

MATTHEW MILLER

How It Really Happened

IT WASN'T ANY FUN.

Fred thought about it as he studied the beetle that sat on the tree before him. It wasn't much fun, but he couldn't just stop now, not when he was so close. After so many years — he had lost count after they moved construction to the river — he and his family had reached the second phase of their plan, the critical phase, and after they completed it, it would be all downhill. An easy ride that Fred felt he deserved, after the hardships of the last few years.

Some years back, Fred had outlined his plan to his perplexed family thusly: Phase I — find workers to help build a really big ship. Phase II — build a really big ship. Phase III — bring aboard a male and female of every sort of creature on Earth. Phase IV — wait for the storm.

It took forever for Fred to explain to his family that they had no choice in the matter — it had come to him in a miraculous vision. You didn't go around questioning miraculous visions, you just *obeyed* them. Still, Marla, his wife, wondered if what they were doing was right.

Fred looked at the beetle on the tree trunk in front of him. As soon as he was sure that it was the mate of the one already in his pocket, he moved quickly and grabbed it. With great care he deposited it into his other pocket and then started back toward the ship.

He made his way out of the trees, over the hills, and finally to the quiet river where the gigantic boat was anchored, waiting to sail Fred and his family away to safety. Marla was waiting for him as he made his way across the plank that connected the ship to the land.

"I'm assuming you found them," Marla said, helping him on board.

"Thought you'd be gone by now," he said.

"I was on my way out, but I found something I think you should take a look



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at.”

“Trouble?”

“Something you should take a look at.”

“Where are the kids?”

“Fred Jr. and Rob are in town, and Jimbo’s probably on his way back.” Fred’s son Jim hadn’t gone by his real name since elementary school, where his friends affectionately referred to him as “Jimbo.” The name stuck.

“Yes, I found them,” he said.

Fred made his way through a low hallway and into a large cabin filled with some uprooted trees and scattered weeds that he had found near the river. He pulled the two beetles from his pockets and placed them on a tree that was propped against the bulkhead. He then returned topside to the deck.

“Let’s have a look,” he said, walking toward Marla.

She led him down three different ladders into the bowels of the ship. In a storage room, she stopped and pointed toward the far end.

“Take a gander at the bulkhead,” she said.

He walked over to inspect it. Running from the deck to the overhead was a small line of tiny white insects. Fred stepped back and arched his brow.

“Termites,” he said, shaking his head.

Marla stood quietly.

“I didn’t know the damn things multiplied so fast,” he continued. “I mean, granted, they were some of the first things that I brought on board, but —”

“Are you kidding me?” Marla interrupted. “You brought them first? That was weeks ago! How far do you think they’ve —”

“I had to, alright? Look, I know it wasn’t the most brilliant idea, but the damn termites have to be saved with everything else! We’ll worry about them later, when we have time!”

“But I don’t —”

“Yes, time! Right now, we need to keep plugging away. We’re quite out of time.”

Time was the one segment of the plan that worried Fred most. He didn’t think twice about other matters, like how difficult it would be to herd two fifty-foot giraffes aboard the ship. No, he was most concerned with time. So much had been wasted already.

He had inspected the first blueprint for his grand ship and rejected it. Too small. He rejected the second and third ones too. The fourth one had pleased him, and he was all set to begin construction out in the desert with the group of 100 men hired from the city, when his friend Thomas approached him.

“You’re going to build *here*?” Thomas asked him.

Fred looked at the barren desert around him.

“Why not?” Fred replied.

"You're in the middle of the bloody desert!"

"Exactly!" Fred exclaimed, good naturedly. "It's perfect. I won't have to worry about any stupid townsfolk taunting me. It's perfectly isolated. We can work without distractions."

"Yeah, but where are you gonna get all your dumb animals? You gonna lead them all out here in the heat? What's it gonna be like leading a bloody lion through the desert and into your boat?"

"Well, I hadn't ..." Fred trailed off, his brow wrinkling up.

"And how are you gonna know if the thing even floats, right? If there's no water to test it in, how are you gonna know you built it right?"

Fred frowned.

"I can see it now!" Thomas laughed, slapping his knees. "The storms come, and you haven't even sealed the wood properly! The great ship sinks!"

After that, Fred and his men spent weeks moving the supplies from the desert back to Fred's home near the very calm Kimson River, closer to town. There, over many years, they built the enormous ship into the water, to make sure that it would float. The change in locations seemed to take forever, and Fred knew that it wouldn't be much longer before the rain began to fall.

On the deck he consulted his checklist.

"Damn! There're so many animals that we have to capture. We've really got to hustle a bit more."

"Remember," Marla jumped in, "that one guy that worked for you, was it Alvin? He said a few weeks ago that he'd be able to get those hippos up here in less than three weeks. He's due any day now."

Jimbo, a muscular young man, appeared with a large cage strapped to his back. Two black birds were crammed inside.

"Hiya' pop!" he cried. "Look! I found two ravens, a male and a female."

Fred and Marla admired the birds for a moment with their son.

"They're stunning," Fred said. "Go ahead and take them to the Bird Room. We've got a lot of work to do."

"Oh, I saw Fred Jr. and Rob in town this morning," Jimbo said, reaching into his pocket. "They wanted me to give you this note."

"Thanks," Fred said as Jimbo disappeared down a ladder. Fred liked how Jimbo's enthusiasm always gushed forth from him, unlike his brothers, Fred Jr. and Rob. Fred Jr. and Rob were younger, and always seemed more preoccupied with the girls from the city than their duties to the family.

After shoving the note into his pocket, Fred looked at Marla.

"Look," he began, "we've got to go after the so called *Great Cats* now, while the opportunity is here."

Marla rolled her eyes and sighed.

"I know what you're thinking, but we've no choice, really. Wally and Will's

Wonderful Traveling Zoo is in town, and I think we may be able to get a couple from them before they split. It'll be a lot easier than traveling to bumfuck Egypt looking for the damn things."

"Nuts," Marla said under her breath.

"What can I say? He said in the vision that *everything* must survive."

"Then the least you could do is tell us how much longer we have!"

"Look, I don't know, alright?" Fred said angrily. "He said that it's got to be done as quickly as possible, because he's going to flood the whole friggin' land. The whole Earth, as I understand it."

"It's taken years just to construct this crazy ship! The flood hasn't come soon enough to keep everyone in the city from guffawing at us! The men you paid to build this monstrosity laughed as they hammered away! Our own friends," she cried, grabbing him by the shoulders. "Our own friends think we've flipped our lids! They stood over there laughing!"

Fred remembered the laughing. He had supervised the building at all times, and for the first year and a half or so, building the ship had been like bringing the circus to town. People from the city would leave work and bring their families out and have a picnic in front of the building site. They laughed and jeered at Fred and his workers as they sawed and hammered away. Fred still vividly remembered the time a young man heckled his wife near the river as he hid behind a stack of wooden beams, listening.

"Still helping your crazy old man build his mighty ship?" the young man called out.

Marla ignored him as she picked up the leftovers of the lunch she had fixed for a group of the hired workers.

"Have you found two monkeys for you ship yet, woman? Have they taken a liking to your husband?"

A large group of spectators behind the young man burst into laughter.

"There won't be any more goddamned laughing after we're riding the waves!" Fred cried, returning to the present. "Soon they won't mock us! Soon they'll be under ten miles of water, and then who'll be doing the mocking?"

Fuming, he walked to the side of the ship, and gazed upon the river. There was nobody around now. After that initial year and a half of picnics and jeering, the novelty had worn off, and the people, for the most part, stopped coming out.

A frantic beating of wings startled Fred and Marla, and they turned to see two small brown birds flying out of the stairwell Jimbo had descended minutes before. Shortly, he emerged cursing.

"I thought you went to dump the ravens into the Bird Room," Fred said.

"I did," Jimbo hissed. "But when I opened the door to get them in, two other birds escaped! Fuck!"

"It looked like a woodpecker and a jay," Fred said, annoyed. "I saw them. It's absolutely imperative that we recapture them. Give me this," he said, yanking the strap-on bird cage off Jimbo's back. "I'll go get them. It's up to you now to go and bring a tiger and a lion here, to the Great Cats Room."

"Me?" Jimbo said, startled. "I think *you* should help me with something this dangerous, pop. At least get Fred Jr., or Rob to help."

"Sorry kiddo. *I've* got to go and recapture the damned birds that are once again flying around thanks to your carelessness."

Fred started pushing Jimbo in the direction of the plank.

"Wally and Will's Wonderful Traveling Zoo is getting ready to wrap up its stay in the city," Fred said. "All you have to do it tell them what you need. They're always hocking their goods on somebody."

"What if money —"

"I just gave you your allowance!" Fred yelled. "If they want money, give 'em that. After you've got the cats, you've got to get them back *here*. Provoke them somehow."

"This is fucking crazy!" Jimbo cried.

"Are you actually questioning the word of our *maker*? Now get out of here! Go and get me a lion and a tiger!"

Glaring at his father, Jimbo proceeded slowly down the plank, and disappeared over the hills.

"You're absolutely obsessed," Marla said. Fred's back faced her. "You've never treated any of the boys like this." She hesitated, thinking, then continued: "It still seems like all of this started after we first met old Elizabeth in the city. Remember, those things she gave us? Those crazy-ass mushrooms that made the sky melt into —"

"I didn't eat any mushrooms, alright?" Fred seethed. He faced Marla. "I keep telling you that, and you never believe me. Why can't my own damn wife trust me? The vision *was* real. I was *wide* awake, and He told me that He was seriously pissed, and that it was up to me, and only me mind you, to build the ship before He flooded *everything*."

Quickly, he strapped the cage onto his back.

"I'm outta' here," he said.

On his way over the hills and toward the trees, Fred remembered the vision.

It was a cool morning, overcast, and Fred was enjoying it. He had been feeling very good, very happy, since he left Elizabeth's house, and now he was walking peacefully out of the city and back home to see his family. He looked up at the clouds above him, and imagined how grand it must be in Heaven.

The light shifted then, very subtly at first, but then noticeably, and began exploding out of the clouds in thick beams of orange and red. Fred stopped, not

so much out of fear as decorum. He felt an immensely strong presence.

Then, he heard a voice.

It was very faint at first. It wasn't loud or frightening, but calm and smooth. It was growing louder.

"Fred."

Looking around and seeing nobody at all, Fred looked back toward the heavens.

"G ... G ... God?" he stuttered.

Brilliant red light continued to pour out of the clouds and all over Fred.

"Fred ... you must listen to me. I have determined to make an end of all flesh. For the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth."

Geez Fred thought. *Sounds like trouble.*

"But —"

"Do it!" the voice came back. "Don't interrupt! Listen: make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it —"

"When you say *ark*, do you mean, like a boat?"

"Yes, a big ship, if you would. You've got to make sure it has *at least* three decks, for behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life from under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die."

There was silence for a moment as Fred contemplated this.

"Kind of severe, don't ya' think?" he asked.

"Don't worry. I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, erm ... the *ship*, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you."

"Groovy."

"Now here's the important part Fred, so listen closely: of every living thing of all flesh, notice the word *all*, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark, to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female."

"So," Fred said, perfectly at ease, "a guy and a gal of each kind of critter, so they can eventually have s — ah ... *reproduce* again."

"Exactly!" the voice said, pleased. "Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping things of the ground according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to you, to keep them alive."

"Um ..." Fred said, thinking again. "How soon?"

"Pretty quick here," the voice returned. "I've had it with you losers."

"But of *every living thing*. I mean, that'll take some time, especially to build the ship. How can I do it *pretty quick*?"

"How would I know? Hire some workers or something! Why are you ask-

ing me these dumb questions Fred?” the voice said, fading. “That’s how it is, brother. You’d better get started ...”

And the voice faded away. Fred stood for a long time, he was unsure how long, gazing into the clouds. The beams of light eventually faded, and Fred continued home as the sun set.

Wide awake Fred thought, as he walked into the trees. *No doubt about it, I was wide awake.*

He had been in the trees for a little over an hour when he spotted the woodpecker, or at least a similar one, in a tall tree. Low hanging branches enabled him to begin to climb, but it was difficult going. Smaller branches kept getting caught in the bars of the bird cage as he pushed upward, and even smaller ones poked and stabbed him in his stomach and legs. After fifteen minutes of painful climbing, he stopped and looked up. The bird was still sitting on its branch, seemingly unconcerned.

He carefully worked the cage off his back, and held it in his right arm. Using his legs, he pushed himself toward the bird, with the cage door hanging open.

“Hello pretty,” he smiled.

The bird turned its head to examine him with one eye.

“How about flying into my cage here?” A branch stuck him in the side, but he ignored it, and the pain. “I would really like to have you.”

As he moved closer, the bird became more and more still. Then it moved, hopping once away from him. Undaunted, Fred continued with his recapture attempt.

“Come, my love. If you would just hop in here, I could save your entire population and —”

The branch in his side snapped loudly and the bird was off like a shot, alighting on another tree twenty yards away. Startled, Fred lost his grip on the cage, which dropped, bouncing off numerous branches until finally landing in the dirt below. The sweet odor of fresh sap filled his nostrils.

“Damn damn fuck all!” he yelled. “Aaarrrrghhhh!” he added.

Making his way back down the tree, he thought *forget that sonuva bitch bird. Don’t need it. So what if I forget one kind of woodpecker? Nobody will even notice, especially if they’re all drowning anyway.*

On solid ground again, he picked up the bird cage and stormed off the way he came. High above him the woodpecker watched and mocked, much like Fred’s friends.

In an attempt to calm himself down, Fred pulled out the letter that Jimbo had given to him, and opened it up to read. Written in Rob’s handwriting, it read:

Daddy-O,

Sorry we haven't been home in a while, but Fred Jr. and I have found some excellent babes here in town, and we plan to stay with them for a while. In fact, Fred thinks he may have gotten his babe, Jessica, pregnant. Fred Jr. Jr.! Awesome! If you need to see us, you'll have to come into town.

Excelsior!

Rob

"WHAT!" Fred roared. He walked toward the city.

Once in town, Fred did a double take walking by the outdoor market, realizing that both of his sons were there buying food.

"What," Fred hissed, "do you bloody well think you're doing?"

Both of his sons spun around, startled.

"Dad!" Rob said.

"What is the meaning of this!" Fred cried, waving the letter in front of Rob's face. "I want the two of you to drop the food and march home NOW!"

"Sorry, dude," Fred Jr. said. "We're hanging with Jessica and Melinda."

"Have you lost your minds?" Fred's yelling was so loud it caught the attention of dozens of people around him. He was so angry he was having a hard time speaking. "We've got to shill the fip! I mean, the ship, fill it! What do you two think you're doing here?"

"Hey," a voice came from the crowd. "It's crazy old Doomsday Fred!" Laughter broke out amongst the spectators as they realized who it was.

"Hear that dad?" Rob asked. "People think like, we're insane or something, because of your ship. Fred Jr. and I are through with that. Our social lives were nil cause all the chicks thought we were stupid, but now we found a couple of nice ones, and we've decided to stay with them."

Astonished at what Rob was saying, Fred stood silently with his mouth hanging open.

"I mean, think about it," Rob said smiling, as he and Fred Jr. walked away with three baskets of food. "Wouldn't you rather be with some babes than slaving over a ship?"

Fred watched as they disappeared into the crowd.

"They're insane," he said to nobody. "I can't believe ..." Shaking his head, dumbfounded, Fred started for the ship. "They're mad."

The sun was setting when Fred got back, and the ship was silent. Not seeing Marla, he decided to calm his nerves by going to see the squirrels in the Small Rodents Room.

The window in the Small Rodents Room's door was a square hole with wooden bars. Fred peered through, and the smell of fresh feces made him gri-

mace. *To be expected* he thought.

"Hello boys," he said. Small footsteps emanated from the Room. Fred's eyes adjusted to the dark after a minute, and not far from the door he spotted a squirrel on its back, very dead. A rat stood nearby.

"Get away there!" Fred yelled, unlocking the door. Opening it, he ran in and kneeled in front of the dead squirrel, carelessly leaving the door cracked. Dozens of tiny footsteps made for the door, and Fred turned to see a group of baby rats run out into the hall. The same rats, he figured, that ate the food he had left for the squirrels.

He left the room and shut the door, but a horde of rats were gone, exploring the ship. *They multiply so quickly* he thought. *Gotta' hurry up and get out of here. Gotta' be ready for the flood.*

A loud crash reverberated throughout the ship, and Fred ran through the halls trying to find what caused it. Because of the enormity of the ship, it took him a while before, above the lowermost cabins, he found Marla cursing at the top of her lungs. Below her, an enormous hippopotamus sat helplessly wedged between two planks which had previously connected into a ramp leading downward into the Great Big Animals Room. Its mate was already at the room's entrance.

"The rampway," Fred whimpered.

"Your friend Alvin finally showed with the hippos," Marla scowled. "The first one had already gone down, and this one was on its way, when the whole thing just gave out! I got them this far, *this far*, and your rampway gives out! The damn thing's stuck, do you see? It's not getting out!"

The beasts legs kicked away desperately for a foothold, but its effort was in vain. Fred squatted near where a portion of the wood had given away, and spotted a line of tiny white insects.

"Ah fuck it! The termites are tearing the whole ship apart!"

Fred's own raving was interrupted by Marla's screaming.

"A rat!" she cried. "A rat just brushed by my foot!"

"I know," Fred said. It was too much for him. "They're multiplying out of control. A couple escaped from the Small Rodents Room. I'll capture them."

"You're a moron, you know that? This ship is huge, but it's nowhere near big enough. *Three* main decks? I was just thinking: look at that hippo."

The two watched the trapped hippo.

"There's a ton of animals as big as the hippo that are eventually going to be crammed into that stupid Largest Animals Room," Marla said. "Do you honestly think it's going to hold all of them? For God's sake, it only took one hippo, *one fucking hippo*, to ruin the ramp. What's going to happen when we bring a rhinoceros, or a giraffe in here? Not only that, but all of the stupid trees and bushes you put down there as *food* for the animals are dying anyway! You

didn't plant them in anything! Oh yeah, come with me to the Insect Room."

Fred and Marla walked the length of the ship back to the Insect Room, where Fred had been at the beginning of the day.

"Look," Marla said. "You dug up all of these trees and bushes and placed them here for the bugs to live in, but once again you didn't plant them in anything. Now they're dying. You keep saying you'll get some dirt to plant them in, but you never do. We work every hour to bring all of the animals to the ship, but there are still hundreds to go. In the meantime, everything else is dying."

He was about to tell her she was right, and he was about to tell her about the squirrel, but he heard the loud buzzing of a fly dart by his head in the direction of the hallway, in the direction of freedom.

"Shit, we've got to get out of here," Fred said, grabbing Marla. "We can't let that damn fly out."

In the hallway he locked the door.

"This is crazy!" Marla screamed. "Look at us! Nearly killing ourselves to shut a door so we don't lose a fucking *fly*? I *hate* flies! Where's your flood?"

She ran, and he didn't go after her.

He stood against the wall for a few minutes. He knew that what she said was true. Everything was dying, and it would be a task to keep it all alive, especially during the voyage. And the size of the ship — she was right again. By themselves, the hippopotamuses looked so big they seemed to fill half the lower level. He wondered if there would be any room left to breath after the ship was filled up with animals.

After reflecting and coming up with no answers, he made his way topside, and lay down to sleep in the peaceful evening air.

In the morning Fred got up and walked to his and Marla's cabin for some fresh clothes. He got as far as the entrance to the cabin when he realized that everything — closet, chest of drawers, and bed — had been ransacked. Marla stood at the far end of the cabin, holding a familiar box of fungi.

"Under the bed," she said calmly. "You hid them under the bed. I knew you had these damn things. I'll bet there is no flood. I'll bet you ate these damn things right before you had your *vision*."

Fred looked at her and didn't know what to say.

"Tell me, you son of a bitch," Marla said.

She's right. She's —

Loud, terrified screams drifted across the hills and into the cabin. Fred and Marla ran out on deck and gasped at the sight of Jimbo sprinting toward the ship. Two tigers were close behind him as he closed in on the plank.

"Motheerrraagghhh!! Heellllpaaarrghh!!"

Jimbo was halfway up the plank leading to the ship when one of the tigers

caught up and jumped. It slammed into his back and bit down on his right calf, but its momentum carried the two of them forward and then down, where they landed harshly on the wood. Still screaming, Jimbo kicked at the tiger's mouth, and inadvertently worked his way to the edge of the plank. The angry tiger closed in, and Jimbo fell off the plank and into the river below.

The other tiger spotted the husband and wife watching this gruesome spectacle from the ship, and ran for them. Fred realized this and shoved Marla.

"Split up!" he yelled.

He ran across the deck, not even seeing which way Marla went. At the far stairwell, he looked back to see that the confused tiger had decided on him. It was moving quickly.

Stumbling down the stairs, Fred tried to form thoughts in his chaotic mind: *Coming for me. Got to save myself. Got to find a way to save myself.*

The Moderately Sized Animals Room flashed in his mind. He was near it. He tripped down two more stairwells, bashing his shin in one. Above him, having some difficulty, the tiger followed. Running hard, Fred covered a long hallway that ended in a single door. The sign above it read, Moderately Sized Animals Room. At the far end of the hall, the tiger arrived. Fred fumbled for the key ring in his pocket, and shoved the proper key into the door.

"Here!" he screamed, flinging the door open. "Here's your fucking food!"

A large Airedale came bounding out, scraping its nails on the wooden floor as it struggled to stop. As the tiger moved toward it, a frightened deer made a dash for the stairwell, completely confused. Jumping past the tiger, the deer ran ahead and turned into another hallway. The tiger ran after it.

Fred gasped and tried to catch his breath, and heard a faint crashing sound, like dozens of wooden boards simultaneously splintering. The ship shifted. It was as if a giant magnet in the sky pulled the bow upward. Fred ran for the Great Big Animals Room.

Marla was already there, on the lowest level, grabbing for pieces of floating, broken wood. The lowest level was filling up with water at an amazing rate. The two hippopotamuses were gone, and he knew what happened.

Marla finally saw him.

"They're gone!" she yelled over the rushing water. "The whole damned floor gave away! The termites ate it up! We've gotta' plug this thing before we all drown! Help me Fred, you fool!"

Fred heard her, but didn't move. The ship shifted again. Under the great weight of the wood and the pressure of the water, the ship groaned and began its descent. As the water rose above his ankles, Fred thought about how the flood had finally arrived.