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## The Legend of Plutonia Young

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## THE LEGEND OF PLUTONIA YOUNG

BY THE TIME SHE REACHED HER SENIOR year in high school, most folks around here had Plutonia figured for the type to suffer an early marriage, a violent divorce, and a hard life of single motherhood in an aluminum trailer on the edge of town.

In other words, a typical local girl, with a bit of a wild streak. There was some justification for these low predictions of Plutonia's prospects, among which was her dalliance with the Vice Principal. It was a sordid business, but maybe not all bad—in some odd sense, it started the chain reaction that split her future wide open.

The first rift appeared under the bleachers during baseball practice one early spring day. Plutonia wasn't sure if the sharp crack she heard at the crucial moment came from bat hitting ball or from her shoulder, the arm attached to which lay twisted uncomfortably behind her back while her partner grunted and farted and ultimately spilled several years worth of pent-up libidinal secretions into her indifferent insides.

When the balding administrator rolled belly-up like a fish played to exhaustion, Plutonia was struck by a stunning wave of revulsion, and realized it was imperative that she graduate and gather enough scratch to get the hell out of Spring Rocks, if not clear out of Wyoming.

Due to the extenuating circumstances, Plutonia's D- average and 25% absentee rate were tactfully overlooked. So she made it to graduation night—a rite of passage sadly cut short by the consumption of a quart of gin on top of two Circle-K microwave burritos.

That was the beginning of one ass-kicking summer, which featured Plutonia shredding the hearts of two Baptist deacons, breaking the jaw of a roughneck who had the bad judgment to try hustling her at pool, and getting tangled up with some thieving cowboys.

The rustling thing was what cost her. The whole deal was ill-conceived and poorly executed. It ended with Plutonia accidentally riding up on a ranch house while making her getaway. She

stirred up the dogs, and got thrown from her horse, and in the course of either trying to catch her mount or beat it to death, she inadvertently whacked a Blue Healer pup along side the head with a stick. She heard just one quick yelp before the rancher froze her in the deer poacher's lights mounted on his pickup. Plutonia was promptly tried, convicted, and sentenced to three years for grand theft bovine, and the murder of a pup many had expected to mature into one of the finest damn cattle dogs in the county.

When the Judge sprung her on bail pending appeal, Plutonia figured the time was past ripe to show her departing ass to that stinking town, broke or not. She boarded a westbound bus on Labor Day, and mooned the crowd waiting for the big parade along the entire four-block length of James Watt Boulevard on her way out. Folks really thought it was a damn shame about the dog.

Plutonia's Grandfather had raised her. She was his life. Her going away like that pretty near killed him. A week or so after her unforgettable exit, he stumbled out of the Colt .44 Lounge around 1 a.m., not having drawn a sober breath since he read her goodbye note. His howls shattered the yellow plastic circle flashing in the spotlight over the intersection of Watt and Wayne, where he lay in the middle of the road screaming, "Por favor, somebody, run across me."

His name was Rojo Amenaza, and most folks counted him one sandwich short of a picnic. He ran the local Port-a-John business that supplied bright blue plastic shitters to drill rigs and construction sites. He had gotten his start in New Mexico back in the 40's, trucking outhouses nailed together from old shipping pallets up onto the Jornada del Muerto during the war, when all those German and Russian physicists were out there working on that secret project.

Rojo always hated that place. The name (Day's Journey of the Dead Man) gave him the creeps, and the way the pale yellow light of dawn out there flowed like water across the bleached sand—well, it made him feel like he had stepped off the edge of the world and into his mother's dark house. He would get to the top of the hill, bless himself, then chug his old truck down the

ruted dirt road to the metal huts where the men worked. He tried to go when no one was around. He would drag the sawed-off barrels of shit out from under the outhouses, pour in a gallon of gas and one of diesel fuel, light it, and watch it burn; watch the black, greasy smoke rise up into the gleaming sky. The men with the uniforms made him do it that way. They didn't bury their shit like other men.

One morning he came over the ridge and a blinding flash of light stopped him. Then an incredible roar and a fierce blast of scorching wind filled the truck. Rojo threw himself to the floor, and prayed to the virgin to deliver him from the devil. The MPs discovered him a short time later, kneeling beside his truck, gibbering about the giant mushroom-shaped cloud he had seen when he finally raised his head, how it drifted up from hell. The MPs hauled him up by his shirt and slapped the cuffs on him.

"Senores, I see the nube Diablo go on the sky!" Rojo sputtered.

"Sure, Buddy. Anything you say. Just get in the car."

Poor Rojo was taken for a clever spy, one who had found a brilliant way to witness the detonation of the first atomic bomb. He was actually a deeply religious and profoundly profane young man whose greatest misery in life was that a bruja had cursed him for stealing a chicken at the age of 14, punishing him by taking his fertility.

Two months after Rojo's release from the stockade, the village girl who had taken to bringing his dinner (and her favors) to the abandoned hay loft where he slept, turned up pregnant. Rojo concluded that the magic cloud that climbed to heaven had lifted the bruja's curse.

"Dios Mio," he said to the girl's shining brown eyes. "Hay un milagro, Mija."

Twenty years later, Rojo's son had a daughter. Rojo was honored by being allowed to choose her name, and he named her after the magic metal men said made the bomb that made the cloud of the devil that had rejuvenated his withered seed.

When a stray lightning bolt orphaned the infant girl, Rojo took her in, saddened that she would never have a brother, that

the tree of his family would grow no taller, but charmed beyond wonder by her mischievous smile.

Rojo most likely didn't know that the magic metal was named after the coldest and most remote planet in the solar system, which was named after the Roman God of the Dead and ruler of the underworld.

Plutonia learned that early on, and took a certain pride in it.

JUST BEFORE THANKSGIVING, AFTER three months on the lam, Rojo's granddaughter turned up working in the Light of Hope Bookstore on Tabernacle Avenue in Lake Salts, Utah. By then, she had started using the name Plutonia Young, thinking that the implied family association with the founding father of what she called the Church of the Own-Everything Saints, couldn't hurt.

Her keen sense of her own best interests served Plutonia well in her first days in Lake Salts, and took a rather dramatic change of direction. Back in Spring Rocks, after draining five or six Buds, she had been known to say, "The only thing I really want out of life is a man with a dick as big around as a beer can, who cooks good Mexican food. The rest is bullshit."

But her brush with the law—and perhaps the batting practice with the Vice-Principal—had convinced Plutonia that all of her previous statements and most of her previous life had been leading her down the wrong road. The prospect of incarceration was so horrible, it cast a totally new light on things. In it, Plutonia saw that what she really wanted was a baby that would nurse without biting and draw good pictures she could stick to the refrigerator with the little magnets her husband would bring home from the office.

And she felt pretty damn sure Lake Salts was the right place to find them.

As for Plutonia's legal problems, well, the bus ride to avoid prosecution didn't help matters any. But even though word of her whereabouts filtered back to his office before too long, the County Attorney had neither the heart nor the energy to chase her down and drag her home. Truth was, he kind of admired her spirit.

So she was on her own. Until, on the very last day of 1984, Harvey Dingman shuffled into the Light of Hope Bookstore in

a shabby trench coat and a Clark Kent-style hat that made him look like a comic book exhibitionist. Without exposing either his naughty bits or his eyes, he asked Plutonia Young for a copy of "Your Daily Bread," a popular devotional guide offering a daily bible reading interspersed with bits of wit and wisdom from Big Daddy Brigham on items like the proper roles of Man and Wife in the households of the Lord.

"They're just over here," Plutonia said, steering Harvey's lumpy grey form down the aisle with a gentle touch on the back of his arm.

Harvey had never been so touched by a woman. Not on his arm, not in his heart, and not, well, there. He had in fact never met a woman who directed her bright green eyes right at him, and when his dull brown peepers accidentally wandered into the line of fire, an electric current ran right down his spine, split in half at ground zero, shot down his legs, and welded his scuffed-up size 12 wingers right to that sanctified floor.

Ol' Harv was a poached cottontail, then and there.

Plutonia took stock of his stuttering, shuddering, immobile carcass, and knew as certain as the Wyoming wind that she'd stumbled smack onto the best refrigerator magnet-provider west of the Wasatch Front.

She put the little book into his hand, and slid hers up his arm and across the back of his stooped shoulders. "Is this what you're looking for?" she murmured.

"I, I, I, believe so," Harvey managed to croak.

Plutonia had her doubts about whether Harvey had sufficient juice to reproduce, but she figured she'd make up in readiness whatever he lacked in amps.

News of Plutonia's wedding reached Spring Rocks right about the time the ice on the river started to break up. The word took a while to filter down to the murky depths where Rojo was still bottom-feeding on bitterness, regret, and whiskey. At least once every day he read Plutonia's faded and greasy goodbye note. "Mi Abuelo," it said. "Sorry, but I've got to go. Jail and me would never mix. Don't be sad. I'll let you know when I get squared away." She had signed it, "Love, P."

Rojo had been wondering about the meaning of the phrase, "squared away." Nearly all the English he knew he had learned

from his granddaughter. He could not bring himself to ask anyone else, as he would of her, "What means it to say this, 'squared away'?"

But he thought surely her getting married would bring word from his little girl. So he checked his mail often and waited anxiously, but no word came. He heard people say she was in Lake Salts, but it was a big place, they said, with lots of people, and they laughed when he asked if he couldn't just go there and wait at the lavanderia until she came to wash her clothes. That had seemed like a good idea, but they told him to forget that girl and the trouble she made.

It was not the trouble he remembered. It was the way the air around her always smelled like trees in the springtime, and the glittering stars that swam in her eyes.

Within a year, Plutonia had a son. Harvey named him Joseph, but when she was alone with her baby, Plutonia called the chubby little bugger Jake. He nursed like a calf, didn't bite, but would latch on and refuse to let go. She suffered a few painful nipple hickeys until she learned to break the suction by slipping her finger into the corner of his mouth. But she didn't mind.

What bothered Plutonia in those days was that Harvey took to calling her Toni. So on those rare occasions when Harvey took her to dinner with his business friends, she wore the clothes he laid out on the bed for her, and she didn't drink or swear, but she did make a special point of stepping in quickly, before he had a chance, and introducing herself.

"What an odd name," the other Wife would say.

"My grandfather named me," Plutonia would explain. "After a bomb that made him potent." They never pointed the middle of their eyes at her after that, but she didn't really care. She enjoyed standing in their big, clean kitchens full of white plastic appliances and dried flower arrangements, chatting about children and how to get gravy stains out of a table cloth.

The Wives were always nice people. Dull as dirt, but nice.

And every now and then when Harvey was snoring through his nose and farting through his sacred skivvies, she longed for the feel of a cue stick, the sound of a jukebox, and the taste of a beer. But she always forgot about it when Jake woke up and clamped onto her nipple.

So she went for #2 while the getting was still reasonably good. This time it was a girl. Harvey named her Martha, after his mother, and Plutonia called her Mattie, after a famous proprietress of a house of ill-repute back in the territorial days in Spring Rocks. Little Mattie was a treasure, and it was her smile—captured in a snapshot on her first birthday—that finally prompted Plutonia to write her grandfather a letter.

She wrote it one morning between 2 and 4 a.m., while a snow-storm hurled itself against the walls of the house and Plutonia sat at the kitchen table trying to fight off a feeling that had started nagging at her lately: the feeling that this nuclear family thing just couldn't hold together, that the center of it was slowly going soft and squishy—not cute and warm and soft like the baby's cheeks—but sour and watery and squishy, like the inside of an overripe tomato.

“Mi querido Abuelo,” it began.

She told Rojo about her husband, about how he had become very involved in The Church because it was good for his insurance business and was doing very well, and how her children looked and talked and ate their strained apricots with their fingers, and about their new VCR, and the fear she felt. She told him how in her dreams the red-hot liquid middle of the earth oozed out, and the rivers all ran down inside the cracks and the land dried up and blew away.

Plutonia wasn't sure what any of this meant, but she thought her Abuelo might know, if anyone did. So she rented a P.O. box and used it for a return address because she couldn't face him after the way she left, but she wanted to find out why she felt so unsteady.

“Nieta, mi corazon,” Rojo wailed as he read her words through a stream of salty tears.

He knew. He had already dreamt that dream.

About that time, Harvey started bringing home all kinds of things: new furniture, expensive desserts with French names, lots of strange tools that he hung up on pegboards in the new garage. Plutonia felt like there had to be something fishy about whatever Harvey was up to. Experience had taught her that only dirty money came easy.

Plutonia told Harvey so one night.

"Honey," Harvey said. "You're being silly. I'm in on the ground floor of a computer distributorship that's going to be a gold mine. And when I get the permits I need in Toolee County, I'll be making \$300 a barrel for people to bury nuclear stuff out there. Toni, Honey, we can't lose."

"My name is Plutonia," she said. "And everybody loses sooner or later, except the government."

The worst of it was that under the influence of Harvey and their pampered playmates, her sweet little babies were threatening to grow into energy-sucking, television-addicted, toy-consuming demons from hell.

Then one day about noon Plutonia stopped at the Whataburger to grab up some flesh patties and a couple of shakes for the kids. She had just picked up a letter from Rojo and was hoping to read it while the kids slurped. But when she got to the drive-up, her electric window wouldn't go down. She pulled up and opened the door and tried to scream back at the squawk box, but all she could hear was raspy static. She was going to try and back out when a Mercedes sedan with a guy talking on the telephone in it pulled in behind her. The handle of her purse snagged on the truck door and she spilled the entire contents into the slimy gutter, including the letter. Then the new Suburban died.

At that point, the Mercedes' horn blew, and so did Plutonia. She lost it, went critical. Uncontrolled chain reaction. Meltdown. Kablooee.

Plutonia assaulted the Mercedes, then the driver, then his telephone. The phone got the worst of it. Plutonia crushed it into little plastic bits with the stout heel of the new red shoes Harvey had bought her to match the truck.

Her next impulse was to remove the shoe and go to work on the driver's head with it. If not for the courage of a fearless cowboy who grabbed her and pinned her elbows behind her back, things could have been much worse.

The cowboy had to drive her and the kids home while a tow-truck came to drag the Suburban out of the clogged Whataburger drive-up. The man on the phone decided not to press charges, but only because he recognized her name. He was Harvey's law-

yer. Plutonia didn't ask what Harvey needed with a lawyer who drove a Mercedes.

The just-in-the-nick-of-time cowboy turned out to be none other than Billy Greg Teller, former national junior all-around rodeo champion out of Hole Fire, Montana, who just happened to cook a bowl of red so powerful if you didn't damp it out with enough tortillas, it would squirm down out of your belly and yank the soles off your boots from the inside.

But what first attracted Plutonia to him was the strong yet gentle pressure he kept on her elbows while she decided not to murder that lawyer. The easy way he got Jake and Mattie giggling at his silly cow stories and biting their lips in concentration as they tried to tie something he called an atomic trigger-hitch into the cords of her teak mini-blinds only helped.

Plutonia stood in the kitchen doorway and watched, thinking that circumference didn't really matter much after all, but it was funny the way things came around.

And so it came to pass that there dwelt in the land of State Liquor stores and all-day church, a woman with two demonic offspring, a felony-suspect husband, and no car. What she did have was a tough call to make.

Rojo's letter, sticky and crumpled as it was, held the key to Plutonia's decision—that and the fact that she happened to know there was an alligator briefcase full of gold coins stashed under Jake's bed. She suspected Harvey was going to pass it to the right people to make sure he got those waste dump permits he was after. She had a few other ideas.

Rojo wanted her to come home. She was all for cutting her losses and getting out of town. But there was no going back to Spring Rocks. Then again, Wyoming was a big state, and one where a girl with a briefcase full of gold could always find herself a suitable situation.

Plutonia lugged the briefcase down to the kitchen, and said, "Billy Greg. I need to go to Wyoming. Tonight."

Billy Greg looked up from the toothpick corral he was building for Jake's plastic dinosaurs and said, "I'll have to stop for gas."

So they piled whatever they couldn't live without—stuffed animals, cowboy boots, Barbie dolls, a rocking chair, clean socks,

a couple of hair brushes, a saddle, a stack of comic books, a jar of peanut butter, a plastic bottle of chocolate syrup, two feather pillows, one antique quilt, and about a half a million dollars in gold—into Billy Greg's pickup and headed out.

Plutonia picked up a newspaper along the way, and buried deep in the classified section she found a little three-liner about a general store, restaurant, bar, dance hall, house, and eight cabins for sale in a place called Landing Woods up along the Larayou River. She unfolded the map, found a little flyspeck along that twisting blue line, and pointed to it.

"Go here," she told Billy Greg.

"What's there?"

"With luck, my new life.

"Anything you say, Little Lady. Landing Woods, next stop."

They pulled in around dawn. By noon, Plutonia was—for all practical purposes—the new owner of the town of Landing Woods. There wasn't a hell of a lot else there except the tight little cluster of weathered and neglected buildings she bought with her alligator briefcase.

After dinner one evening a few weeks later, Plutonia called one of Harvey's business partners. His wife answered, and was pleased to tell Plutonia that Harvey had skipped the country, and was believed to be running a German car dealership in Costa Rica. Plutonia hung up and called the Colt .44 Lounge back in Spring Rocks.

Rojo screamed, cried, threw himself to the floor, tore his shirt with joy at hearing his nieta's voice. Her invitation to come help put the dance hall and the cabins on a paying basis sent him soaring near ecstasy, or apoplexy—it was hard to tell by the way he clutched at his chest and moaned. What was clear was that he left a fresh whiskey and water sitting on the bar and raced home to load up a couple of his best shitters (you never know when you might need one) and to pack the figures of Christ and the Virgin he had carved as birth presents for his bisnietos. He bathed, shaved, dressed in his best clothes, and left at first light.

Once again, his timing was fortuitous, sort of. Around noon, Rojo pulled into Landing Woods and parked within spitting distance of a utility box where a workman was reconnecting the electricity for the dance hall. Rojo was too excited to notice. He

dusted off his boots and walked into the general store. The wind slammed the door behind him.

The startled workman looked up, and caught an eyeful of a city girl strolling past with an extra tight pair of those silky little shorts giving her a celestial wedgie. Her strut raised his Wyoming salute. Being shy by nature, he was understandably disconcerted by his erect condition. So it wasn't really his fault, but he hooked a 440 volt transformer into a 220 line, over juicing the whole local grid.

As the wiring started to sizzle, Plutonia stepped into Rojo's widespread arms. Jake—Plutonia's growing baby boy—peeked out from behind the fishing tackle rack, wondered who the old guy was, and tossed a frozen green chili burrito in the microwave. Mattie hit the high button and zapped a field of hyper-micro accelerated particle-waves into that unholy chemical conglomeration. That did it. A ball of blue-white light consumed the general store, touching off the propane, the gasoline, and certain little-known geologic micro-phenomena. One part of the world subducted the other. An undetermined amount of mass converted into energy. Atoms split, wandered, collided, and recombined.

Nobody could see for a good five minutes. When the spots faded, there was nothing but a shallow depression where the general store used to be. Beyond that, the river went under the highway bridge and never came out the other side. The water reappeared about a mile downstream.

Plutonia and Rojo never did reappear. Neither did Jake or Mattie.

Most folks think the river just found an old underground channel, reopened by the force of the explosion. Of course some insist alien abductors were involved. The cynics claim Plutonia staged the whole thing and her and Rojo are actually running a dive shop in Isla Mujeres. The night clerk at the Circle-K swears she saw them down there, yukking it up like Butch and Sundance—before the Federales wasted them.

Don't really matter much if they're hiding out up at Hole in the Wall or zipping around the universe on Miracle Whip waves. Plutonia took her clan and dropped through a crack in the earth, or went off to see the stars. Either way, what matters is that the

former Vice-Principal took over Rojo's Port-a-John business and expanded into garbage collection. There isn't much drilling or construction going on now, what with the price of oil in the toilet, so he mostly works the county fairs and rodeos and football games around here.

And it's a good thing too. After all, when the big game is over, *somebody* has to pick up the trash and burn the shit, even if there isn't any proper place to bury all the shattered atoms.

Smart money in Spring Rocks says Plutonia knew that all along.