

# EUGENE AND CASPER

*A very rough draft*

*by Ben Crowder*

## CHAPTER ONE

*A history of Victoria Place*

Many, many years ago, when royal elk and rabbits roamed the earth at leisure, when the British were colonizing the various and sundry parts of the world, a few years before a trio of aboriginal explorers landed on the moon in their homemade weather balloon, a little girl named Victoria sat in a tent, drawing pictures in the sand with her index fingers.

Her father was a colonel in the British army or navy or something—she could never keep them quite straight—and they were stationed in Mozambique. Hot, dry, sandy Mozambique. Sometimes the sand got in her eyes, and it stung. Sometimes it didn't, though, and those were the times when Victoria would go exploring, scouting out the territory among the rocks and dried up riverbeds. Victoria was a brave little girl.

She also has nothing to do with this story.

The person who *does* have something to do with this story lived on the other side of the world. When he had reached a ripe old age of eight years old, Eugene (as we'll call him, for that was his name) was sent to a boarding school on Piper Lane, which

eventually became 500 North as we now know it. The school was a maze inside, with rooms scattered here and there, left and right, even on the ceiling. There was only half a rhyme (the other half was lost in the laundry, the cleaning woman said) and no reason whatsoever to it all.

Sonny didn't care much for the schoolmasters, for they didn't care much for him. But he plodded along in his studies, scraping out sums with the chalk on his dusty slate, learning to spell words like "precipice." The part he actually enjoyed, though, was reading about people on the other side of the world—people like Marco Polo and Genghis Khan. He would often dream of exploring the world, driving a team of camels across the Sahara, or sailing a Spanish galleon into the heart of the Atlantic in search for lost treasure. But his dreams were only dreams.

It was a Friday afternoon, with only half an hour of class left. Eugene was staring out the window next to his desk when he spotted something different. There, behind the school, was a large mirror. It was so big that it cut across the entire block, stretching up as far as he could see. It hadn't been there before; nothing had been there but an old field, which the teachers would never let anyone play in.

And reflected in the mirror, in the second window on the third floor, was Eugene. He lifted his hand ever so slightly, so as not to catch the attention of the schoolmaster, and bent his fingers in a timid wave.

His reflection didn't wave back.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *A Window of Opportunity*

Eugene blinked. The boy in reflected in the mirror was looking around, seemingly searching for something. Then he caught sight of Eugene. From what Eugene could see, the boy grabbed a pencil and started scribbling something on a large piece of paper on his desk, looking over his shoulder every few seconds. Then he held up the piece of paper to the window. It was far away, but Eugene could still make out the large letters, written in his own handwriting: “Come down, quickly!”

He swallowed. Pacing back and forth in front of the blackboard, old Mr. Stonebridge was scattering chalkdust everywhere as he sketched out a series of sums for the students to do. In fact, his back was to the class; if Eugene hurried, he could slip out just in time. With a finger pressed to his lips as the other children stared at him with eyes wide open, he slid off his desk and tiptoed up his row and made his way to the door.

He was only a foot or two from escape when Mr. Stonebridge twirled around and pointed a sharp piece of chalk at him. “Just what do you think you’re doing, young man?”

“N...n...nothing, sir,” Eugene croaked. Then an idea came to him. “I mean, I feel sick. Please let me go!”

“Sick, eh? You don’t look it. But it wouldn’t do to have you make a mess of the schoolroom, now, would it. Be off with you, but hurry!” And he returned to his chalk tapestry.

Eugene dashed down the rickety stairs as fast as he could, even forgetting to leap over the creaky step, ran through the old kitchen which always smelled like barley and rotten cheese, slipped past the crumbling bricks at the side entrance, and practically stumbled down the stairs out into the courtyard.

His reflection wasn't there. The mirror still was, but the other boy was nowhere in sight. As Eugene walked closer to the mirror, some motion above him caught his eye, and he saw a window floating above him, up like a balloon. He looked closer and saw that it was actually flying, slowly beating its panes like wings. Up it went, higher and higher until Eugene couldn't see it anymore.

How odd, he thought. It had looked just like the window to his bedroom. But that was impossible.

In the middle of that thought, a shiny black raven flew down in front of him and landed on a crumpled ball of paper which he hadn't noticed until then. "No!" he shouted. "Go away!" He batted at the raven till it let go and took off, cawing at him in a nasty tone. It then flew round the corner of the school and disappeared.

He leaned over and picked up the paper, unfolding it as he stood up again. There were holes where the raven's talons had punctured the paper, with the words "Come down, quickly!" on one side. Eugene turned it over and read this message:

They're coming to kidnap me! I  
need you to rescue me—you're  
the only one! Come here tonight  
at midnight. There'll be an X  
on the ground. Knock on it three  
times and a door of opportunity  
will open in the mirror. Don't  
be late, or you won't get through!  
Thanks.

—Casper

There aren't many philosophical moments in the life of an eight-year-old, but this was one which Eugene remembered for the rest of his life. The logical absurdity of everything that was happening that day was at the forefront of his thoughts; clearly this was a delusion, an academically induced hallucination which would pass within the hour. The piece of paper he was holding was undoubtedly of his own creation, a fiction produced in reverie, concocted to engender an intoxicating confusion between reality and unreality. And yet there was Descartes—if "I think, therefore I am," then perhaps "I dream, therefore it is," was equally valid, and this creation of his sadly demented mind was in fact a reality itself, in its own individual sphere and obeying its own laws of nature. Perhaps, Eugene thought to himself, there is more to reality than meets the eye, or nose, or ears, or any of the other senses. *Creo ergo sunt*. "I believe, therefore they are"; they being a purposefully vague pronoun with which one could substitute whatever subcreation happened to fit the argument at the time.

The philosophical moment passed and Eugene was a normal eight-year-old again. This was a good thing, for at that precise moment he heard Mr. Stonebridge's gravelly voice hollering out the window, "Young man!", and it simply wouldn't have done if he had responded in Kierkegaard's or Sartre's words. Instead, a confused panic set into Eugene's little heart and he ran back up past the brick, through the kitchen, and up the stairs into the schoolroom.

"Sick, eh?" said a finger-wagging Mr. Stonebridge. "An interesting definition of sick you have there. To your seat!"

Eugene quickly returned to his seat. Luckily Mr. Stonebridge seemed to forget about the entire incident for the rest of the day. Eugene couldn't forget about it, however. Every two minutes he would pull the wrinkled paper out from under his slate and re-

read the message. Midnight. He'd go to bed and then wake up just before then and come back. Nobody would be around.

Wait. A sick feeling dangled in his stomach as he looked around at all the children in the room. One girl was all green, with a long warty nose and pointed hat and stringy hair. Another had a red cape and hood on and a basket of biscuits on her desk. The three boys in the back were dressed up as bears. Eugene had forgotten that it was Halloween.

School got out that evening at six (the hours were longer in those days) and he grabbed his slate and books and headed home. It ordinarily took fifteen minutes to get there, but he passed trick-or-treaters every few seconds and couldn't help stopping to stare at their costumes. As he crossed the bridge, which was the halfway point, he had the distinct sensation that somebody was following him. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed a tall man—or thing—in a black robe, slowly walking toward him. He picked up his pace. Sweat tingled on his skin. His heart pounded like a blacksmith's hammer upon the anvil. The number of trick-or-treaters was diminishing—naturally, since Eugene's house was out in the sticks. The dark man was still on his trail, walking slowly and yet somehow keeping up with him.

It was at this moment that Eugene panicked.

He ran the rest of the way home, slammed the old front door, turned the deadbolt, and ducked under the front window. A careful peek outside later and he sighed with relief: there was nobody in sight. Maybe he'd just imagined it all.

Then there was a knock on the door.

Eugene felt like little spiders were running all over his skin. Where were his parents? He didn't dare call out to them.

Another knock. It echoed throughout the house.

Perhaps they'd already left to take his younger brother trick-

or-treating. Or maybe they were taking a nap. He could crawl upstairs and see if they were there. Anything to get away from the door.

The knock came again, followed by a friendly voice. “Anybody home?”

Eugene sighed again with relief. It was just Uncle Ivan, Dad’s brother who lived down the lane. He’d be able to take care of Eugene, certainly.

Eugene undid the deadbolt and opened the door wide. “Uncle—” was as far as he got before his stomach leapt into his throat. The dark man stood on his porch. He slammed the door shut and turned the deadbolt just as the man reached out a thin and bony hand, quite unlike Uncle Ivan’s thick, pudgy one.

“Mom! Dad!” he hollered, pushing against the door with his back. No reply. He felt sick.

Then the scraping started. Eugene could hear the dark man scratch his fingernails down the length of the door, could feel the path wriggling its way down his spine. He couldn’t stand it any longer and ran upstairs to his parents’ bedroom.

Empty.

He ran to his bedroom. A raven was perched on what used to be his windowsill; the window itself was missing. He shut the door and climbed under his bed, which was on the side of the room opposite the window, and started to cry. The raven cawed. Eugene watched it tap the sill area three times with its talons. Then he almost screamed as he saw a thin, bony hand reach in and snatch the raven away.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *X Marks the Spot*

Eugene closed his eyes, panting heavily and wanting more than anything else for this to be a bad dream. His throat felt all scratchy and he had to cough, but he didn't dare make any noise, so he held it even though he could hardly breathe. The raven was gone, as was the hand, and in their place was a dread silence. No scraping. No tapping. Just the wind whistling through the empty area where Eugene's window had once resided.

A long time went by, each heartbeat like the tick-tock of an old grandfather clock. It was getting dark. He had to turn the light on, but the thought of leaving the security of his hiding place froze his bones in place. The shivers caught hold of him, first in his chest and then fluttering out to his arms and legs. His dry tears were caked and crumbly on his cheeks.

Then he heard a jangling of the lock downstairs, and then footsteps. He breathed faster. Voices. Mom's and Dad's, it sounded like. Could it really be them? The faint spark of a hope warmed him. "Eugene?" came his mother's voice from the hallway.

With a creak the doorknob to his bedroom turned, the light came on, and in walked those familiar high heels, followed closely by his father's loafers and a pair of tiny cowboy boots. "Eugene, where are you?" his father called.

"Under here," he replied, crawling out while rubbing his eyes.

"Good heavens! What have you been doing under there?" His mother knelt down and buried him in her arms. He couldn't hold back the tears any longer. He blubbered out the story of the mirror and the boy and the dark man and the raven while she softly rocked him back and forth. When he got to the part

where the dark man snatched the raven from his window, his father jumped up and ran to the window.

“The window! It’s gone!” He stuck his head out and looked down. “Nothing. Kids these days. Must’ve been a Halloween prank.” Eugene’s three-year-old brother Theodore, clad in cowboy attire and busy inspecting each piece of candy in the pumpkin basket he was holding, looked up when he heard the word “Halloween” and smiled.

“I’d better take him back to the school to see this mirror,” his father said. “And call the police.”

His mother frowned. “Can’t it wait till morning?”

“It’ll only take a minute. Trust me.”

“Whatever you say, dear,” his mother said, sounding utterly unconvinced. “Just be quick about it. He needs to get to bed.” She looked at the window. “I’ll have Ivan put some boards up for now.”

Eugene felt sick. But his father had made up his mind, so he trailed him down through the house and out the front door to the car. Off they drove through the darkness. There was a thin forest around his neighborhood, ordinarily so commonplace it wouldn’t have scared anyone, but tonight Eugene kept thinking he saw the tall, dark man running alongside them through the trees, his nightblack robes flowing behind him. Once he imagined the hood turned to face them, but there was nothing inside it, just hollow darkness.

They soon got out of the forest and drove into town. Two minutes later, they arrived at the school. The mirror was still there. Eugene’s father parked the car on the street and they both walked through the school gate and into the courtyard.

“I don’t see any mirror, son.”

Eugene looked at his father with eyes wide open. “You don’t?”

It's right there!" He walked up to it to put his hand on it, but his hand went right through. Nothing. It was like air. But he couldn't see his hand anymore. He pulled it back out. "Did you see that? My hand disappeared behind it."

His father frowned and walked up to the mirror. "Son, where's the window?"

"The window?"

"Eugene, this isn't funny. It's late. Your mother's worried. No more games, okay?"

Eugene's lip quivered. "You don't see it? The mirror?"

His father looked where Eugene was pointing, then shook his head slowly. "Look, hold my hand." Eugene grabbed his hand. Together they walked forward, coming up to where the mirror was, and then suddenly they were through it. And they saw the other side of the courtyard, like it had always been, just a dusty old field. No other school. Quickly looking back, Eugene saw nothing but the school, and their car on the side of the street over the hedge. No mirror.

"But...but..."

"Let's go home, son." As they walked back towards the car, Eugene looked back again. There stood the mirror, looking as old as the earth itself. It *was* there! Then why couldn't he feel it? And why couldn't his father see it? These questions consumed his thoughts during the ride back home—until he fell asleep as they entered the forest, that is. His father carried him out of the car and took him upstairs to their bedroom. That night Eugene slept with his parents, something he hadn't done since he was four.

A dreamless stretch later, he sat up wide awake in the middle of the night, sandwiched in between his mother and his father. The clock on the bedstand read 11:37. With a start he remembered the note from Casper and the mirror. A tiny flame of

bravery kindled itself within his heart. A moment later he also remembered the dark man, and with that memory a blanket of fear fell upon him, threatening to extinguish the flame. He knew he had to go save Casper, but at the same time he felt like there stood a yawning abyss between him and the mirror. It was sheer madness to go back alone, at midnight, with the dark man out there somewhere.

Something inside Eugene flickered, and the little flame fanned itself into a roaring fire, blown on by the danger which faced him. He was scared, but he knew what path lay before him. If you could have seen him at this moment you would have been struck by the serene and noble look which gave him the appearance of one far wiser than his years. Determination etched itself across his face. He swallowed hard and slipped out of the bed.

Tiptoeing down the stairs, he grabbed the flashlight from the closet and opened the side door, which led into the garage. There he found his father's old bicycle. Opening the garage itself would cause too much noise, so he walked the bike back through the house and out the front door, taking care to shut the door very carefully lest his parents wake up.

The ride through the forest was uneventful, though Eugene's heart raced. Several times he thought to himself how crazy this was, and that he really ought to turn around and go back home, but on he rode, pedaling faster and faster as he thought of Casper being kidnapped. All the while he never once thought how he would actually go about saving him. This would later become a problem, but for the moment he had other things to think about, namely the dark man. For just as Eugene popped out of the forest, he heard footsteps chasing him from behind, and a moment's glance revealed his worst fears. The dark man was running hard, not more than twenty or thirty yards behind him.

Eugene looked forward and pedaled even faster. He turned the corner and saw the school racing up in front of him. Then he was there, jumping off the bicycle, racing through the gate, and searching desperately for the X on the ground. The dark man was at the gate. Eugene found the X, drawn in chalk a couple of feet in front of the mirror. He patted it three times. The dark man had run in through the gate and was now six or seven feet away. Eugene ran towards the mirror, then screeched to a halt, waiting for the door to appear.

Nothing happened.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Through the Looking-Glass*

The raven flew down and attacked the dark man, tearing at his hood with its talons. Just then a siren sounded and a white police car squealed to a stop just outside the gate, and two policemen jumped out with guns in hand. The dark man looked over his shoulder, then back at Eugene, and then disappeared like mist.

Eugene looked back at the mirror. There, right in front of him, had appeared a small opening. You could almost call it a door, but not quite. The edges looked like intricately carved stonework, and there was a larger stone at the top of the arch, engraved with the words “Enter Here.” But if Eugene noticed any of this, it was only for a moment, for he had flung himself through the entrance just as the two police officers ran through the gate.

There was a burst of light as he flew through the opening and landed hard on his stomach in some prickly bushes. He rolled out of them, as he’d been trained to do, stood up, and found himself in the heart of an ancient forest. The trees surrounding him on every side were tall, so tall that the canopy was obscured by all the clouds beneath it. None of the trees had branches.

Eugene felt very small.

“Psst, you!” Eugene turned around but couldn’t see anyone. “Duck!”

Before his mind had finished processing the word, his body had dropped back into the bushes. A moment later, the forest was filled with a reverberating thud, and a row of trees came crashing down just in front of his wide eyes and open mouth.

Eugene lay still. Two or three seconds went by, and then another ear-splintering crash. He looked over and saw a house-sized boot, which lifted up and came down again farther into the for-

est, felling another row of trees. The boot was connected to a leg, which was connected to the body of a giant the size of the Eiffel Tower. Or at least it appeared that way to Eugene.

“We’ve got to hightail it out of here,” came a voice from behind one of the still-standing trees. “If there are any more of them coming, you see...well, the trees are tall and when they come down, they take out a long path. Come, this way.”

Eugene frowned. “Which way? Who are you?”

The voice moved to the left out from behind the tree, but there was still nobody there. “This way.”

“I can’t see you,” said Eugene.

“You can’t what? We don’t have time for jokes. Quick!” And with that the voice went silent, but Eugene could hear footsteps running in a direction perpendicular to the giant’s path. He shrugged and followed.

They weaved their way through the forest, passing over a stream here, leaping over a dried up brook there, following no path in particular. Eugene was looking up at the cloud cover when he ran into something with an oomph and came to a dead stop. He could see nothing, but the voice cried, “Ouch! Watch where you’re going!”

“Sorry,” Eugene said. “Let’s stop. Who are you? Where are we going? Where am I? Why can’t I see you?”

“Slow down, slow down.” The voice sighed. “My name is Yinks. Now what do you mean, you can’t see me? I’m right here, aren’t I?”

“I’m serious.”

Yinks fell silent for a few moments. “I must’ve been enchanted while I slept. That \*would\* explain why nobody said anything when I slipped out of town last night.”

“Are you running away?”

“No,” replied Yinks. “Well, yes. But not really. At least not the way you’d normally think of it. It’s a long story. Anyway, we’re out far enough that we shouldn’t be in danger any more.”

Eugene sat down on a rock. He looked around at the clearing they were in. It didn’t look like Utah to him. “Where am I?”

“You’re sitting on a rock. I can see *you* just fine.”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant,” said Eugene. “What state am I in?”

“Well, you’re a human, so you’re mostly liquid, with some solid bones and—”

“Stop it!” Eugene stood up. “Be serious. What country is this?” He was about to ask if he was still in Utah, but he had enough sense to realize that if there had ever been any giants in Utah, they had left long ago, around the time of Noah.

“This isn’t any country. It’s in-between countries. It’s the line.”

“Very funny,” shot back Eugene, sitting back down again. His calves ached from the run.

“I’m serious! The king who drew up the map back in the day used a thick marker, so there are plenty of these in-between lands which no country can lay claim to. Lots of people hide out in them. It’s the way it works here. But you’re not from here, are you?” Eugene could hear a smile in Yinks’ voice.

“No. I’m from Utah.”

“Utah? Never heard of it. Must be one of those foreign places,” said Yinks.

Just then the initial shock of being transported to another world faded away and Eugene remembered the wad of paper and Casper’s plight. “Do you know Casper?”

“Casper? Never heard of him.”

“He looks like me. He’s going to get kidnapped. Or maybe he

already did. I've got to rescue him."

Yinks laughed. "You? Rescue? Right. How old are you?"

"Old enough," said Eugene.

"Whatever. What's your name, kid?"

"Eugene."

"Eugene. Funny name. You must not like your parents very much, then, eh?"

"I like them a lot."

"Oh." With that, Yinks became silent again.

Eugene's mind sprinted, did some hurdles and the high-jump, and finished off with the shot put. He had to find Casper. But how? Yinks was no help. Besides, how did he know Yinks was a good guy? He couldn't even see him. Maybe he was one of Casper's kidnappers. Probably not. He didn't sound like a bad guy, really. More of a joker than anything. But about Casper... What he had to do, he decided, was find somebody who might know him. And then, in a brilliant flash of inspiration, he had it—the police!

"Hey, where's the nearest police station?"

Yinks yawned. "The what? Please station?"

"You know," said Eugene. "Police. They wear uniforms and protect people and stuff."

"We don't have those here. It's every man for himself." The sound of his voice dropped a couple feet, and Eugene figured (correctly, I might add) that Yinks was sitting down.

The light bulb extinguished itself. If there weren't any police, then who else might know who Casper was? He didn't even know which country he was from. And he probably wasn't exactly famous, come to think of it. Just a no-name kid, like Eugene. He wondered what Casper's parents were like. Did he even have parents? Wherever he was, it seemed awfully different from home.

But he liked it. Being chased by a giant? Talking with an invisible man? This sure beat writing out sums in Mr. Stonebridge's class.

His thought was interrupted by a flurry of black dogs which burst into the clearing, growling and with their hides bristling. He had no time to do anything before they were upon him.

"Heel!" came a different voice, and the dogs all retreated. A tall man—if you could call him a man—stepped into the clearing. Eugene's heart skipped a beat as he saw the man's thin, bony hands. A raven flew in through the trees and landed on the man's shoulder.

"Welcome to my world, Eugene."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *The First of Many Meetings*

It was the dark man. Out here in the light, Eugene couldn't help but notice his pale, clammy, almost translucent skin -- like you'd expect from someone who lived in a cave. Blackish bags drooped under his eyelids. His eyes were sunk, dark as pitch, without a single reflection or gleam, rather like a yawning abyss.

And yet the man was smiling. Not a nice smile, but a smile nonetheless. "Come here." He curled in his fingers in a smooth and yet somehow lifeless gesture.

Eugene didn't know what to do. He wanted to run. But if he did, the dogs would be on him before he'd gone two paces, and besides, he was paralyzed with fear. He sat still.

"Come," the dark man said. "Now."

Before he knew what was happening, Eugene stood up and started walking over to the man. That wasn't what he wanted! But no matter how hard he tried to stop, he couldn't. His legs moved by themselves.

Two or three feet in front of the man, he suddenly stopped. The power which had taken over his legs abruptly relinquished control, before Eugene was ready, and he sank to his knees in a daze.

"Why didn't you obey me, Eugene?" The dark man bent over and lifted Eugene's chin, but the boy didn't—couldn't—look into those blank eyes. "Answer me."

It was hard to talk. His heart pounded, and his arms felt like ice, and his head felt like a hot air balloon with nothing inside. But Eugene somehow managed to choke out, "Who are you?"

"Milagro is what my master calls me," said the man. He stood up. "You're probably wondering why I've summoned you here.

Good. Keep wondering.”

A twig snapped at the other side of the clearing. Milagro spun around and made a motion with his hand as the dogs pounced upon the area. There, frozen with one leg in the air, was a young woman. She remained motionless, somehow not falling, not even blinking.

“A girl?” Eugene gasped. Yinks was a girl?

Milagro turned back. “Your friend?”

Eugene was about to say yes, but then he thought better of it. “No, I’ve never seen her before.” And that was true.

“You lie.” He bent down again and whispered, “Don’t ever lie to me again, Eugene.” And with that he flicked his hand and Yinks shot up through the air, finally stopping a hundred or two feet up. Thin white strands flew out from the surrounding trees, catching her in the center of a hexagonal pattern which blossomed into a full-scale spiderweb.

“You can’t do that!” said Eugene, standing up. “She didn’t hurt you!”

“No,” said Milagro. “But that doesn’t matter. I can do whatever I want, and right now I want her up there. Besides, she’s dangerous. A runaway criminal. She could have killed you.”

Before Eugene could say anything, Milagro had raised a finger to his lips. “No more. We’ve got to leave before they smell us.” He motioned up with his head. Eugene stifled a cry as he saw three elephant-sized spiders crawling down the trees toward Yinks.

“You’re just going to leave her there?”

“Yes. Let’s go.” Milagro started walking out of the clearing, with the dogs following close behind.

“But—”

“Now.” And Eugene’s legs started to move again. He kept

his gaze on Yinks as he was walked out of the clearing. The spiders were getting closer. Just as she disappeared from his view, he thought he saw her arm move. But maybe he was just imagining it.

...to be continued...