

Senator Bilbo

Andy Duncan

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Andy Duncan (www.angelfire.com/al/andyduncan/) is an ex-journalist—for seven years a reporter and editor at the News & Record in Greensboro, N.C.—now college teacher who began publishing fiction in the late 1990s. In 1998 his story “Beluthahatchie” was a Hugo Award finalist, and he was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. His short fiction made an immediate impression, and in 2001 he won two World Fantasy Awards, one for a story and one for his first book, Beluthahatchie and Other Stories (2000). Duncan is a Southern writer; his settings have thus far characteristically been the American South, and his stories are revelations of character, often with a strongly ironic subtext. Nothing much happens in a Duncan story, but things change.

The year 2001 will be remembered for many things, but among them will be the December grand opening of the film The Fellowship of the Ring, and the whole year of its build-up, which made bestsellers of J.R.R. Tolkien’s books all over again. “Senator Bilbo” is overtly satirical, combining all of Duncan’s strengths with one outrageous big idea: What if Senator Bilbo, the well-known old Southern racist politician, was a descendent of Bilbo Baggins, and lived in the Shire, in the Middle Earth, generations later?

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“It regrettably has become necessary for us now, my friends, to consider seriously and to discuss openly the most pressing question facing our homeland since the War. By that I mean, of course, the race question.”

In the hour before dawn, the galleries were empty, and the floor of the Shire-moot was nearly so. Scattered about the chamber, a dozen or so of the Senator’s allies—a few more than were needed to maintain the quorum, just to be safe—lounged at their writing-desks, feet up, fingers laced, pipes stuffed with the best Bywater leaf, picnic baskets within reach: veterans all. Only young Appledore from Bridge Inn was snoring and slowly folding in on himself; the chestnut curls atop his head nearly met those atop his feet. The Senator jotted down Appledore’s name without pause. He could get a lot of work done while making speeches—even a filibuster nine hours long (and counting).

“There are forces at work today, my friends, without and within our homeland, that are attempting to destroy all boundaries between our proud, noble race and all the mule-gnawing, cave-squatting, light-shunning, pit-spawned scum of the East.”

The Senator’s voice cracked on “East,” so he turned aside for a quaff from his (purely medicinal) pocket flask. His allies did not miss their cue. “Hear, hear,” they rumbled, thumping the desktops with their calloused heels. “Hear, hear.”

“This latest proposal,” the Senator continued, “this so-called immigration bill—which, as I have said, would force even our innocent daughters to suffer the reeking lusts of all the ditch-bred legions of darkness—why, this baldfooted attempt originated where, my friends?”

“Buckland!” came the dutiful cry.

*“Why, with the delegation from *Buckland*... long known to us all as a hotbed of book-mongers, one-Earthers, elvish sympathizers, and other off-brands of the halfling race.”*

This last was for the benefit of the newly arrived Fredegar Bracegirdle, the unusually portly junior member of the Buckland delegation. He huffed his way down the aisle, having drawn the short straw in the hourly backroom ritual.

“Will the distinguished Senator—” Bracegirdle managed to squeak out, before succumbing to a coughing fit. He waved his bladder-like hands in a futile attempt to disperse the thick purplish clouds that hung in the chamber like the vapors of the Eastmarsh. Since a Buckland-sponsored bill to ban tobacco from the floor had been defeated by the Senator three Shire-moots previous, his allies’ pipe-smoking had been indefatigable. Finally Bracegirdle sputtered: “Will the distinguished Senator from the Hill kindly yield the floor?”

In response, the Senator lowered his spectacles and looked across the chamber to the Thain of the Shire, who recited around his tomato sandwich: “Does the distinguished Senator from the Hill so yield?”

“I do not,” the Senator replied, cordially.

“The request is denied, and the distinguished Senator from the Hill retains the floor,” recited the Thain of the Shire, who then took another hearty bite of his sandwich. The Senator’s party had rewritten the rules of order, making this recitation the storied Thain’s only remaining duty.

“Oh, hell and hogsheads,” Bracegirdle muttered, already trundling back up the aisle. As he passed Gorchendad Bolger from the Brockenborings, that Senator’s man like his father before him kindly offered Bracegirdle a pickle, which Bracegirdle accepted with ill grace.

“Now that the distinguished gentleman from the Misty Mountains has been heard from,” the Senator said, waiting for the laugh, “let me turn now to the evidence—the overwhelming evidence, my friends—that many of the orkish persuasion currently living among us have been, in fact, active agents of the Dark Lord...”

As the Senator plowed on, seldom referring to his notes, inventing statistics and other facts as needed, secure that this immigration bill, like so many bills before it, would wither and die once the Bucklanders’ patience was exhausted, his self-confidence faltered only once, unnoticed by anyone else in the chamber. A half hour into his denunciation of the orkish threat, the Senator noticed a movement—no, more a shift of light, a *glimmer*—in the corner of his eye. He instinctively turned his head toward the source, and saw, or *thought* he saw, sitting in the farthest, darkest corner of the otherwise empty gallery, a man-sized figure in a cloak and pointed hat, who held what must have been (*could* have been) a staff; but in the next blink, that corner held only shadows, and the Senator dismissed the whatever-it-was as a fancy born of exhilaration and weariness. Yet he was left with a lingering chill, as if (so his old mother, a Took, used to say) a dragon had hovered over his grave.

At noon, the Bucklanders abandoned their shameful effort to open the High Hay, the Brandywine Bridge, and the other entry gates along the Bounds to every misbegotten so-called “refugee,” be he halfling, man, elf, ore, warg, Barrow-wight, or worse. Why, it would mean the end of Shire culture, and the mongrelization of the halfling race! No, sir! Not today—not while the Senator was on the job.

Triumphant but weary, the champion of Shire heritage worked his way, amid a throng of supplicants, aides, well-wishers, reporters, and yes-men, through the maze of tunnels that led to his Hill-side suite of offices. These were the largest and nicest of any Senator’s, with the most pantries and the most windows facing the Bywater, but they also were the farthest from the Shire-moot floor. The Senator’s famous ancestor and namesake had been hale and hearty even in his eleventy-first year; the Senator, pushing ninety, was determined to beat that record. But every time he left the chamber, the office seemed farther away.

“Gogluk carry?” one bodyguard asked.

“Gogluk *not* carry,” the Senator retorted. The day he’d let a troll haul him through the corridors like luggage would be the day he sailed oversea for good.

All the Senator’s usual tunnels had been enlarged to accommodate the bulk of his two bodyguards, who nevertheless had to stoop, their scaly shoulders scraping the ceiling. Loyal, dim-witted, and huge—more than five feet in height—the Senator’s trolls were nearly as well known in the Shire as the Senator himself, thanks partially to the Senator’s perennial answer to a perennial question from the press at election time:

“Racist? Me? Why, I love Gogluk and Grishzog, here, as if they were my own flesh and blood, and they love me just the same, don’t you, boys? See? Here, boys, have another biscuit.”

Later, once the trolls had retired for the evening, the Senator would elaborate. Trolls, now, you could train them, they were teachable; they had their uses, same as those swishy elves, who were so good with numbers. Even considered as a race, the trolls weren’t much of a threat—no one had seen a baby troll in ages. But those ores? They did nothing but breed.

Carry the Senator they certainly did not, but by the time the trolls reached the door of the Senator’s outermost office (no mannish rectangular door, but a traditional Shire-door, round and green with a shiny brass knob in the middle), they were virtually holding the weary old halfling upright and propelling him forward, like a child pushed to kiss an ugly aunt. Only the Senator’s mouth was tireless. He continued to greet constituents, compliment babies, rap orders to flunkies, and rhapsodize about the glorious inheritance of the Shire as the procession squeezed its way through the increasingly small rooms of the Senator’s warren-like suite, shedding followers like snakeskin. The only ones who made it from the innermost outer office to the outermost inner office were the Senator, the trolls, and four reporters, all of whom considered themselves savvy under-Hill insiders for being allowed so far into the great man’s sanctum. The Senator further graced these reporters by reciting the usual answers to the usual questions as he looked through his mail, pocketing the fat envelopes and putting the thin ones in a pile for his intern, Miss Boffin. The Senator got almost as much work done during press conferences as during speeches.

“Senator, some members of the Buckland delegation have insinuated, off the record, that you are being investigated for alleged bribe-taking. Do you have a comment?”

“You can tell old Gerontius Brownlock that he needn’t hide behind a facade of anonymity, and further that I said he was begotten in an orkish graveyard at midnight, suckled by a warg-bitch and educated by a fool. That’s off the record, of course.”

“Senator, what do you think of your chances for reelection next fall?”

“The only time I have ever been defeated in a campaign, my dear, was my first one. Back when your grandmother was a whelp, I lost a clerkship to a veteran of the Battle of Bywater. A one-armed veteran. I started to vote for him myself. But unless a one-armed veteran comes forward pretty soon, little lady, I’m in no hurry to pack.”

The press loved the Senator. He was quotable, which was all the press required of a public official.

“Now, gentle folk, ladies, the business of the Shire awaits. Time for just one more question.”

An unfamiliar voice aged and sharp as Mirkwood cheese rang out: “*They say your ancestor took a fairy wife.*”

The Senator looked up, his face even rounder and redder than usual. The reporters backed away. "It's a lie!" the Senator cried. "Who said such a thing? Come, come. Who said that?"

"Said what, Senator?" asked the most senior reporter (Bracklebore, of the *Bywater Battle Cry*), his voice piping as if through a reed. "I was just asking about the quarterly sawmill-production report. If I may continue—"

"Goodbye," said the Senator. On cue, the trolls snatched up the reporters, tossed them into the innermost outer office, and slammed and locked the door. Bracklebore, ousted too quickly to notice, finished his question in the next room, voice muffled by the intervening wood. The trolls dusted their hands.

"Goodbye," said Gogluk—or was that Grishzog?

"Goodbye," said Grishzog—or was that Gogluk?

Which meant, of course, "Mission accomplished, Senator," in the pidgin Common Speech customary among trolls.

"No visitors," snapped the Senator, still nettled by that disembodied voice, as he pulled a large brass key from his waistcoat-pocket and unlocked the door to his personal apartments. Behind him, the trolls assumed position, folded their arms, and turned to stone.

"Imagination," the Senator muttered as he entered his private tunnel.

"Hearing things," he added as he locked the door behind.

"Must be tired," he said as he plodded into the sitting-room, yawning and rubbing his hip.

He desired nothing more in all the earth but a draft of ale, a pipe, and a long snooze in his armchair, and so he was all the more taken aback to find that armchair already occupied by a white-bearded Big Person in a tall pointed blue hat, an ankle-length gray cloak, and immense black boots, a thick oaken staff laid across his knees.

" 'Strewth!" the Senator cried.

The wizard—for wizard he surely was—slowly stood, eyes like lanterns, bristling gray brows knotted in a thunderous scowl, a meteor shower flashing through the weave of his cloak, one gnarled index finger pointed at the Senator—who was, once the element of surprise passed, unimpressed. The meteor effect lasted only a few seconds, and thereafter the intruder was an ordinary old man, though with fingernails longer and more yellow than most.

"Do you remember me?" the wizard asked. His voice crackled like burning husks. The Senator recognized that voice.

"Should I?" he retorted. "What's the meaning of piping insults into my head? And spying on me in the Shire-moot? Don't deny it; I saw you flitting about the galleries like a bad dream. Come on, show me you have a tongue—else I'll have the trolls rummage for it." The Senator was enjoying himself; he hadn't had to eject an intruder since those singing elves occupied the outer office three sessions ago.

"You appointed me, some years back," the wizard said, "to the University, in return for some localized weather effects on Election Day."

So that was all. Another disgruntled officeholder. "I may have done," the Senator snapped. "What of it?"

The old-timer showed no inclination to reseat himself, so the Senator plumped down in the armchair. Its cushions now stank of men. The Senator kicked the wizard's staff from underfoot and jerked his leg back; he fancied something had nipped his toe.

The staff rolled to the feet of the wizard. As he picked it up, the wider end flared with an internal blue glow. He commenced shuffling about the room, picking up knick-knacks and setting them down again as he spoke.

"These are hard times for wizards," the wizard rasped. "New powers are abroad in the world, and as the powers of wind and rock, water and tree are ebbing, we ebb with them. Still, we taught our handfuls of students respect for the old ways. Alas, no longer!"

The Senator, half-listening, whistled through his eyeteeth and chased a flea across the top of his foot.

"The entire thaumaturgical department—laid off! With the most insulting of pensions! A flock of old men feebler than I, unable even to transport themselves to your chambers, as I have wearily done—to ask you, to demand of you, why?"

The Senator yawned. His administrative purging of the Shire's only university, in Michel Delving, had been a complex business with a complex rationale. In recent years, the faculty had got queer Eastern notions into their heads and their classrooms—muddleheaded claims that all races were close kin, that ores and trolls had not been separately bred by the Dark Power, that the Dark Power's very existence was mythical. Then the faculty quit paying the campaign contributions required of all public employees, thus threatening the Senator's famed "Deduct Box." Worst of all, the faculty demanded "open admissions for qualified non-halflings," and the battle was joined. After years of bruising politics, the Senator's appointees now controlled the university board, and a long-overdue housecleaning was under way. Not that the Senator needed to recapitulate all this to an unemployed spell-mumbler. All the Senator said was:

"It's the board that's cut the budget, not me." With a cry of triumph, he purpled a fingernail with the flea. "Besides," he added, "they kept all the *popular* departments. Maybe you could pick up a few sections of Heritage 101."

This was a new, mandatory class that drilled students on the unique and superior nature of halfling culture and on the perils of immigration, economic development, and travel. The wizard's response was: "Pah!"

The Senator shrugged. "Suit yourself. I'm told the Anduin gambling-houses are hiring. Know any card tricks?"

The wizard stared at him with rheumy eyes, then shook his head. "Very well," he said. "I see my time is done. Only the Gray Havens are left to me and my kind. We should have gone there long since. But your time, too, is passing. No fence, no border patrol—not even you, Senator—can keep all change from coming to the Shire."

"Oh, we can't, can we?" the Senator retorted. As he got worked up, his Bywater accent got thicker. "We sure did keep those Bucklanders from putting over that so-called Fair Distribution System, taking people's hard-earned crops away and handing 'em over to lazy trash to eat. We sure did keep those ugly up-and-down man houses from being built all over the Hill as shelter for immigrant rabble what ain't fully halfling or fully human or fully anything. Better to be some evil race than no race at all."

"There are no evil races," said the wizard.

The Senator snorted. "I don't know how *you* were raised, but I was raised on the Red Book of Westmarch, chapter and verse, and it says so right there in the Red Book, ores are mockeries of men,

filthy cannibals spawned by the Enemy, bent on overrunning the world...

He went on in this vein, having lapsed, as he often did in conversation, into his tried-and-true stump speech, galvanized by the memories of a thousand cheering halfling crowds. "Oh, there's enemies everywhere to our good solid Shire-life," he finally cried, punching the air, "enemies outside and inside, but we'll keep on beating 'em back and fighting the good fight our ancestors fought at the Battle of Bywater. Remember their cry:

"Awake! Awake! Fear, Fire, Foes! Awake!

"Fire, Foes! Awake!"

The cheers receded, leaving only the echo of his own voice in the Senator's ears. His fists above his head were bloated and mottled—a corpse's fists. Flushed and dazed, the Senator looked around the room, blinking, slightly embarrassed—and, suddenly, exhausted. At some point he had stood up; now his legs gave way and he fell back into the armchair, raising a puff of tobacco. On the rug, just out of reach, was the pipe he must have dropped, lying at one end of a spray of cooling ashes. He did not reach for it; he did not have the energy. With his handkerchief he mopped at his spittle-laced chin.

The wizard regarded him, wrinkled fingers interlaced atop his staff.

"I don't even know why I'm talking to you," the Senator mumbled. He leaned forward, eyes closed, feeling queasy. "You make my head hurt."

"Inhibiting spell," the wizard said. "It prevented your throwing me out. Temporary, of course. One bumps against it, as against a low ceiling."

"Leave me alone," the Senator moaned.

"Such talents," the wizard murmured. "Such energy, and for what?"

"At least I'm a halfling," the Senator said.

"Largely, yes," the wizard said. "Is genealogy one of your interests, Senator? We wizards have a knack for it. We can see bloodlines, just by looking. Do you really want to know how... *interesting*... your bloodline is?"

The Senator mustered all his energy to shout, "Get out!" but heard nothing. Wizardry kept the words in his mouth, unspoken.

"There are no evil races," the wizard repeated, "however convenient the notion to patriots, and priests, and story-tellers. You may summon your trolls now." His gesture was half shrug, half convulsion.

Suddenly the Senator had his voice back. "Boys!" he squawked. "Boys! Come quick! Help!" As he hollered, the wizard seemed to roll up like a windowshade, then become a tubular swarm of fireflies. By the time the trolls knocked the door into flinders, most of the fireflies were gone. The last dying sparks winked out on their scaly shoulders as the trolls halted, uncertain what to pulverize. The Senator could hear their lids scrape their eyeballs as they blinked once, twice. The troll on the left asked:

"Gogluk help?"

"Gogluk too *late* to help, thank you very much!" the Senator snarled. The trolls tried to assist as he struggled out of the armchair, but he slapped them away, hissing, in a fine rage now. "Stone ears or no, did you not hear me shouting? Who did you think I was talking to?"

The trolls exchanged glances. Then Grishzog said, quietly: “Senator talk when alone a lot.”

“A lot,” Gogluk elaborated.

The Senator might have clouted them both had he not been distracted by the wizard’s staff. Dropped amid the fireworks, it had rolled beneath a table. Not knowing why, the Senator reached for it, eyes shining. The smooth oak was warm to the touch: heat-filled, like a living thing. Then, with a yelp, the Senator yanked back his hand. The damn thing *definitely* had bitten him this time; blood trickled down his right palm. As three pairs of eyes stared, the staff sank into the carpet like a melting icicle, and was gone.

“Magic,” said the trolls as one, impressed.

“Magic?” the senator cried. “Magic?” He swung his fists and punched the trolls, kicked them, wounding only their dignity; their looming hulks managed to cower, like dogs. “If it’s magic you want, I’ll give you magic!” He swung one last time, lost his balance, and fell into the trolls’ arms in a dead faint.

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The Bunce Inn, now in the hands of its founder’s great-granddaughter, had been the favored public house of the Shire-moot crowd for generations. The Senator had not been inside the place in months. He pleaded matters of state, the truth being that he needed a lot more sleep nowadays. But when he woke from his faint to find the trolls fussing over him, he demanded to be taken to the Bunce Inn for a quick one before retiring. The Senator’s right hand smarted a bit beneath its bandage, but otherwise the unpleasant interlude with the wizard seemed a bad dream, was already melting away like the staff. The Senator’s little troll-cart jounced through the warm honeysuckle-scented night, along the cobbled streets of the capital, in and out of the warm glows cast by round windows behind which fine happy halfling families settled down to halfling dinners and halfling games and halfling dreams.

The inn itself was as crowded as ever, but the trolls’ baleful stares quickly prompted a group of dawdlers to drink up and vacate their table. The trolls retreated to a nearby corner, out of the way but ever-present, as bodyguards should be. The Senator sat back with a sigh and a tankard and a plate of chips and surveyed the frenzy all around, pleased to be a part of none of it. The weight of the brimming pewter tankard in his unaccustomed left hand surprised him, so that he spilled a few drops of Bunce’s best en route to his mouth. *Aah*. Just as he remembered. Smacking foam from his lips, he took another deep draft—and promptly choked. Not six feet away, busy cleaning a vacant table, was an ore.

And not just any ore. This one clearly had some man in its bloodline somewhere. The Senator had seen to it that the Shire’s laws against miscegenation had stayed on the books, their penalties stiffened, but elsewhere in the world, alas, traditional moral values had declined to the point that such blasphemous commingling had become all too frequent. This creature was no doubt an ore—the hulking torso and bowlegs, the flat nose and flared nostrils, the broad face, the slanting eyes, the coarse hair, the monstrous hooked teeth at the corners of the mouth—but the way the ore’s arms moved as it stacked dirty plates was uncomfortably manlike. It had genuine hands as well, with long delicate ringers, and as its head turned, the Senator saw that its pupils were not the catlike slits of a true ore but rounded, like the pupils of dwarves, and men, and halflings. It was like seeing some poor trapped halfling peering out from a monstrous bestial shell, as in those children’s stories where the hero gets swallowed whole by the ogre and cries for help from within. The ore, as it worked, began to whistle.

The Senator shuddered, felt his gorge rise. His injured hand throbbed with each heartbeat. A filthy half-breed ore, working at the Bunce Inn! Old Bunce would turn in his grave. Catching sight of young Miss Bunce bustling through the crowd, the Senator tried to wave her over, to give her a piece of his

mind. But she seemed to have eyes only for the ore. She placed her hand on its shoulder and said, in a sparkling gay voice: "Please, sir, don't be tasking yourself, you're too kind. I'll clean the table; you just settle yourself, please, and tell me what you'll have. The lamb stew is very nice today, and no mistake."

"Always pleased to help out, ma'am," said the ore, plopping its foul rump onto the creaking bench. "I can see how busy you are. Seems to me you're busier every time I come through the Shire."

"There's some as say I needs a man about," Miss Bunce said, her arms now laden with plates, "but cor! Then I'd be busier still, wouldn't I?" The ore laughed a horrid burbling mucus-filled laugh as Miss Bunce sashayed away, buttocks swinging, glancing back to twinkle at her grotesque customer, and wink.

At this inauspicious moment, someone gave the Senator a hearty clap on the back. It was Fredegar Bracegirdle, a foaming mug in his hand and a foolish grin on his fat red face. Drink put Bracegirdle in a regrettable bipartisan mood. "Hello, Senator," Bracegirdle chirped, as he clapped the Senator's back again and again. "Opponents in the legislature, drinking buddies after hours, eh, Senator, eh, friend, eh, pal?"

"Stop pounding me," the Senator said. "I am not choking. Listen, Bracegirdle. What is that, that... *creature*... doing here?"

Bracegirdle's bleary gaze slowly followed the Senator's pointing finger, as a dying flame follows a damp fuse. "Why, he's a-looking at the bill of fare, and having himself a pint, same as us."

"You know what I mean! Look at those hands. He talks as if someone, somewhere, has given him schooling. Where'd he come from?"

As he answered, Bracegirdle helped himself to the Senator's chips. "Don't recall his name, but he hails from Dun-land, from one of those new, what-do-you-call-'em, investment companies, their hands in a little of everything. Run by ores and dwarves, mostly, but they're hiring all sorts. My oldest, Bungo, he's put his application in, and I said, you go to it, son, there's no work in the Shire for a smart lad like yourself, and your dear gaffer won't be eating any less in his old age. Young Bunce, she's a wizard at these chips, she is. Could you pass the vinegar?"

The Senator already had risen and stalked over to the ore's table, where the fanged monster, having ordered, was working one of the little pegboard games Miss Bunce left on the tables for patrons' amusement. The ore raised its massive head as it registered the Senator's presence.

"A good evening to you, sir," it said. "You can be my witness. Look at that, will you? Only one peg left, and it in the center. I've never managed *that* before!"

The Senator cleared his throat and spat in the ore's face. A brown gob rolled down its flattened nose. The ore gathered its napkin, wiped its face, and stood, the scrape of the bench audible in the otherwise silent room. The ore was easily twice as wide as the Senator, and twice as tall, yet it did not have to stoop. Since the Senator's last visit, Miss Bunce had had the ceiling raised. Looking up at the unreadable, brutish face, the Senator stood his ground, his own face hot with rage, secure in the knowledge that the trolls were right behind him. Someone across the room coughed. The ore glanced in that direction, blinked, shook its head once, twice, like a horse bedeviled by flies. Then it expelled a breath, its fat upper lip flapping like a child's noisemaker, and sat down. It slid the pegboard closer and re-inserted the pegs, one after the other after the other, then, as the Senator watched, resumed its game.

The Senator, cheated of his fight, was unsure what to do. He could not remember when last he had been so utterly ignored. He opened his mouth to tell the ore a thing or two, but felt a tug at his sleeve so violent that it hushed him. It was Miss Bunce, lips thin, face pale, twin red spots livid on her cheeks. "It's late,

Senator,” she said, very quietly. “I think you’d best be going home.”

Behind her were a hundred staring faces. Most of them were strangers. Not all of them were halflings. The Senator looked for support in the faces in the crowd, and for the first time in his life, did not find it. He found only hostility, curiosity, indifference. He felt his face grow even hotter, but not with rage.

He nearly told the Bunce slut what he thought of her and her ore-loving clientele—but best to leave it for the Shire-moot. Best to turn his back on this pesthole. Glaring at everyone before him, he gestured for the trolls to clear a path, and muttered: “Let’s go, boys.”

Nothing happened.

The Senator slowly turned his head. The trolls weren’t there. The trolls were nowhere to be seen. Only more hostile strangers’ faces. The Senator felt a single trickle of sweat slide past his shoulder blades. The ore jumped pegs, removed pegs: *snick, snick*.

So. The Senator forced himself to smile, to hold his head high. He nodded, patted Miss Bunce’s shoulder (she seemed not to relish the contact), and walked toward the door. The crowd, still silent, parted for him. He smiled at those he knew. Few smiled back. As he moved through the crowd, a murmur of conversation arose. By the time he reached the exit, the normal hubbub had returned to the Bunce Inn, the Senator’s once-favorite tavern, where he had been recruited long ago to run for clerk on the Shire First ticket. He would never set foot in the place again. He stood on the threshold, listening to the noise behind, then cut it off by closing the door.

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The night air was hot and rank and stifling. Amid the waiting wagons and carriages and mules and two-wheeled pedal devices that the smart set rode nowadays, the Senator’s little troll-cart looked foolish in the lamplight. As did his two truant bodyguards, who were leaning against a sagging, creaking carriage, locked in a passionate embrace. The Senator decided he hadn’t seen that; he had seen enough today. He cleared his throat, and the trolls leaped apart with much coughing and harrumphing.

“Home,” the Senator snapped. Eyeing the uneven pavement, he stepped with care to the cart, sat down in it, and waited. Nothing happened. The trolls just looked at one another, shifted from foot to foot. The Senator sighed and, against his better judgment, asked: “What is it?”

The trolls exchanged another glance. Then the one on the right threw back his shoulders—a startling gesture, given the size of the shoulders involved—and said: “Gogluk quit.” He immediately turned to the other troll and said: “There, I said it.”

“And you know that goes double for me,” said the other troll. “Let’s go, hon. Maybe some fine purebred halfling will take this old reprobate home.”

Numb but for his dangling right hand, which felt as swollen as a pumpkin, the Senator watched the trolls walk away arm in arm. One told the other: “*Spitting* on people, yet! I thought I would just *die*” As they strolled out of the lamplight, the Senator rubbed his face with his left hand, massaged his wrinkled brow. He had been taught in school, long ago, that the skulls of trolls ossified in childhood, making sophisticated language skills impossible. If it wasn’t true, it ought to be. There ought to be a law. He would write one as soon as he got home.

But how was he to *get* home? He’d never make it on foot, and he certainly couldn’t creep back into the tavern to ask the egregious Bracegirdle for a ride. Besides, he couldn’t see to walk at the moment; his eyes were watering. He wiped them on his sleeve. It wasn’t that he would *miss* the trolls, certainly not,

no more than he would miss, say, the andirons, were they to rise up, snarl insults, wound him to the heart, the wretches, and abandon him. One could always buy a new set. But at the thought of the andirons, the cozy hearth, the armchair, the Senator's eyes brimmed anew. He was so tired, and so confused; he just wanted to go home. And his hand hurt. He kept his head down as he mopped his eyes, in case of passersby. There were no passersby. The streetlamp flared as a buzzing insect flew into it. He wished he had fired those worthless trolls. He certainly would, if he ever saw them again.

"Ungratefulness," the Senator said aloud, "is the curse of this age." A mule whickered in reply.

Across the street, in the black expanse of the Party Field, a lone mallorn-tree was silhouetted against the starlit sky. Enchanted elven dust had caused the mallorn and all the other trees planted after the War to grow full and tall in a single season, so that within the year the Shire was once again green and beautiful—or so went the fable, which the Senator's party had eliminated from the schoolbooks years ago. The Senator blew his nose with vigor. The Shire needed nothing from elves.

When the tavern door banged open, the Senator felt a surge of hope that died quickly as the hulking ore-shape shambled forth. The bastard creature had looked repellent enough inside; now, alone in the lamplit street, it was the stuff of a thousand halfling nightmares, its bristling shoulders as broad as hogsheads, its knuckles nearly scraping the cobbles, a single red eye guttering in the center of its face. No, wait. That was its cigar. The ore reared back on its absurd bowlegs and blew smoke rings at the streetlamp—rings worthy of any halfling, but what of it? Even a dog can be trained, after a fashion, to dance. The ore extended its horrid manlike hand and tapped ashes into the lamp. Then, arm still raised, it swiveled its great jowly head and looked directly at the Senator. Even a half-ore could see in the dark.

The Senator gasped. He was old and alone, no bodyguards. Now the ore was walking toward him! The Senator looked for help, found none. Had the wizard's visit been an omen? Had the confusticated old charm tosser left a curse behind with his sharp-toothed staff? As the Senator cowered, heard the inexorable click of the ore's claws on the stones, his scream died in his throat—not because of any damned be-bothered wizard's trickery, but because of fear, plain and simple fear. He somehow always had known the ores would get him in the end. He gasped, shrank back. The ore loomed over him, its pointed head blocking the lamplight. The ore laid one awful hand, oh so gently, on the Senator's right shoulder, the only points of contact the fingertips—rounded, mannish, hellish fingertips. The Senator shuddered as if the ore's arm were a lightning rod. The Senator spasmed and stared and fancied the ore-hand and his own injured halfling hand were flickering blue in tandem, like the ends of a wizard's staff. The great mouth cracked the ore's leathered face, blue-lit from below, and a voice rumbled forth like a subterranean river: "Senator? Is that you? Are you all right?"

Sprawled there in the cart, pinned by the creature's gentle hand as by a spear, the Senator began to cry, in great sucking sobs of rage and pain and humiliation, as he realized this damned ore was not going to splinter his limbs and crush his skull and slurp his brains. How far have I fallen, the Senator thought. This morning the four corners of the Shire were my own ten toes, to wiggle as I pleased. Tonight I'm pitied by an orc.