

A WONDER UNTO MANY

A Woody Wonder Novel

By Scott M. Hess

“He who knows how to be aggressive, and yet remains patient, becomes a
receptacle for all of Nature's lessons.”

- *Lao Tzu*

“Numberless are the world's wonders, but none
more wonderful than man.”

- *Sophocles, “Antigone”*

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"Motherfuck!"

On the morning my life came apart, I was climbing imaginary mountains on an elliptical trainer at the Lakeside Club. My marriage was in the dumper, my career was heading south, and my friends were getting tired of covering for me.

Looking back, those were the good old days.

Three machines down from me a red-faced giant in black running tights and a gray hooded Oakland Raiders sweatshirt was

stomping up and down on his own elliptical trainer, looking more like he was falling than exercising. He was also swearing, intermittently and loudly.

Judge not, I thought to myself. Judge not.

"Shit sticks!" enunciated the oversized man, flashing halogen teeth.

Either this guy was wearing dentures, or he was the poster boy for whitening strips.

"Ass muncher!"

He also had a real knack for profanity.

Some people can feign oblivion. Detachment comes natural. Me, I'm more the open-book type. I strained to blank my face and keep my legs moving in their march to nowhere. That I was good at.

In the year since my wife, Christina, left, I've spent all my non-work hours moping and exercising at home. Crying is good for the abs, let me tell you. And the loss-of-love diet? Nothing works better. Color me ripped.

Still, all that time alone can make a person crazy. Standing on my rooftop deck on New Year's Eve a week ago I'd resolved to rejoin humanity. A week later here I was, sweating

with my fellow man. Luckily, the workout wasn't much of a problem for me. Physically I was in good shape. Mentally...

"Holy mother of fuck!"

Hello, humanity. Great to be back.

I'd started the morning with my least favorite workout: shoulders. I always want to take my arms off my body afterward. Do it right and it hurts just to have them hanging there. Still, shoulders are a shortcut, and I love shortcuts. You have big shoulders, people perceive you as bigger in general.

I already had one shortcut on my side. Cash. Unfortunately, that hadn't kept me out of trouble lately. Maybe bigger shoulders would help.

After a half hour of raises and presses and extensions my arms were afterthoughts, just angry meat hanging off dead shoulder sockets. Now, on the elliptical, my legs were also speeding down the path to uselessness. That which doesn't kill us...

"Piss flaps!"

You could say I have a temper. I also have a thing about swearing. Look, we all do it. Nevertheless, I don't like it when people do it out loud in public places, no matter how creative

they are. It's rude. And I'm something of a militant priss, like Barney Fife on a 'roid cycle.

I guess I have a thing about manners. Actually, I have a thing about a lot of things. I need people to be nice. Polite. Good. I more than need it. I make it my business that people behave. I'm not proud of it. Actually, I guess I am. "Be nice or I'll kick your ass" seems like a fair policy to me.

Homeless guys are always mistaking me for a cop.

I fought the urge to leap across the machines and smack the swearing giant across his giant swearing mouth. I was trying to live up to another of my resolutions: to stop sticking my nose where it didn't belong.

"Cunt stains!"

That resolve would last just a little longer.

Gathering up my usual retinue of fatigue, agitation, and casual orneriness - I can't help it, I'm cool like that -- I climbed down off the elliptical trainer and started tugging on layers of black clothes.

Black sweatpants. Black sweatshirt. Black down vest. Black knit cap over my short black hair. Remember the Fonz? My idol. Same outfit every day, no matter the weather or the event. Unfortunately, I probably look a bit more like Richie than

Fonzie. Fresh of face, and all. Aaaaaayyyy. At least I don't look like Patsie.

Okay, maybe a little bit.

I headed down the broad double staircase. I was damp. I was exhausted. And I was proud of myself. Heck, I was nearly two hours into my day without butting in on anybody. Call it progress.

"Have a good day, Mr. Wonder!"

I nodded to the deskman, a college-age guy with an orange afro who I'd never seen before. Sort of an early-career Bill Walton look, actually. Not a good look, but it did have a sort of vintage flair.

"Peace," I told him, squinting like I meant it.

Despite my baby-face, I'm used to people calling me Mr. Wonder, even strangers. People in this town tend to know my family, for better and for worse. Even though I may still look like a kid, folks treat me with an air of formality. Sometimes I feel like everybody around me is expecting a tip. Like I said, I'm used to it.

I leaned into the revolving door and let it lead me around into the slushy parking lot. Chicago may not be the prettiest girl on the block, but she's got a heck of a personality.

Besides, if the weather were better everybody would live here. Another ten years of global warming and maybe we'd be the next South Beach.

They say timing and location are everything, and in this case they were right, whoever they were. I noticed the swearing giant shouldering his way through the regular door right next to the revolving door I had used. Apparently, he couldn't be bothered with the revolving door. I stood and stared at him.

Bad manners on a cold day like today, not using the revolving door. Enough was enough. Time to do some butting in, albeit for the greater good. It's my curse.

The damp gray buzz of Monday morning traffic surrounded us like the expectant murmurings of a sports crowd. I stepped toward the giant, smiling tightly.

"Excuse me, sir," I said. "This time of year it's more courteous to use the revolving door."

Free pass on the earlier profanity. Straightforward. Polite. Good for me.

"Huh?" grunted the Un-Jolly Red-Faced Giant, making an elaborate gesture of turning head-on to size me up.

I'm not a big guy. That's part of the problem. The other part of the problem? I have a bit of a temper, mixed in with an inferiority complex. I'm the pug who thinks he's a bulldog.

In my mind's eye, I'm very large. Unstoppably so. And I am fit, what with the crying and lonely workouts at home. But apparently when other people look at me they see a five foot-something guy, average build, pointy nose, nothing to worry about. I'm the guy that people underestimate. That, mixed with the righteousness -- well, sometimes it makes for an interesting life.

I leaned toward the giant, still forcing a smile.

"The revolving door holds in more heat than the one you used," I explained. "Keeps the desk personnel warmer."

The giant stood, staring. He was not impressed.

That made two of us.

"That door you used is really only for handicapped folks, and for people who simply can't handle a revolving door."

"Mind your own business, punk," he said, turning away.

"Woody Wonder," I said, extending a hand.

"What?" He turned back toward me.

"My name's Woody Wonder."

"That's a stupid fucking name." Smirking.

He had a point, but I wasn't in a conceding mood. I withdrew my hand. Apparently, he wasn't aware of my family. All the better.

"Didn't name myself, pal," I said, my forced grin changing course, angling downward.

"I'm not your pal, and you should shoot your fucking parents. Now go mind your business."

"Your rudeness is my business," I said, stepping toward him as my heart kicked into double-time.

So much for my nose-butting resolution. Game on.

The giant moved a few steps closer to me, his newish running shoes making a squishing sound in the parking lot. He planted his feet and leaned towards me, leaned over me, looking almost amused. A Fu Manchu moustache framed his blazing teeth, like a lazy caterpillar draped over a row of Chiclets.

I knew where this was headed. I'd seen dogs do the same dance in the park across from my loft.

"Fuck. You." So sayeth the giant.

"Nice manners," I replied, casually moving my left hand up to frame my chin, fingers extended in an L-shaped brace. I took my right hand out of my pocket and let it hang in front of my body. Ready without looking ready.

My shoulders still ached ferociously. Luckily, I didn't intend to use them. I had devised an ugly little plan the moment the giant squared off. What looked to him like a little guy frozen in fearful contemplation was actually the first frame in a movie he wouldn't much like.

"Listen, little ninja, I'm gonna cut you a break," said the giant from between his flashbulb teeth. "Take your ass home to your stupid fucking parents and I'll forget about your big mouth."

Little ninja. Pretty funny, actually. Score one for the big man.

"The club has a policy against profanity, my fair-toothed friend," I said. "And this parking lot is still club property."

I can't help it. I crave propriety, not to mention Funyuns. Plus the guy was asking for it. They always are.

Confusion overtook amusement on the giant's face -- he wasn't used to being talked to like this. I, on the other hand, was quite comfortable in my role as Miss Manners With an Attitude.

As the sound of the morning traffic swelled around us, I saw his confusion harden into something more certain. I had to hand it to the giant -- he had a face born to wear anger. His

rage animated him, and I envied that. I'm sure I still looked like a punk kid in black workout clothes.

A little ninja, like the man said.

The giant's jaw began working back and forth, as if he were trying to contain a struggling bird in his mouth. Then, as if he'd swallowed the bird, he seemed to resolve something. His face went slack. He spoke softly, almost sadly. He had made a decision, and like a Jeopardy contestant, he chose to phrase his conclusion in the form of a question.

"You need your ass kicked?" he queried. "Zat it?"

I couldn't have turned away if I tried. Still, I sensed some reluctance on his part. He really wanted an answer to what was typically a rhetorical question.

I took a breath. Then another. Maybe this didn't have to end in tears. Maybe he sensed that I could back up my big mouth. I would offer him an out.

"Listen closely, Big Man," I pronounced carefully. "I don't want to fight you." I was only half-lying.

"What if I wanna fight you?" he said, seeming almost surprised by his own words.

He didn't want my out.

"I'll have to stop you."

Now the giant looked amused again. "How you gonna do that?"

"If I told you, it might spoil the surprise. But just for fun, I'll give you a hint."

"A what?"

"A hint. A clue. A tip. Something that will lead you to the answer."

The giant was angry again. He took an agitated step toward me, and I turned slightly sideways in turn, smaller target and all, still cradling my chin.

"Hold on," I said. "Before you launch yourself at me, consider this: You're much bigger than I am."

"Shoulda thought of that before you ran your mouth. Punk."

"All I'm saying is, since you seem to have an advantage, I'm going to have to take something away from you."

"What?"

"Normally I would go for your eyes -- take away your sight. But I could just as easily smack you in the throat so you can't breathe. Or maybe I should just shove your shiny new dentures down your..."

"Motherfucker!" bellowed the swearing giant, and he lunged at me with his arms extended in a taut shoving motion.

Who knows, maybe he would have just given me a big shove, then walked off. That's the trouble with physical conflicts. You never know what's coming next. That's why it's good policy to start and end conflicts as quickly as possible. That's what my friend Traz has taught me. Assume the worst, and act decisively to end the threat.

And so I did.

I was certain he intended harm. I was equally certain he would be the one to suffer.

I anticipated his lunge and turned almost fully sideways, so that his push was little more than a glancing blow. As the giant's weight came forward, I shot my formerly dormant left hand straight out from my chin and directly at the big man's eyes -- just like I told him I might.

He was no stranger to a fight, and he anticipated the blow. Hell, I had told him what I might do. Or, maybe he'd seen a few Stooges films. Either way, he was ready.

He lurched back, planting and stretching his left leg in front of him as he leaned away from my jabbing fingers. He could move, for a big guy. A real Kevin McHale Baryshnikov, this guy.

I was no stranger to a fight either. The eye jab was a feint. I wanted the knee, and there it was.

Before the big man could collect himself, I hopped forward and lifted my right leg directly above his left kneecap. With my foot aligned perfectly I stepped down and forward, almost like kicking through a slightly stuck door. The blow -- a relatively gentle one, since I used only enough force to push the kneecap past its normal flex point -- hyper-extended the giant's knee joint, which proceeded to give way in a series of small but audible pops, not unlike the sound of kindling taking flame.

Dumbass.

The giant fell back in a very large heap, inadvertently making a spastic angel pattern in the slush.

"I'm sorry I had to do that," I said, standing over the moaning flagellant. But I didn't feel sorry.

That would come soon enough.