

# Say it Ain't So!

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**genre: short story**

**word count: 7,121**

They came for Walter Scrapper in Mexico. He didn't know how they knew he'd be there, since he himself hadn't known for sure where he was going. When the temperatures began to drop, he'd simply packed a bag and started driving south.

He'd been standing on the beach with the hundreds of other touristas, dumbfounded by the sight of ice floes building up off the resort beaches of Cozumel. There were easily as many natives as there were foreigners. None of the natives had ever seen such a thing before, nor had they ever experienced temperatures below the freezing point.

Scrapper had seen both, having been born and raised on Chicago's south side. Many years he had stood in the sand at the Monroe Street beach, watching as the dynamism of Lake Michigan slowed and stopped under the tyranny of cold. Once winter had the city in its grip, the lake would be transformed from a living organism into an ice sculpture.

In all his life he never thought he'd see the same stilling of the waters so far to the south. Never believed he could walk the white sand beaches and hear ice crystals crunching beneath his feet.

His past ten years in L.A. hadn't prepared him for the drop in climate. When he had started his drive south he hadn't thought the cold would extend so far. His clothing had been inadequate to his needs, so he had adopted the style worn by many others with him on the stretch of sand. He wore layer upon layer of serapis. The gaily colored woven ponchos helped to trap his body heat in, and kept his hands and arms warm.

They did little to protect his face, however. Tears ran down his cheeks as the icy breeze clawed at his unprotected head. He had been so wrapped up in wiping off the tears before the moisture led to frostbite that he hadn't seen the watchers around him melt away. He hadn't become aware of the new arrivals surrounding him until an amplified voice shouted, "Walter Scrapper, we are officers of the United State's Marshall's office. Under treaty provisions with the government of Mexico we have been authorized to take you into custody and return you to the United States."

Pulling his hands away from his face, Scrapper found himself surrounded by two dozen men and women in military parkas. Oddly, he noticed the thick gloves they wore had the index fingers cut

away so the soldiers could keep their hands on the triggers of the dozen assault rifles pointed at him.

Scrapper sighed, then raised his hands over his head. The gesture pulled the ponchos he wore up, allowing the wind to push its greedy fingers in close to his body. It wasn't the wind stealing his body heat that chilled his heart. It was the knowledge that he had been found. Walter Scrapper, the man who killed the world.

Scrapper offered no resistance as two of the soldiers approached him and held out a pair of manacles. Nor when the two soldiers slung their rifles on their shoulders and marched him to a waiting convoy of vehicles.

As he walked within the bracket of military personnel, Scrapper glanced skyward. Weak, watery light pulsed from the sun. Where once looking at the sun meant a risk of permanent blindness, now he could stare at it all day and it would leave only the faintest afterimage.

Inside the silvery disk of the sun, Scrapper could just make out a small oval. "The bulb," he muttered, "it's so dim you can see the bulb now." A barked order from one of the soldiers brought his eyes back to earth as he was loaded within one of the covered trucks.

He sat on a bench and leaned back against the canvas covering. Six sets of eyes followed the movement. The muzzles of six weapons tracked his every move. Scrapper could make out very little about his captors. Bulky parkas, hoods and face shields hid everything but their eyes but he knew they must be young. Perhaps young enough to have watched the show, even. Offering a wan smile he said, "Hey kids, it's your old Unca Walter. And you know what we say, don't you? Say it ain't so."

The reaction was immediate and violent. The soldier nearest him swung the barrel of his rifle back, bring the stock around in a clockwise motion smashing it into the side of scrapper's skull. The impact snapped his head to the side, where it hit the barrel of a second soldier's weapon. The barrel hit him square in the bridge of the nose. Scrapper heard a crunching sound, then tears were streaming down his face and he could taste blood at the back of his throat. As he spun down into darkness he tried to say, "It was just a joke", but the words were choked back by blood and bile.

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"I'm sorry, Walt, but Mr. Science just isn't pulling in the numbers anymore. We're going to have to cut it from the schedule." Bill Jacobs took a drag off his cigarette and settled his paunch comfortably behind the desk. The smile he offered Scrapper, meant to be commiserating, instead came off condescending.

With an effort, Scrapper held his temper. "Bill, this show is important. Kids in our country don't know shit about science. If we can get some of them interested, maybe we can start reversing that trend." Scrapper's eyes roved the station manager's office as spoke. Awards covered the walls, many of them garnered through his efforts.

Jacobs followed his gaze before answering, "Yes, you've done a lot for this station and a lot for the kids in this community, but the reality of the situation is this...we have to be able to sell your show in order to pay the bills. We have to pay the crew, the guests you bring in." He looked Scrapper in the eye, "We have to pay you, Walt. Two years ago you bullied us into a fifty percent increase in your salary because of rumors you might syndicate. What happened? Nothing. And yet we're still paying you."

Money. That was what it had come down to. Scrapper knew that once it reached the level of how much was being spent on the show versus how much it brought in, the argument was over. He knew Jacobs was just trying to let him debate the merits of his case, but once he mentioned money, he knew the decision had come from much higher up and wasn't about to change. He sighed, "How long? How many shows are they going to let me finish before they toss me out?"

Jacobs stood, stubbing out the barely smoked cigarette in a well-worn brass ashtray and pulling a fresh one from the pack in his breast pocket. "They're giving you tomorrow's show to say goodbye Walt." His eyes fell, "I'm sorry man, it was the best I could do."

Scrapper stalked out of the meeting and headed straight to a bar. He had been clean and sober for three years. The show had given him the strength to stay on the wagon, and having it taken away showed that it had all been for nothing.

Two hours later Walter Scrapper was under full sail, regaling the few patrons of the tavern with tales of his years in television and his latest fall from grace. "I tell you" he thundered, "I was making a difference. Kids in Cook County were paying attention. They were learning. This show was making a difference. More of a difference than any of the other crap on TV now."

A young man sitting near Scrapper and listening to his diatribe shook his head. Noticing the movement Scrapper pounced, "What? You don't think kids should be interested in science?" He sneered, "What'd you major in, junior? Marketing? Law? Heaven forbid, we add more scientists to the world."

Unmoved by the attack the young man met his gaze and quietly answered, "Physics. I majored in physics." Before Scrapper could he reply he continued, "I agree with what you're saying man, but you have to look at your audience. Kids don't want you telling 'em facts and figures. They get that shit all day at school. Now, I remember one of my profs had an interesting way of making a point. He'd lay out whatever principle we were studying that day, then he'd just say the craziest thing he could think of, then have us prove why that wasn't the way it worked in real life."

Scrapper stared, as an idea began to form in his head. Mistaking his silence for disdain, the young man finished his beer and stood. "It might sound stupid to you, but it sure as hell made physics a lot more interesting for me." When no reply came, he left muttering angrily.

Taking no note of the man leaving, Scrapper continued to stare, lost in thought. "*Have I been going about this all wrong?*" he thought. Peeling a bill from his wallet, Scrapper threw it down on the bar and made his way back to the car. He grinned. He had a final show to plan.

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Ten minutes to air and Walter Scrapper was bent over a toilet in his dressing room, trying not to vomit up the tylenol he had just swallowed. Sweat made runnels in his pancake makeup and his eyes wouldn't stop tearing up.

Some of it, he knew, was a hangover three years in the making. Some was nerves over what he had decided to do. In a drunken frenzy he had returned to the station after leaving the bar and spent a lot of time in the station's graphics department. He knew the crew didn't check the graphics anymore. They had done the show so many times now that it was rote. No one would see what he had done before it was too late to stop him.

The thought that he had locked himself into this course steadied him. He pushed back from the toilet and stood. Turning, he surveyed himself in the lighted mirror. Instead of his usual lab coat and tie, he was wearing jeans and a T-Shirt bearing a broken beaker and spilled chemicals that seemed to be eating a hole in the shirt. The logo above read, "Science Bites". He had dyed the gray out of his hair, and spiked it out using mousse.

A knock on the door broke his reverie. "Yes?" he called.

Bill Jacobs voice sounded from the other side. "Walt? We've got a full house out here. The kids are excited. Looks like you're going to go out with a bang."

Scrapper stole another look at himself in the mirror. "Oh yes," he answered, "this one's gonna be a humdinger."

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That episode became a milestone in television history. Years later, network executives would still be talking about how Walter Scrapper reinvented children's programming.

Scrapper had come out in the show with Dr. Gregory Dunbar, a chemist who spoke on catalysts. When Dr. Dunbar had finished his speech on how catalysts can change one chemical composition into another, Scrapper had shrugged out of his lab coat amid laughter from the children in the audience.

Scrapper moved close up the camera, until all that could be seen was one unblinking eye and he whispered, "Say it ain't so."

A confused Dunbar just had time to say, "I beg your pardon?" before he was grasped by the lapels of his lab coat by a manic Walter Scrapper.

"I said, Say it ain't so! Dr. Dunbar, I pronounce you full of crap and expel you from this show!" Shocked silence exploded into howls of laughter as Scrapper dragged the chemist off the set. He then bounded back in front of the cameras and shouted, "Kids, do you really want to know what causes chemicals to change composition?"

The crowd roared back "Yeah."

Scrapper then launched into a full demonstration, complete with animated graphics, of how molecule sized Guatemalan fruit flies caused chemical changes by pooping on certain compounds. The applause at the end of the program was thunderous.

The applause from Bill Jacobs was not. Once Jacobs became aware of what was happening he called 9-1-1 and had a full complement of Chicago's Finest waiting to escort Scrapper off the premises and to a holding facility on South State Street.

Of course, once the phones began to light up and the station owners got wind of how the show had been received, Jacobs himself was ordered down to State Street to pay the bail of the very man he'd had jailed.

Jacobs would later laugh about the incident referring to it as the fastest hiring and firing in television history. Shortly after returning to the studio offices, Walter Scrapper signed a new three-year contract and "Say it ain't so!" was born.

For Scrapper the next years went by as in a dream. A show that had been slated for cancellation became the number one program in the fall lineup. Even reruns were getting better ratings than first run episodes of other children's programming.

It wasn't long before the show was bought by the network and later taken into worldwide syndication. Children were buying Unca Walter dolls and 'Say it ain't so' themed parties became the rage of children of all ages. Where once clowns were the favored guests at parties, now parents would hire science students and interns who would come and present scientific theories. After which the children would enthusiastically scream "Say it ain't so". Then each child would get to offer their own theory about how things really worked.

Walter Scrapper became a member of Hollywood's A-List. Movie stars, politicians and scientists all vied to be a guest on the wildly popular children's show. Scrapper was asked to appear, as himself, on every newszine, talk show and sitcom available. Each appearance would be punctuated by Scrapper giving the camera his skewed smile and happily shouting his catchphrase.

People either adored or hated Scrapper and his show. Supporters referred to it as the programming revolution the public had been waiting for. Detractors called him "The Education Anti-Christ". Many blamed him for falling test scores world wide. In the fall of 2004, presidential candidates from both parties courted him. After that, Time Magazine dubbed him, "The Most Dangerous Man in the World."

It seemed that his fifteen minutes of fame would never end. That was until the arrival of the U.S. Military in the form of General Bill Abignail.

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"I am a god" sighed Walter Scrapper, as the nude young woman rubbed the kinks out of his shoulders. It was an hour before air. He had just time for the girl to finish the massage, give him a blowjob, and then do his makeup. Just one of the many perks he received for having the single most popular television show in the world. He grinned as he thought about how far he had come in just a few short years.

His enjoyment of the moment was cut short as the door to his suite burst open, his personal assistant David tumbling to the floor only bare feet ahead of a large man in military dress.

Screeching, the woman covered herself with a towel and rushed into Scrapper's bathroom. The door slammed and the lock clicked.

Scrapper himself had not moved. He continued to lay naked on the massage table. Turning his head he surveyed the intruder. A shade over six feet tall, the man appeared to be somewhere in his 40's. Salt and pepper hairs peeked from beneath the man's cap. His uniform was immaculate, with creases sharp enough to shave with. Although he must have physically pushed David through the door, the soldier didn't appear mussed and wasn't even breathing hard.

Cold blue eyes met Scrapper's almond colored ones. Despite his confidence that security was on his way and he was in no real danger, Scrapper was the first to look away. A baritone voice with a slight South Carolina drawl asked, "Walter Scrapper?"

Despite his discomfort at the icy stare, Scrapper laughed. "Do you really need to ask that? You know who I am or you wouldn't be here. What do you want?"

"You can stuff your false bravado, Mr. Scrapper. Everyone in this building is being detained by a squad of my men. There is no security coming to your rescue. The girl in the bathroom isn't even getting a dial tone on that phone."

The calmness with which this was delivered did more to convince Scrapper than the frustrated cries from the makeup girl. He swallowed, then pushed himself up onto his elbows. He nodded towards a hook on the wall. "Can you throw me that robe. Can I at least have this conversation with some clothes on?"

The man shook his head. "I like you just where you are. I've found that naked people are less likely to run and I'm in no mood to chase you." The man sat tailor fashion on the edge of the makeup table and said, "My name is General Bill Abignail. I work as a liaison between the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and certain members of the scientific community."

With a puzzled look, Scrapper said, "Ok, I'm impressed. But why are you here?"

Abignail's features relaxed slightly at the question. Almost sheepishly he said, "It's a matter of national import. We need you to discontinue your show."

Looking as though he had been poleaxed Scrapper slumped back down onto the massage table, as he tried to get a grasp on what the general had just said. "Are you serious? You're asking me to just quit? Why?"

"I can't tell you that. Suffice it to say that your show has become a danger to not just Americans, but to everyone."

Anger began to replace fear and Scrapper said, "What do you mean you can't tell me? What kind of horseshit is that? Do you know who I am? Does your boss know you're here? You know, I could get on the phone right now and talk to the president? If he wants my show shut down, then why hasn't he called me?"

Abignail looked away. Studying the ceiling, he answered quietly. "No, the president doesn't know. The only people who know I'm here are my men and the scientists I work with in Washington. For your safety its best that no one else knows."

The veiled threat only fanned the flames of his anger. "My safety? Are you here to kill me because I'm a success? What the hell? I'm doing more to promote scientific awareness than anyone else on the planet. Is that why? Am I a threat to your precious scientists? They don't want to share the spotlight?"

When no answer came, Scrapper looked over at the general. The military man had moved to the bathroom door. He knocked on the door. "Miss, I'm going to let you leave. By now you should be dressed. Exit the room quickly and go to the studio cafeteria. The rest of your coworkers are there under guard." He glanced to the floor and added, "And please take Mr. Scrapper's assistant with you. If you do as I ask you will not be harmed."

After a pause, the lock snicked back and the door opened. Scrapper watched as the blonde woman helped David to his feet and ushered him from the room. When the door had closed, Abignail took the chair from the makeup stand, turned it backwards and sat down next to the massage table. His face was bare inches from Scrapper's. In a low voice he said, "Are you familiar with the theory of the Collective Unconscious?"

"Not really. It's something to do with psychology isn't it?"

He nodded, "Yes. Carl Jung was a colleague of Sigmund Freud's. The two grew apart because of Jung's belief in a collective unconscious. Jung believed that all of our dreams and myths come from a collective pool of thought. Each human is connected to it. Jung believed that if you dreamed about a certain archetype, like flying, it came to you from an experience another might have had. Their experience was uploaded to the collective unconscious and then downloaded to you in your dreams. Follow me?"

Scrapper nodded uncertainly. "So Jung believed it was all interconnected at some unconscious level. What does that have to do with me?"

"In the last few years that your show has been on, the viewership has grown by an astonishing degree. I'm sure you know you have more people watching your show simultaneously than any other program ever."

Smiling, Scrapper said, "So what? A lot of people watch me and learn about science. So what?"

The general shook his head. "Just the opposite," he said, "more and more people believe the stupid alternative theories that you spout out. They think that's what you believe, so that's what they believe."

He continued, "The scientists that I work with are part of a large scale think-tank that monitor global phenomena. Over the past year they've seen some statistical anomalies that they've been unable to explain." Restless, Abignail stood and walked, circling the massage table. "Do you remember last year when you told everyone that Concord Grape Jelly was a cure for diabetes?"

Scrapper nodded, watching the circling man out of the corner of his eye.

"We had over three hundred and fifty cases of people going into insulin shock because they tried eating an entire jar of that grape crap. Two nearly died."

Scrapper gaped and pushed himself back up. "That was a joke! It wasn't my fault that those people tried that. Don't you remember the lawsuits? The court said it wasn't my fault." Heedless of his nudity, Scrapper pushed himself off the table and pulled his robe from the hook. Angry at the implication he rounded on Abignail. "I can't be held responsible for what stupid people do."

Abignail nodded in agreement. "You don't understand. That's not what caught my people's attention. Four people reported spontaneous curing of Type 1 diabetes after eating Concord Grape Jelly." At Scrapper's stare he went on, "Those are only the cases that we're aware of in the U.S. We haven't been able to get accurate data, but it seems to be about one in a hundred experienced what you said was the truth."

Head spinning, Scrapper walked to the makeup table. He picked up the pitcher of fruit juice and poured himself a cup. Without thinking, he offered one to Abignail, who accepted. He looked up at the taller man. "Are you saying that my show did that?"

Abignail nodded as he sipped. Grimacing at the tart juice he set his cup down and gazed steadily into Scrapper's eyes. "It gets worse. Do you remember the flooding along the Japanese coast last month? Sixteen hundred people died?"

Deep in thought Scrapper thought back to the shows they had done at that time. "No. You don't mean?"

"Yes. The floods were caused by perturbations in the moon's orbit. Those fluctuations occurred right after you did a show where you explained that the moon isn't held in place by gravity, it's held by a huge rubber band. I remember that show." Lips quirked in a smile, Abignail said, "Thought it was pretty funny. Bet the Japanese didn't."

The juice he had just drunk curdled in his stomach and Scrapper rushed into the bathroom and heaved it all back up. After he finished, he rinsed his mouth out from the sink and ran cold water into his hands. He rubbed them over his face, concentrating on the coolness. "This can't be happening," he thought, "this is just some screwed up dream I'm having."

When he opened his eyes, though, Abignail still stood there. The general held a towel out and Scrapper took it and sat on the toilet seat while drying his face. A small, giggling voice in his head tolled out a refrain he hadn't heard since childhood. "Scrapper's on the crapper". He shook the voice away and looked up at the general.

Abignail chuckled, "Well, you're certainly taking it better than some of the guys in our think-tank. I've got two MIT grads who are afraid to turn on their tv's because they're afraid you'll turn them into frogs or something." His face sobering, he said, "Now do you understand why we need you to stop?"

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Half an hour later Scrapper and the shaken members of the crew filed onstage to prepare for the day's show. Network attorneys were on the phone screaming to Washington about the harassment of a simple television show and threatening massive lawsuits against the government.

Settling himself into his easy chair, Scrapper thought about Abignail's last words before he left. The general hadn't threatened him or tried to force him to stop. He'd just said, "Somehow, the number of people watching your program has reached a sort of critical mass. The ideas you're presenting aren't just affecting the unconscious, but the conscious mind. Don't you see Mr. Scrapper? You've shown perception is reality. The problem is, what you say is what they perceive. What if you say the wrong thing? Some offhand remark or joke. What happens then?"

Laughing out loud, he looked around the studio. He'd let the soldier scare him, no doubt. But all that rubbish about people affecting their reality? "What a load of crap" he thought.

Scrapper stood as his guest entered the studio. Dr. Michael Greever was a Physics Professor at Duke University who specialized in Heliotropic theory. Greever would give a detailed lecture on the thermo-nuclear reactions that powered the sun. Striding to meet Greever he called, "Nice to see you again Professor. How's the sun today?"

A lanky young man with the long hair of a rock star, Greever smiled back. "Still shining Mr. Scrapper." He paused, "Uh, thanks for having me on the show."

"Don't worry, Professor. I'm sure you know how this works. For the first part of the show you explain how things really work, then I'll give out my theory, we smile, we shake hands, you go home with a paycheck." His smile faltered for a moment, then clicked back into place. "Make a good argument, would you please?"

Greever was finishing his presentation, to the lackluster applause of the children in the audience. Scrapper frowned, still haunted by the ridiculous claims of Abignail. Greever had given a good

presentation with a lot of flash and glitz, but the kids barely watched. Obviously they were marking time for the host's response and the "explanations" he would present.

Striding across the stage in the glare of the spotlight, Scrapper glued his smile in place, fear still in his heart. "Hey kids, it's Unca Walter! Wow, that was an interesting look at the sun from Dr. Greever, wasn't it?" A smattering of applause filtered from the stands.

Scrapper faltered for a moment as he realized that everyone in the studio, the kids, the crew, even Greever himself, were waiting for him to say four stupid words. As his eyes roved across the crowd he met a gaze that burned into his own with a cold intensity. Abignail.

The pause lengthened and the floor manager began frantically signalling for him to move on. He snapped his eyes away from the general's and looked straight into the camera. He shouted, "It was interesting, but...Say it ain't so!" The children in the studio went wild, screaming out the catchphrase along with him. With a smug feeling, he looked back at the general, but he was gone.

Revelling in the applause he pushed his misgivings to the back of his mind as he launched into his theory of how the sun works. "Well, kids, your old Unca Walter knows that the sun isn't some nasty old blast furnace. No sir." With a gleeful smile he continued, "It's actually a big old flashlight hanging out there in space. At the start of the day it turns on, then at night it turns off to save its batteries."

Pictures began flashing on the screens behind him of a big, old style, lantern flashlight shining a beam of light on the globe. He mock-shuddered at the camera and said, "It'd sure be a bad thing if the batteries ran out. It'd get awful cold down here on earth wouldn't it?" He laughed, "Yep, it might get so cold that the air itself would start freezing and falling down like snow. Wouldn't that be something kids? You could make a snowball and instead of eating it you could breathe it?"

He continued on for several more minutes, and then the show was over. He sighed in relief as he made his way back to his dressing room. Despite the rocky start to the day and Abignail's crackpot story he'd still been able to pull it together at the end. As he reached for the knob to enter his suite, the door flew open and a hand snaked out to grasp his wrist. Caught off balance, he fairly flew into the room and crashed against the wall. He dimly heard the door close as spots swam before his eyes.

The barrel of the pistol being pushed underneath his chin, brought him back to reality. Abignail's forearm pinned him to the wall while his other hand held the gun. Tears streamed down his face as he whispered, "You damned fool. I told you and you did it anyway." The pistol swept back and pointed straight at his forehead. "I was supposed to kill you. Did you know that? I wasn't supposed to tell you that you had the power of God in your hands. I was supposed to put a bullet in you." Hands shaking, he let up the pressure on Scrapper, lowered the gun and sat down. Rough voice cracking he said, "It's my fault. My fault. I let you live, so now it's my fault."

Scrapper edged toward the door speaking calmly. "General, I think you've made a mistake. I think you might want to let me go. You need help. I don't have the kind of control you're talking about. No one does." He was reaching for the door handle when Abignail exploded out of the chair and grabbed him by the throat.

"No. Let's go watch the sunset, Mr. Scrapper. Then you tell me how much control you have."

Abignail's gun nestled near his kidneys, Scrapper was herded down the corridor the bank of elevators. In a low, controlled voice the general said, "We'll go look at the sun going down. The boys in the think-tank told me that the changes you're causing having been coming faster and lasting longer. With the numbers you're pulling now, any changes should be visible by tonight. And permanent."

The pair entered the elevator and rode it down in silence. Abignail checked his watch as they moved out towards the parking lot. Forcing a smile for the security guards, Scrapper signed out and left the building. Once out, they walked to the western side of the building to watch the sky.

Minutes ticked by as the sun continued to sink along the horizon. Scrapper turned to face the general with a quip on his tongue when the light went out. It didn't fade, there was no twilight. It was simply...gone.

Eyes blazing with rage, Abignail raised the gun. Scrapper held up both hands and shouted, "Please, don't. I didn't believe you, I'm sorry." Speaking more rapidly he said, "The sun will come back up tomorrow. It's just different. It'll still shine."

Rage was replaced by puzzlement on the man's face. When the realization came, his face broke into a queer smile. As he lowered the gun, he began to laugh. "You stupid man. You don't even know what you've done." His body quivered in a paroxysm, part laughter, part sobbing. In response to Scrapper's confused look he pointed to the sky. "You said it was a flashlight, you stupid son of a bitch. What do flashlights run on?"

Comprehension dawned, "Batteries," he said.

"Yes, batteries. You laid it all out for them to imagine. The sun's batteries running down, the world going dark, air falling like snow." The strange smile deepened as he holstered his gun. "I'm not gonna kill you. I want you to freeze to death with the rest of us." Without another word, he was gone.

Over the next few days, the news was filled with reports of the sun's strange activity. One new account in particular caught Scrapper's attention. CNN was interviewing Dr. Michael Greever about a global drop in temperature. Rock star hair swept back in a pony tail, Greever looked at the camera as he explained that the sun had been showing a constant drop in temperature gradient over the past days. With a grim look, Greever said, "At the present rate of decay, the earth will stop getting heat from the sun within three weeks."

Astronomers, astrophysicists and other scientists spent a week trying to explain the bizarre phenomenon, but came up with nothing. At the end of that week, the news crews had something else to report on as well. The strange disappearance of hugely popular TV host Walter Scrapper.

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White light flashed in Scrapper's eyes, accompanied by a wave of indescribable pain. Weak as a kitten, he tried unsuccessfully to push the light away. Mushy sounds resolved themselves into voices as he returned to consciousness.

"General, I think he's coming out of it. Both pupils are equal and reactive. I don't see any signs of concussion."

A familiar voice answered, "Thank god for small favors. Tell those two gung-ho assholes who did this to report to the stockade. If we survive the next few weeks, they're going to be really sorry."

As his eyes came back into focus, Walter Scrapper saw the last person on earth he wanted to see. Bolts of pain throbbled through his head as he struggled into a sitting position. "Thought you were going to let me freeze general."

Abignail, dressed in a parka and cold weather gear, shook his hooded head. "Nope," he said, "got a better idea. You're going to fix what you broke."

Days later, Scrapper was back in his dressing room, getting ready for the most important show of his life. Instead of his pretty blonde makeup artist, a dour faced army sergeant was ineffectually patting base onto his face. Between his healing bruises and the soldier's ineptness, Scrapper looked ghastly. Instead of his normal bronze hue, his skin looked like a cross between leprosy and gangrene. Irritated, he snatched the sponge from the man and tried to even out the coloring.

Sitting on a divan in his suite, Abignail seemed unaware of the half dozen armed men surrounding the TV star. The general still wore his parka inside the building. Even with the furnaces running full time, the building hovered around 50 degrees. A television monitor had been set up in the impromptu command post. It showed a perpetual twilight outside under a sky the color of urine.

Pointing the screen Abignail said, "We're just about out of time, Mr. Scrapper. You're our last hope. The governments of nearly every country in the world have stopped broadcasting to start holding power in reserve. But they've all agreed to carry your show. In some of them, including the good old U S of A, anyone not watching your little program today will be shot."

The weeks had not been kind to Abignail. His eyes were raw from lack of sleep and shadowed by the horror he saw approaching for the people of earth. He stood, stretched broad shoulders, then strode to the makeup table. "Look here. This is how it's going to work. You're only going to say what's on the cards in front of you. You introduce the "expert" who's going to explain how

the sun doesn't really need batteries, you're going to tell the kids that this is how it is, then you're going to say good bye and never go in front of a camera again."

Abignail's intensity was more disquieting than his earlier rage. Mouth dry, Scrapper said, "Who's this expert? Dr. Greever?"

The military man snorted, "It doesn't matter who the fucking expert is. You want to introduce him as Dr. Farvehgnugn you go right ahead, but you don't contradict him or you are a dead man. Do you read me?"

Nodding, Scrapper went back to finishing his makeup. Glancing in the mirror at the still hovering general he asked, "What happens if it doesn't work?"

Unblinking eyes stared into his own. "Then we're all dead. About eight minutes after the sun goes out, the light goes out here for the last time. Vegetation dies within a few weeks, animal life not long after. There are places where geothermal venting might make for a habitable temperature, but you saw to that too. You told them that the atmosphere would freeze and fall like snow. Millions will die in the first few months, then it will taper off." He leaned in, so that his mouth was next to Scrapper's ear. "It'll taper off, but it won't quit. It's only a matter of time, and we'll all be dead."

His voice dropped to less than a whisper, "Bottom line is, if it don't work, you'll be the first to go."

Abignail stood silently and strode to the open door. As he stepped through and pulled it closed behind him he stopped and called. "Gee, almost forgot. Break a leg Mr. Scrapper."

A short time later, accompanied by an armed honor guard, Walter Scrapper returned to the scene of his greatest triumph. A smile flickered across his face at the cheers and applause from the audience. Despite the thick coats they wore and the strained aspect of their smiles, it restored some sense of normalcy.

His smile faded as he saw Abignail holding an assault rifle and standing next to the monitor showing the sun's progress.

As the show's theme music began to play, Scrapper realized that there was a flaw in the plan. He looked over to signal Abignail but could barely see his ice blue eyes behind the gunsight aimed at his head. The muzzle barely moved as the general motioned towards the cue cards. The music faded and the steady red light of the camera came up. Scrapper stood mute for only a second, before a fainter version of his trademark grin snapped into place.

"Hey, kids, it's me Unca Walter and it's time to..."

Despite the cold and their fear of the armed men in the studio, the children responded in almost pavlovian fashion. "Say it ain't so" they cried.

Beaming at the audience, Scrapper began, "Well kids, its kinda scary outside right now with the sun acting all funny and everything. But we've got someone here who's going to help make it all right. My guest tonight is going to explain to you why the sun's batteries aren't running out and how tomorrow the sun's gonna come on up and keep on beaming. Won't you all say hello to Dr. Paul Marshall."

Marshall, dressed in a white lab coat and wire rim glasses crossed to join Scrapper at center stage. "Wow, thanks Unca Walt. What a great greeting. Ok, kids are you ready to hear about what's going to happen to the sun next?"

Amid the cheers, Scrapper faded to the back of the stage. He had recognized "Dr. Marshall" from Abignail's staff. Rather than try to rebut the "flashlight theory" that had started the mess, they had decided to try to explain that the batteries they were talking about were nuclear in nature, not like a couple of everready's and that they wouldn't go out for millions of years.

Marshall elaborated, with pictures and graphs of what giant nuclear batteries would look like. The children seemed interested, but many kept shooting looks to where Scrapper hovered in the background. Finally Marshall wound down and the spotlight found Scrapper again.

He smiled at the audience, gauging their reaction. Clearing his throat he spoke, "Wasn't that great, kids? Thanks Dr. Marshall. Sure is good to know all that cold weather is going to go away."

Blank stares and mutters caused Scrapper's words to falter. Expectant eyes shined on him, hanging on his words, waiting for him to say it. In desperation he cried, "Boys and girls, this is the truth. This time, it is so. You've got to believe me."

Silence reigned in the auditorium. Scrapper stared out at the audience, straining to reach them. "*Please,*" he prayed, "*please believe this.*"

The moment stretched to what seemed an eternity, then with an almost audible pop it broke. A child in the middle rows began to giggle. Others soon joined in until the entire room was awash in the laughter of children. Then, as one, their deafening roar reached to the rafters and carried out across the world.

"SAY IT AIN'T SO," they cried.

Scrapper's heart was faint in his chest as he felt that rallying cry echo from room to room, home to home across the planet. The death knell of an entire world spelled out in four simple words. Slowly, he shifted his gaze to the monitor where the last feeble rays of the sun were just now beginning to enter earth's atmosphere. Next to the screen stood Abignail, rifle at the ready.

The last thing Walter Scrapper saw was an ice blue eye pronouncing his sentence.

The laughter and shouting of the children in the audience turned to screams of terror as the shooting began.

