flying. In the dream his children were being shot at, chased by some sort of deranged maniac, or they were doing dangerous, crazy things: setting fire to themselves and others, holding their own heads under the toilet bowl water until they'd drowned themselves. Kids did such crazy things.

Instead of staying and trying to fix things Cal had stretched out his arms, beat his hands against his sides until he was bruising himself, beat his hands against his face until he was bleeding, and until he began lifting off the ground, flying away, escaping.

At some point in the dream he would fall to the ground, of course. And there the corpses of his children would be: laid out, waiting for him.

There was no place he could fly to without, eventually, finding their deaths.