



In the Blood

by Ken Altabef

Brother Dill's Traveling Circus and Roadside Carnival passed through Carson City in October 1882. We've played a lot of towns and dragged a lot of country miles, but I'll never forget that one, no sir.

Autumn rain had turned the dirt roads to red mud as we pulled in, as wet and bedraggled a troupe as you ever did see. While the main company pounded stakes, the sideshow barkers went to work drumming up business. I set to putting up our little stage, my son Matthew holding the boards in place while I screwed them in. Then I stood him atop his soapbox.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Fine, Pa," he answered. That was my boy, always short on words. Ten years old, he was a quiet one. Maybe life on the road's not much good for a boy, I don't know. He seemed half scared to death most of the time, though he wouldn't speak of it, and looked at people fair strange when they weren't looking back. But a very good boy. And that was the day I'll always remember, the day everything changed.

I wiped the slick drizzle from my forehead, pulled on a soggy old top hat, and warmed up my ten-dollar words.

"Ladies and gen'lemen! Gather 'round. Gather 'round," I hollered. "Here to amaze, here to astound your sensibilities, I present to you my son Matthew, the Amazin' Matthew, the Boy Genius!"

We gathered a fair crowd of about twenty curiosity seekers around, and the rain finally stopped.

"My son, this fine young man you see here before you," I pitched, "whose brain is an amazin' calculatin' machine. Let me have two numbers, gen'lemen, the biggest you can think of."

"Twenty-six!" threw out one bedraggled soul.

"Fifty-seven!" added another.

"All right, all right. We have twenty-six and fifty-seven, and this little lad here will

multiply these two numbers against themselves on the instant."

I brought my arm around in a grand, sweeping arc that ended at the soapbox. "The answer, Matthew?"

"One thousan' four hunnert an' eighty-two," he said calmly.

"There you have it, folks. The Boy Genius. Have you ever before witnessed such a thing?"

This statement was met with the usual disarray among the crowd. None of them knew if the answer was correct. Someone came up with the bright idea to call in the town assayer. They acted as if they expected me to object, but I went and cheered them on.

"A fine idea," I said, "Go an' get him!"

My biggest problem was holding the crowd until this assayer fellow showed up. To that end I launched into a couple of bawdy jokes, real crowd-pleasers such as the one about the doctor and the milkmaid.

After a few, the assayer appeared through the gathering crowd. A tall man in pinstripe jacket and cornsack pants, he looked the educated type. He even wore gold-rimmed spectacles.

"What was the question?" he asked in a pale, reedy voice.

"Twenty-six times by fifty-seven," I said.

All eyes turned to the assayer. The accountant withdrew paper and pencil and began figuring the answer. It took a few minutes. Usually the longer it takes the better for me in the end. The crowd was just getting restless, when he barked out: "1,482!"

I threw both arms toward Matthew and boomed, "Correct! Boy Genius has done it again! Have you ever seen the like?" A mixed response from the crowd. This was maybe taking a bit too long. "Care to give it another try?" I said. "Any two numbers. . ."

"Seventeen," suggested a portly rancher.

"And the other?"

The assayer said, "One thousand fifty three."

I put on a worried look and exhaled mightily. I dry-washed my face with my hands. "All right then," I said in a shaky voice. "Seventeen taken by one thousan' an' fifty-three."

My boy hesitated not a bit. "Seventeen thousan' nine hunnert an' one."

"Aha!" I said. "If I was a bettin' man. . ."

"Ten dollars!" said one cowpoke.

"Twenty!"

"But no, no," I added, "That wouldn't be fair. This is a boy genius here. I wouldn't want to take advantage."

Laughs from the crowd. All eyes turned toward the assayer as he began figuring madly.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, "But the boy is wrong. I get one thousand one hundred and six."

A chorus of boos and hisses rose up. The crowd jostled, threatening to break apart.

"Now wait one minute!" I said. "You there!" I pointed toward the assayer. "Well sir, I suggest you check your 'rithmatic again. You see, my boy is never wrong. Never!"

The crowd drifted back as the assayer took up his pencil again. In the end he doffed his porkpie hat, made a comical little bow, and said. "My apologies, good people. The sum is indeed 17,901. The boy is correct!"

A tremendous cheer rang out.

"Incredible! Incredible!" I purred. As I set out my top hat to catch their jubilant donations, a well-dressed man delivered a note on fine paper. Of course I couldn't read it, but I

called Matthew to my side. He piped up: "Arthur Doakes and son, you are cordially invited to partake dinner at the home of Mr. W. Calhoun at six o'clock this evening."

William Donner Calhoun, head honcho of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad, was the richest man in town.

"See, boy?" I said. "We're finally comin' up in the world."

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The same manservant who had passed me the note at the carnival let us in. I'm afraid Matthew and I looked a sad sight, as we were still damp and the long walk up the hill to Calhoun's had left us tracking mud. The butler insisted we take off our boots and ran to get us each a fresh pair of socks.

Calhoun's study was a large rectangular room dressed up like the inside of a railway car with fine mahogany panels along the walls and a doorway at either end. The wall behind his desk was lined with bookshelves holding all sorts of odd and sundry items. Children's wind-up toys, music boxes, a balsa wood model of a frigate, and a couple of animal skulls, too. I guess rich people collect anything they want. One skull came from some sort of a gorilla. The other was even uglier. It was the skull of a cat, a real big one by the looks, with eye teeth long as knives. It seemed like something Brother Dill would have put in his freak show to chill the spines of his hapless marks, but I guess those huge fangs weren't glued on. Somehow I don't think Mr. Calhoun would take much truck with fakes.

Calhoun strode into the room. A tall man, clean-shaved with sandy hair cut neat. He wore a sleek blue jacket of the military style trimmed with gold at the cuffs and collar.

He extended his hand. "Mr. Doakes."

I returned a firm grip, saying, "A pleasure, sir."

Calhoun nodded at Matthew. "A fine-looking boy. Mrs. Heller informs me dinner will be ready shortly."

Just the mention started my stomach to rumbling. "What, sir, exactly will we be havin'?" Calhoun chuckled. "Roast turkey, sweet potatoes, string beans. Rum cake."

I nearly fell over.

"Can I offer you a brandy before dinner?" he asked.

"Don't mind if I do."

He took a crystal decanter from his desk. "Your boy has an amazing mind. That's quite a trick he does."

"No trick, sir," I said. "He's a calculatin' machine. Any two numbers. . ."

"Any two?" asked Calhoun. "What if I say fifty-seven?"

"Right as rain," I said. "And the other?"

Calhoun turned to Matthew. "You pick one."

The boy blinked uncertainly.

"Well go ahead," I said. "Don't be rude."

"Seventy-eight," Matthew said meekly.

"Okay," agreed Calhoun. "Fifty-seven times seventy-eight, and that makes. . ."

"Four thousan' four hunnert forty-six," said Matthew. But the thing of it was—Calhoun recited the number at the exact same time. Now I really did go weak at the knees.

"Yes," said Calhoun, "I can do it too. Your boy does not calculate the numbers, Mr. Doakes. He has instead a terrific memory. He's memorized the multiplication tables as far as the eye can see. So it is, in fact, a trick."

"And you can do it too?"

"Yes. Having a memory for figures is quite an asset for an engineer. That's how I got to the top of the rail business. That, and a lot of hard work, mind you. But a memory for figures and detail, yes, and a memory for what people say, for their different facial expressions. I don't suggest you try to lie to me Mr. Doakes. I'll know it just by your face."

"No sir."

"I remember everything," said Calhoun. "I recall the day I came screaming into this world. I remember my circumcision, the sting of the doctor's knife, five days old. My first birthday too. I remember all of it, every detail."

Calhoun looked at me with such a mix of pain and pleasure in his eyes I didn't doubt a word of it. He went on, "But having a terrific memory has its drawbacks too. I remember all sorts of things. I remember people, places, things that happened in the past. I pass a man on the street and I remember he was my frigate Captain, a hundred and fifty-years ago. I look at my friend, Bill Johnston, and I remember that same man as a French Lieutenant on the fields of Gananoque. He died in my arms in 1812. But Bill Johnston, he doesn't remember any of it at all."

Calhoun spoke to Matthew as much as to me, and damn if he wasn't studying that boy's face.

"I run into people all the time, but they don't remember the things I remember. I walk among them, a stranger drowning in a sea of familiar faces. This type of thing wears on a man, Mr. Doakes. Sometimes a body gets to thinking he might be crazy, living like that."

Calhoun gave my son a look I didn't very much care for. I was just on the point of protest, when I noticed Matthew's reaction. I took a fortifying sip of brandy.

"And so I ask," said Calhoun, "What do you remember, boy?"

"I. . ." said Matthew hesitantly. He walked over to the curio shelf. He indicated the gigantic cat skull with the dagger-teeth. "I remember that."

"That's very old," said Calhoun. "My friends in New York call it a sabre-tooth tiger. And just what do you remember about that?"

"I remember the smell of its blood."

"Matthew!"

"No, it's all right," insisted Calhoun. "Let the boy speak."

"I remember that it was death. . . sudden death for any of our people, 'nless we were very careful. We hunted that thing. But we had. . . we had to do it smart-like. I made the noises to scare it. 'Aroo, aroo' I would say, while the others, they went sneakin' aroun' the other way. And I remember my heart beatin' fast, so fast because that thing was death. But if you got it lined up jus' right in the canyon. . . "

"Yes, that's right," added Calhoun. "If we kept its back to the rocks it would get skittish. And again, if a few of us came at it to one side, it would run the other way."

My boy Matthew nodded, saying, "An' then someone would take his spear an' neck it. I remember the taste. The salt an' the fire. An' the blood."

"Yes," Calhoun said. "Its blood was sweet."

Then Matthew and Mr. Calhoun both together, cried out, "Hurragghh!"

I can't describe the unearthly chill it caused me to hear that guttural sound coming from my son's lips.

Calhoun straightened his coat, momentarily embarrassed. He chuckled. "Indeed I believe I just heard the dinner bell tolling."

He put his arm around Matthew's shoulder and offered me a friendly nod. "Only one way to settle my mind, but what were the chances of finding another like me? Let's head into dinner."

We've quite a lot to talk about."

And that night my quiet little boy talked and talked and talked.

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About the Author

New York writer Ken Altabef's short fiction has appeared three times in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* as well as *Interzone*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Buzzymag*, *Stupefying Stories*, *Unsettling Wonder*, and various anthologies.

Way of the Shaman, his five-part series of epic fantasy novels, is published by Blueberry Lane Books. You can preview this work and others at the author website, www.wayoftheshamanONLINE.com

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