

WHEN  
GRAVEYARDS  
YAWN

*The Apocalypse Trilogy*  
Book One

G. Wells Taylor

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Email: [books@wildclown.com](mailto:books@wildclown.com)

Website: [www.wildclown.com](http://www.wildclown.com)

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# Part One: Changeling

## Chapter 1

The dead man looked at the clown and smiled. The clown was draped over a chair and desk across from him in a semi-intoxicated state of contemplative repose and was too busy studying his reflection in a hand mirror to notice the nervous gesture. The clown's small black eyes studied the image in the mirror with something like the concentrated discipline of an astronomer. They squeezed into tight whirls of flesh and pondered, peering at the silvery surface from cavernous sockets in a right then left canted head as though such contortions could help him fathom what the eyes saw. A hazy border of greasy fingerprints obscured the image more giving the reflection a dream-like quality. The clown could easily make out the dark spiky hair that grew to his shoulder and the tip of his nose painted black. By lifting his chin he revealed a wide grin scrawled across his white-powdered cheeks, by dropping it he showed scripted eyebrows swooping up and over the tall forehead in exclamation or terror. They wrinkled, gleaming with sweat. Perhaps they posed a question.

An ill-fitting coverall hung on the big man's frame with all the sophistication of an oily tarp thrown over discarded car parts. The apparel was decorated with faded colored spots that vied equally for notice with stains of various sorts. His boots were black and heavy, better suited to combat than office work. They were crossed on the desk, and threatened to upset the telephone where it had been pushed with a pile of papers and overflowing ashtrays.

“What?” The clown drifted from his reverie. His gaze fell evenly on the corpse that sat across from him. “What?”

“We was talking,” said Elmo, always reluctant to prompt his boss, “about the Change.”

“Oh.” The clown’s eyes did an inward turn, pupils flashing for memory. He dropped the mirror in a desk drawer, slammed it. “You remember the earthquakes, Elmo!” He leaned back in his chair with an air of authority, but a thin quaver in his voice denounced it. “Airplanes fell from the sky. There were riots and civil strife! And that millennium bug...”

“True,” rasped the dead man, exhibiting a rare display of assertiveness. “But could’a been coincidence, could’a been anythin’.” He gingerly nibbled a yellowed fingernail. “Could’a been the ozone, or the greenhouse gases?”

“Rumors of war—nation rising up against nation! And all that cloning...oh that was bad!” The clown suddenly animate lurched forward, pounding the desk. “It’s not coincidence! It’s all there in the book, that Bible! John saw it didn’t he? And it wasn’t any hothouse effect!”

“But the Bible talked about seals and lambs and such. I ain’t seen no lambs nor seals.” Elmo’s hands shook, almost overwhelmed by his own bravado. “I seen hardly any animals at all.”

“That’s where we let ourselves down. It’s not going to happen like a TV show. The world won’t end after the closing credits or following a commercial break.” The clown swept his legs back onto the desk as he tapped his forehead with index finger. “We’re going to have to think about this one, Elmo. Think about it! A lamb might not be a lamb, so to speak. Could be a man or a thing. Could be a lamb.”

A stream of derisive air shot from between Fat Elmo’s pursed lips. “Still ain’t convinced,” he hissed. “Nations is always rising up against nations. And a lamb is always a lamb where I come from! And seals, I ain’t driving to the coast just to see them.” He drew a curtain of silence as he crossed his arms.

The clown silently studied the dead man. His partner’s head was round and the black skin on it was drawn tight over the exposed crown. What remained of his hair was fair, almost a strawberry blonde, and long and lanky. Elmo had pressed or ironed the kinks out of it. It could have been the bleach he used that pacified the ancestral convolutions. Large dark eyes sat in a very thin face with a broad broken nose splayed across it. A long skinny moustache trailed over thick lips. As always, his clothing was impeccable. Even with the frayed cuffs his dark wool suit was head and shoulders above the clown’s ensemble. He even had matching silver tiepin and cufflinks. The slack sag of skin against cheekbone hinted at Elmo’s need for re-hydration.

Suddenly, the clown's eyes burned with revelation. Leaning forward on his elbows he barked, "For Christ's sake, Elmo. You're dead!"

Fat Elmo shifted nervously in his chair then rolled his eyes at the ceiling as though a suitable rebuttal might be written there.

"Course I am!" His eyes dropped beneath loose lids. "Still don't prove it. Just 'cause I'm dead..."

"The dead rose up from their graves..." the clown started, but Elmo was saved from this difficult position by the annoying rattle of the telephone. Glaring, the clown scooped the receiver up and wedged it between his chin and collarbone. "Yeah." His inky black eyes darted back and forth. He wrinkled his eyebrows then picked at something under a thumbnail.

"This is Wildclown Investigations," the clown whispered, as the dead man across from him strained his leathery ears toward the squeaky chipmunk voice on the phone. Elmo's eyes were otherworldly in the extreme shadow of the office, bordered as they were by sooty black skin. The inconsistent lighting from the street was sending flashing bars of lightning through the blinds—the lamp on the desk flickered as another blackout loomed. Madness nibbled at the edges of the scene.

"Yeah, I'm him. I'm Tommy Wildclown," the clown repeated, drilling a bony finger into his nose. He made a flicking motion, then gestured for a cigarette. With creaky deliberate movements, Elmo produced a pack and tossed one to Tommy, who lit it with a match.

"Yeah," he said as Elmo noisily slurped water from a glass.

Tommy continued like this for some time, chanting his approving mantra. "*Yeah.*"

The dead man passed the time lifting and flexing his thin legs where he sat. He hoisted a foot up to chest level by gripping an argyle-covered ankle and held it there a few seconds before repeating the process with the other leg. The post-mortem aerobics produced creaks, snaps and rubbery thrumming sounds from the dead muscle and connective tissues. Irritated, the clown pressed a petulant finger to his puckered lips. Elmo stopped stretching, cowed, but continued to shift uneasily in his chair. All dead people had Elmo's problem. The joints froze up with extended inactivity.

"All right!" Tommy growled as he crashed the receiver into its cradle. Elmo's eyes snapped wide. "God-damned, son-of-a-bitchin' Christ!" The clown leapt to his feet. "Damned if I'm not going to have to work."

Elmo's face made crackling sounds as he worked up a grin. "Got a case?"

"Yeah," said Tommy pouring two four-finger whiskies. "Seems some

lawyer got himself whacked, and he's pissed right off. *Shit.*" He raised his glass and smiled. "He's coming over which means money, Elmo. No more of this sitting around, this senseless fucking arguing."

Elmo declined the drink offered opting instead to fidget noisily in his chair.

Tommy drank. He sauntered to the window, made scissors of his fingers, cut a hole in the blind and peered out at the flickering lights. A big Packard sizzled by on the rain slick street—its retro-fenders glistening like wet blisters. It was a dark afternoon. The sun hadn't broken the cloud in years.

The clown's teeth clinked against his glass. He wiped whiskey from the corner of his mouth. Quivers ran from his shoulders to his hands as he downed the rest of the drink at suicidal speed. He glanced back at Elmo creases of fear marking his painted cheeks. The dead man watched him calmly.

I watched the scene from where I floated near the ceiling. Tommy's nervousness had nothing to do with the fact that Elmo was dead or the impending mayhem inherent in any criminal investigation. It was me. I was about to possess him and he didn't like it. Every time he got a case, I stepped into his head and like Pavlov's slobbering dogs; the clown was conditioned to expect it. Not that I was a goblin or a devil. I had no interest in making him vomit, levitating his bed or forcing him to speak in tongues. When I took over I worked. He didn't like it because he couldn't remember anything that happened when I was in charge. That bothered him. And so his reluctance to enjoy the work on the rare occasion that it came. I guess it would bother me too.

I was in no rush to take over just then. It had been a while since our last case and I spent the time between them in my invisible, odorless state. The longer I did that, the more complicated my love-hate relationship with corporeality became. I enjoyed my time in Tommy Wildclown's body, but I had a habit of getting hurt when cases came up and I was no fan of pain. Neither was the clown and he was the one stuck with the bruises at the end of the day. But understanding it didn't make me stop.

## Chapter 2

I walked to the desk, set the empty glass down and refilled it. Elmo fidgeted across from me. His eyes were fixed in a slack-lidded stare unaware that anything had happened to his boss. I pushed the glass against my lips—ran its cold pucker over them for a moment—then drained it. A good drunk was always tempting in the first giddy moments of possession. There is nothing like drinking as deep as a fish and feeling it when you spend most of your days hanging around ceiling fans with cigarette smoke for company. But as usual, Tommy was running at a fair intoxicated clip already and I had to be sober enough to handle the interview with the lawyer. I had an impulse to knock another one back anyway, resisted it for a second and then gave in. That's the way of it. I'm not back in a body for five minutes and I'm all impulses. I could argue that the booze kept my host sedated wherever he lurked at the back of his mind. But the truth was: I became addicted to sensation at the first itch.

“Elmo,” I said, pleased with the sound, pleased with the sight of the dead man—even pleased with the bite of the fiery hemorrhoid that dictated terms to Tommy's nether regions. “When this lawyer gets here, I want you to keep a close ear to the door from the outer office. I never trust a dead man. Present company excepted.”

“Sure, Boss. I'll keep an eye out for him.” Elmo nodded and climbed to his feet. No offense was taken.

He left to take his seat by the lamp in the waiting room where he kept a pile of yellowed newspapers and tattered magazines. I had told Elmo the

truth—I didn't trust dead men. They had different motives. Things outside of normal human experience governed their actions. I couldn't figure Elmo. He worked slavishly even though Tommy was a good six months behind on his paycheck. I couldn't figure me. I made the claim that I hated injustice, but there I was taking over another man's body. What could be more unjust? Of course, justice is a word and any word can be conveniently lodged in a web of semantics. I also made the assumption that I was dead so it could be argued that the words required definition before the debate could ensue. So my unique perspective made me a little protective of Tommy Wilddown. It's not that I liked him but he was my only doorway to the land of life and limb and though the rigors could be painful, I knew that to remain in my incorporeal state—devoid of sensation—would drive me mad in time. I raised the refilled glass, finished it off in one lusty bite then slid the bottle back into the right hand drawer of the desk. I stretched and flexed my borrowed musculature.

Tommy stood about six-one when he didn't slouch. His shoulders were heavy with long arms made strong from lifting whiskey bottles and chronic masturbation. Yes, they broke the mold before they made him. He had an almost constant erection. As always it was urgently present beside the .44 automatic that was thrust through his pink skipping rope belt. For a moment, I imagined Tommy's warped and buckled soul residing in that particular part of his anatomy during possession. It wouldn't surprise me—of course, nothing does.

I yanked open the top drawer and pulled out his mirror. I studied what I could see of my purloined face. The eyes struck me right away. They were painted black and sinister as though drawn on by the devil himself. I noticed the makeup was smeared on the left side and mended it with pancake and greasepaint from the desk. I had tried to remove the stuff the first time I had possessed Tommy, but his psyche had bucked me off like a bronco at the very idea. I had been poised with cold cream and towels when without warning he appeared as a memory of rage. I was flung from him like a sneeze. Life is full of compromises. The deal was I could inhabit his body to do my detective work, but I would have to do it dressed like a clown. *Oh joy.*

Tommy lived life simply, slept and ate at the office and wore functional if austere clothing. He kept another spotted white coverall draped over the coat rack in the waiting room, and one in the trunk of his car. Fashion free and painfully utilitarian. I had made the mistake once of thinking the others were clean. Tommy went to the airing out school of laundry.

I carefully re-drew the tall false eyes on my forehead. *When in Rome,*

*right?* Then, I put the makeup and mirror back into the drawer and closed it, before sitting and kicking my big black boots onto the desk.

Elmo poked his head through the door. “Client’s here, Boss.” He disappeared with a snap of skin and was replaced by a tall thin gentleman in the early stages of death. His face was a mottled blue and gray hue with stains of dark purple shadowing each eye. It took a long time for oxygen to leach out of blood when it happened from the inside out. It made for some startling skin tones. From his complexion, I judged him to be recently deceased. His almond-shaped face was crowned with an expensive fedora that hung low over his brow—I immediately liked the hat. A crisp gray sharkskin suit showed off a lean and angular form. His large wool overcoat was draped across thin shoulders.

I rose and reached out to shake. The dry skin on his extended hand tickled the hairs on the back of mine and I giggled reflexively. I quickly covered my hypersensitivity by coughing and gesturing to the chair I kept across from me for clients. He set himself into it like a jeweler would a prized gem in gold. It was common among the dead to act like that for a while—all eggshells.

I returned his gaze across the desk.

“Mr. Wildclown?” His voice was not so thin and reedy that it couldn’t carry the tone of genuine disbelief. He looked at my painted face with something like horror.

I nodded, “and you’re...”

“Conrad Billings.” He screwed up his eyes, and then tilted his head from side to side. His chin dipped, lips forming an ugly triangle. Carefully, he lifted the hat from his dead head with his dead hand.

A ragged hole sat high in his forehead about the size of a penny. By the shape, I figured it was the exit wound from a low-caliber bullet. Apparently he had decided to charm me with the sight of it because he set his hat softly in his lap.

“I’ve been murdered!” His words knifed out at me.

I pulled my bottom lip. “Looks like the bastard shot you from behind, too.”

Billings made fists of his dead hands and pounded the arms of the chair. “I want him!”