

The Hidden Citizen

“Oyez! Oyez! The court will come to order. On this 5th day of November, 2033, the The fifth district court of the state of New Mexico in Chavez county is now in session, the right honorable Judge Joseph J Johnson presiding. All rise!”

The bailiff ceded the center of the room as the judge entered and took his seat.

“Please be seated.” Judge Johnson said, and the seven people in the court audience eased back onto their benches.

Oh God, thought the judge as he read his schedule, not another one of these. Sometimes I hate being in Roswell.

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Better get it over with.

“Ok,” he announced out loud, “First case, the people of Chavez county vs Jack A. Alien in the matter of the abandonment of the property located at —“

“What is this, Nelson?” the judge leaned over and asked his bailiff for assistance with an illegible item on his schedule. After a brief conference he continued.

“—Abandonment of the property located at 2111-111011 Caraboy Road, which shall during this hearing be identified as the Jepson Creek property. Who here represents the people?”

A graying, distinguished but somewhat bleary eyed fifty something gent stood. His dark blue suit was well cared for but not new. His haircut, just a week or two late.

“Good morning, Raymond, take your place and identify yourself to the court,” the judge said.

Attorney Raymond Norster did as directed.

The judge went on, “Is there anyone here representing Mr. —
“

“Raymond, where the heck did you come up with this name?” he interrupted himself to ask the people's lawyer.

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Attorney Norster shrugged. “It's on the county records that way, your honor. We tried to subpoena the defendant but the subpoena couldn't be delivered.”

The judge eyeballed Norster skeptically, then continued. “Is anyone here representing Jack A. Alien in this case?”

Judge Johnson's head was down and his pen ready to write “unopposed”, when a rich baritone voice came from the benches.

“I'm Jack Alien, your honor. Is it permissible to represent myself?”

The judge looked up in surprise. Attorney Norster wrenched around in his seat to look.

A portly middle aged man stood in the benches. Red-brown hair surrounded a bald pate but he had a cheery chipmunkish face. He wore charcoal slacks and a long-sleeve dress shirt with a checkered vest over it, no tie. He looked the part of a stereotypical Irish bartender.

The judge indicated the table opposite Attorney Norster, “Please take your place at the bench on my left and present your identification to the court, Mr... ..Alien.” Judge Johnson rubbed his face into his own palm momentarily at having to say that name.

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“I am Jack A. Alien, I own and reside at 2111-111011 Caraboy Road, in Chaves County.”

“Do you have some form of identification Mr. Alien?” The judge asked.

“Yes, your honor, will my driver's license do?”

“Yes, Mr. Alien, that will suffice.”

Jack brought out a wallet like anyone else's, packed with papers and cards and extracted a current drivers license, handing it to the Baliff who took it to the clerk. The clerk recorded the license number, address and name and handed it on to the judge, who turned it over thoughtfully and handed it back to the bailiff, who started to bring it back to Jack.

Attorney Norster wasn't about to be had by an imposter. “May I see that please?” he asked the bailiff.

The bailiff looked at the judge, who nodded, then handed it to Attorney Norster. With a couple seconds examination Norster spotted a fly in the ointment.

“Aha!” he exclaimed with a triumphant look, “You were born in 1947, Mr Alien. That would make you 86 years old would it not? You hardly look over fifty, sir.”

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“Excuse me, your honor,” said Jack, “Is this an appropriate challenge? And if it is may I also ask to see Attorney Norster's bona fides?”

“Gentlemen,” Judge Johnson intoned firmly, “If there is a pissin' contest in this court I will be the winner and you will both lose. Mr Alien, attorney Norster raises a point the court apparently overlooked. You certainly don't look 85 years old.”

“Your honor, my thumbprint is on my license and on the end of my thumb,” he held up his right thumb, “ I can provide more documents if you'd like, but you did say earlier that my driver's license would be sufficient.”

“That I did, Mr. Alien. Jenny, have you checked his license on the system?”

The clerk responded, “Yes sir, it appears to be current and valid to me.”

“Then let it be recorded that Mr Alien's bona fides have been tentatively accepted by the court. Let's get on with it.” the judge said, “Plaintiff, bring your case.”

Attorney Norster stood and cast a jaundiced eye toward Jack, who sat with his fingers interlaced across his slightly rotund belly.

“Your honor, it is plain that the... ..Jepson Creek property

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has been abandoned for some time. There is a derelict structure nearest the eastern property line which is a danger to people and animals. The county requests the court find the property has been abandoned and that it be relenquished to the county.”

“That's an interesting statement, Raymond. Exactly what you filed here. Do you have any evidence of this abandonment?” the judge asked.

“Yes, your honor,” Attorney Norster pulled an enlarged photograph from his briefcase. “This is the subject barn. It is falling down and is obviously derelict. It represents a danger to society and shows a lack of involvement with the property on the part of Mr. Alien for at least the last five years.”

The judge flipped through the pages of the complaint. “Raymond, you said this barn was on the eastern edge of the property. Just how large is this property you want relinquished to the county?”

“Um, property records show it is currently 20,000 acres, your honor,” Attorney Norster said quietly.

“Twenty thou—, Holy cr—,” the judge massaged his temples between his forefinger and thumb.

“That's a big chunk to ask someone to relinquish, Raymond.”

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“Your honor, this person claims to reside on the property, but there is not in fact any residence on the property at all. There's no evidence that anyone has set foot on this property in the last forty years!”

“Mr. uh... ...Alien,” The judge said, “your statement on this matter, please.”

“Yes, your honor,” Jack said, “May I see the photograph for a moment?”

“Bailiff.” The judge said, and the bailiff delivered Attorney Norster's photograph, which Jack inspected for a second, turned over, then handed back to the bailiff.

“Your honor, the barn in the photograph is not a derelict structure, it's a work of art. That is amply evident in that Attorney Norster's photograph is a copy made from a set of photographs that appeared in the August, 2028 edition of “Farm and Barn Art”, an issue commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I'm afraid I don't have that issue on my person, but it's available for online viewing if the court wishes to investigate. The picture this is cropped from is on page 48.”

“Your honor, “ Attorney Norster interjected, “whether a derelict is depicted artistically or not is a question that can be

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argued in other places. That the barn pictured here is a derelict is beyond dispute.”

“Excuse me, your honor,” Jack added, “the structure in that picture is not derelict in any way. It is neither old, nor rickety; it is neither falling over, nor decaying. It is in fact a work of art that I personally erected for the purpose of creating an attractive esthetic for my own viewing.”

“Your honor—“ Attorney Norster began, but the judge overrode him.

“Gentlemen,” Judge Johnson announced with a rap of his gavel, “I will have decorum in this court. It would appear that we have a case of one man's trash is another man's treasure. Let us put that discussion aside momentarily.

“Attorney Norster, what is the current tax status on this property?” asked the judge.

“Its taxes are up to date, your honor,” the reluctant attorney mumbled.

“And have those taxes ever been in arrears?” the judge asked.

“According to the records, they have not,” The attorney admitted.

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“And how many derelict barns are there in Chaves county, Mr. Norster?”

“I don't know, your honor.”

“Your honor?” Jack raised a hand and Judge Johnson acknowledged him.

“Forty-seven decrepit and unused barns are visible from paved roads, your honor.” Jack answered, “Ninety-two total within the county borders, and eight that are closer to Roswell than my property. But I do not include my work of art.”

“Thank you, Mr. Alien. Unless Attorney Norster objects, we'll accept that number without further question. It seems reasonable in my experience.”

“Attorney Norster, what prompts the county to try and acquire Mr. Alien's property by default, in view of all the other patently derelict buildings in the county?”

“I just try the cases assigned me, your honor,” Norster responded.

Jack raised his hand again.

“Mr. Alien,” The judge recognized him.

“Your honor, my property, along with an adjoining 100,000

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acres in Chaves county and more in Lincoln county reside atop a relatively shallow aquifer which remains untapped to date. In addition to the water, aerial surveys by the firm of Brown and Degroot suggest that there are probably rare earth materials of significant value underlying these same acreages.

“Those aerial surveys were commissioned by Simpson DOWNDRAFT Construction, a subdivision of General Metals. Greenbelt homes, a subordinate company also within the General Metals portfolio, has proposed to the city of Roswell a development of 1000 homes atop its played out mines to the east, in exchange for a like amount of acreage in my area.”

Attorney Norster sat in stunned silence, mouth agape. A fly buzzed off in the benches and someone swatted at it.

Judge Johnson had a feeling he was hearing a rare truth and it had a significant effect on him.

“Your honor?” Jack requested acknowledgement.

“Yes, Mr Alien?”

“Why don't you come take a look at the barn before you make a decision?”

Judge Johnson smiled on the inside. At least then he couldn't be accused of making a political decision. As much as he liked to

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side with the little people, sometimes you just had to consider where the next rung on your career ladder lay, and the Mayor of Roswell was up for re-election next year.

“An excellent suggestion Mr. Alien. The court will take you up on it. How far are you from town?”

“It's a twenty minute drive, your honor. And about a ten minute walk,” Jack said.

“Great!” The judge said, “We'll convene at your place at 12:30 P.M. today, Mr. Alien.

Mr. Norster, can you arrange your schedule to accommodate that?”

“Um. Yes, sir.”

“Court's recessed until 12:30 P.M. today when we'll reconvene at Mr Alien's Jepson creek property.” The gavel hammered down.

About fifteen minutes of their ride was on well paved numbered highways, then a less well paved Caraboy road angled away to the west. Scrub grass and burnt rock characterized the road on either side. About the time they saw distant peaks begin to rise above the horizon they spotted Jack waiting for them at a

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steel gate in the wire fence. He signaled them to park in the wide graveled spot beside the dirt path the gate guarded.

Sagging rafter beams of the barn in question stood stark above the horizon just a hundred yards beyond the fence. What was left of the sidewalls leaned in eager anticipation of their final rest. The judge thought it fortunate that his decision would be easy. The structure was obviously on the cusp of collapse.

Jack swung wide the steel gate, opening to a generous graveled path. The four of them... ..Judge Johnson; Jenny, his clerk; the bailiff, Nelson and Roswell City Attorney Norster... ..well, five including Jack.

In summer they might have choked on hot dust, but fall rains had turned the dust into drying mud cakes, and the temperatures in November were tolerable.

The barn was farther than it looked. The path swung west and as their perspective changed the judge got an uneasy feeling that it resembled something like an antenna from this angle. Parallel spikes struck upward to the sky at technical angles.

Probably just a trick of perspective, the judge thought. This may not have been a good idea, but it was too late to go back now. The trail turned back east and when the apparently derelict

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barn returned to the right perspective his unease evaporated.

And then they were there.

It still looked slanted, collapsing overall, but something wasn't right. Something was... ...different, odd.

The structure was quite tall. Taller than a barn ought to be, thought Attorney Norster. He kept a nervous eye on what looked like a rickety beam as they passed beneath it. But when he followed its connection to the ground, he saw the upright it sprang from was set in solid concrete. All the others he could see in the shadows were also solidly based. The scent wasn't right either. You could usually smell rotting wood from the abundance of insects inhabiting it, but this smelled like... ...blooming Jasmine. In November? In the desert?

The judge reached out and touched cold metal where he expected to feel splintering rotted wood.

“Aluminum,” Jack said, “Lightly acid etched to resemble ancient barn-wood. Go ahead, give it a shake.”

Tentatively at first, then with increasing vigor, the judge heaved against the beam, first one way then the other, but nothing moved. Bailiff Nelson, six feet four and 250 pounds of ex-Aztec linebacker tried shaking a different upright with the same lack of

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effect.

“My God!” Attorney Norster said, “this is incredible!”

Awe overtook them as they followed Jack into the structure. As their eyes adjusted the dimness faded. Smooth cobbles underfoot revealed a welcoming patio with flowers abounding in stacked stone planters, a water feature bubbling atop a sidewall and flowing creek-like down along the wall beneath a spreading Jasmine bush in bloom. It was very comfortably warm inside, with no breeze despite the apparent openness to the sky. Bees attended the flowers as though it was spring.

Two pitchers of iced tea awaited them atop a patio table with comfortable arm chairs around it. A covered silver serving tray contained a variety of freshly made sandwiches.

“I thought you'd like a bite of lunch while you're here,” Jack said, “Please help yourself.”

The group sat as invited..

“This is fantastic, man!” the judge exclaimed. “This is a masterpiece! Is it your home?”

“Yes.” Jack said.

“Why didn't we know about this?” Attorney Norster asked,

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“It deserves to be in any of a dozen architectural magazines! It's incredible! Where is your house?”

“It's largely underground,” Jack said, “Try the cucumber/tomato sandwiches. I grew them myself.”

“I don't understand,” said the judge, “Why did this have to come to a court issue before we could see this marvelous place?”

“Then you agree with me that it is not a derelict?” Jack asked.

“Are you kidding?” Attorney Norster said, “Forget this, I have no case here, I'm dropping the issue. The city's going to have to work on a different property. This is an absolute treasure.”

“So noted, Raymond,” the judge said, “Jenny, make a note, the people withdraw their charge.”

“Yes sir.”

“Why are you sitting out here all alone in this wonderful garden?” Judge Johnson asked.

“Because I'm an alien.” Jack said.

Laughter pealed from his visitors, “Of course you are,” Attorney Norster guffawed, “Born in 1947... Haw, haw, ha.”

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“Yeah, that's a little misleading, but it really was my first day on earth,” Jack said.

“Oh, yeah,” snorted the bailiff, Nelson. “You and Mack Brazel.”

“Yup.” Jack nodded, “one and the same.”

“Sure. How could you sit right here under everyone's noses all this time with all the security forces in the country looking for aliens after 9-11?” The bailiff asked.

“Well, I did make myself scarce for a time, but I started aggregating this property back in the fifties. It took some time to get the package together and of course, I'm still interested in expanding.”

“I've heard of you,” Jenny, the clerk said with a tinkling laugh. “I've heard stories of people who met you on some country road when they got a flat or something.”

“Yep. I still do that from time to time.”

“So how were you able to acquire all this property, Mr. Alien?” the judge asked. He was feeling a pretty good, like after he'd had a glass or two of wine in the evenings.

“I established an identity after I got a feel for your culture.

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Just applied for a social security card, and they sent it. Filed a gold claim on a piece of land out there—,” Jack swung his arm vaguely west, “—added a piece of homestead property to it, back when it was available. Bought out a neighbor or two when they felt like moving. Always legal.”

Jack went on, “I got a driver's license in the seventies. Registered as an alien during the first amnesty program in 1986 and applied for citizenship in the nineties. I was naturalized in 1992.”

“What'd you use for money?” Attorney Norster asked.

“Traded gold for it.” Jack responded. “Not that my claim ever produced anything, but it's pretty available offshore if you apply my technology to dredging it out of the river silts.”

“So you've got a spaceship or flying saucer or something hidden away out here?” the judge asked, almost unable to keep from spasming with laughter.

“Yep. That beam over there—,” Jack pointed at a long slanting stab at the sky, “—is actually a guide for an Eastern orbit launch.”

“You're not going to let us go are you?” Jenny, the clerk asked, chuckling at the thought.

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“Yes, I am. But you won't remember any of this until just before you die. It's really the only way I can be fair to all of us. I have to keep my privacy and you get to go out knowing the truth. Does that seem harsh of me?”

“And how are you going to steal our memories?” Judge Johnson asked, almost bursting with laughter.

“It's painless, an ingredient in the food and drink—,” Jack said, “—and it ought to be activating right about now.”

They lost contact with reality almost at the same time. Nelson, the bailiff first, and the court clerk, Jenny last. She gave him a long searching look before the understanding in her eyes faded.

Jack walked them back along the path to their cars. Along the way he thanked them for coming to see his artwork and for deciding to drop the case. He even shook Attorney Norster's hand.

A quick check of his suit's sensors showed just what he wanted to see in the official record, then he ushered them into their cars. He went back through the gate, closed it and walked behind a burnt piece of scrub brush where he waited a few more minutes, tuning his space suit exterior from Irish Bartender to

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very low visibility pass-through, until both cars started and turned back onto the road toward Roswell. Then he walked slowly back to his ship.