

JANUARY 2025

WWW.BNPMAG.COM

# BOOKS & PIECES MAGAZINE

— Stories, Poems, Articles, Interviews, Chapters, Reviews, Art & more —

**IN THIS ISSUE:** PAUL GOODWIN, PETER SHORE, EVAN KAISER, PAUL KIMM, MICHAEL BARRINGTON, EVA SANDOR, JOSEPH LYTTLETON, ALICE BABUREK, ANJI BROWN, JILL HEDGECOCK.

**INTERVIEWS** WITH RUSSELL LITTLE, BRUCE HORNIDGE.



**SUBMIT  
YOUR STORIES  
TO BOOKS & PIECES  
MAGAZINE**



Dear Readers,

Welcome to 2025, a hopeful year, I wish for us all. And with it some new changes. Our website has been evolving and I wanted to share a bit of what is new and what you can expect.

Please be sure to submit your LINKS when you submit content. We want to publicize you and hopefully get you a following.

If you have any videos, You Tube, Vimeo, etc., be sure to let us know as we can embed them in our flip-page magazine and link them in the standard PDF.

Books & Pieces also publishes poetry, artwork, non-fiction (even controversial subjects as we will publish rebuttals from readers). Keep the language clean, limit anything sexual, and be sure to format your submissions properly.

While we accept novellas, and even novels, we cannot publish them in their entirety. Our solution is to excerpt them with a download link if someone wants the whole thing.

Our magazine is free to read. We count on you spreading the word. Tell friends. Share with writing courses, even at the high school level, book clubs and so on.

And above all else, enjoy!

Happy New Year.

~William Gensburger, *Publisher*

# CONTENTS

## CONTRIBUTORS:

<b>FICTION:</b>	Pg.
• <a href="#">PAUL GOODWIN</a>	2
• <a href="#">PETER SHORE</a>	10
• <a href="#">EVAN KAISER</a>	57
• <a href="#">EVA SANDOR</a>	85
• <a href="#">ALICE BABUREK</a>	106
• <a href="#">PAUL KIMM</a>	124
• <a href="#">ANJI BROWN</a>	145
• <a href="#">JOSEPH LYTTLETON</a>	160

## NON-FICTION:

• <a href="#">MICHAEL BARRINGTON</a>	48
--------------------------------------	----

## INTERVIEWS:

• <a href="#">RUSSELL LITTLE</a>	82
• <a href="#">BRUCE HORNIDGE</a>	187

## REVIEWS:

• <a href="#">JILL HEDGECOCK</a>	185
----------------------------------	-----

## VIDEO CORNER

• <a href="#">TIPS</a>	200
------------------------	-----

*Books & Pieces Magazine is published monthly by B&P Books, LLC, and is offered FREE to read in digital and flip-page formats. All content is certified original by the author and not written by AI. All story rights remain with the authors. In this publication, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental unless intended by the author. Story images are AI-generated unless otherwise credited. AI is never used for content.*

©2024 B&P Books, LLC.

Questions to [editor@BooksNPieces.com](mailto:editor@BooksNPieces.com)

# JIGSAW PUZZLES

A SHORT STORY BY PAUL GOODWIN

Everyone thought jigsaw puzzles had saved Jane's sanity after the death of her daughter, Lara. Neighbours had talked about her standing at the window for hours, surveying the road as if she was still expecting Lara to come home. She'd looked like a statue draped in her nightgown with her rich red hair - once her pride - now dull and matted as it flopped over her face and bent shoulders. People would wave as they walked their dogs past her house, but Jane looked through them as her eyes scanned the distant horizon.



Lara had just celebrated her seventeenth birthday when she didn't return home from college at her usual time. Two hours after Lara's stepfather, Ken, phoned the police, a body was found 250 feet below the White Gorge suspension bridge. Lara had been upset after the break-up with her boyfriend. It was clear

she'd committed suicide, but Jane blamed the boyfriend. She'd screamed that he'd as good as murdered her. One terrible night, Ken had to hold her back when she leapt out of bed, threatening to go round to his house to confront him with a carving knife.

Sometimes, Ken would find Jane talking to Lara's photograph on the lounge wall, promising revenge. The picture showed a pretty woman with her mother's auburn hair in a blue dress. But the smile seemed bashful and reluctant. You could imagine the photographer saying: 'Come on! Give us a smile. You look like you're carrying all the world's troubles on your shoulders.'

Ken confessed to a colleague that he was desperate to find a way to help Jane cope with her grief. The colleague suggested jigsaw puzzles might distract her. Ken was skeptical at first but thought it was worth a try. He spent an age in the local stationers before choosing one he thought she'd like. It was in a box close-wrapped in shiny plastic, and the picture on the front showed a room in a cottage with cats stretched in front of a roaring fire and plants, books and ornaments on dark brown shelves. A crescent moon could be seen through a small window, and a painting above the mantelpiece showed a shepherd watching his flock next to a stream from where hills and

valleys rolled far away. Amidst it all, a sleeping man lay in an armchair with a newspaper falling over his lap.

When Jane first saw the picture on the box, the word ‘peace’ flashed through her mind. It seemed to come from another world. But she put the jigsaw away unopened. A few days later, Ken asked her if she didn’t like the puzzle. I’ve too much on my mind, she’d replied. Come on, he’d said. It’ll take your mind off things, and he opened the box, spreading the pieces across the dining table. Jane had resisted at first but found herself searching out the edge and corner pieces, and soon she’d formed a frame. Then she sorted the pieces into similar colours, and the picture began to grow.

A few days later one of the neighbours stopped Ken and said they were worried because they hadn’t seen Jane at the window. ‘Oh, she’s fine,’ he said. ‘She’s totally absorbed in a new hobby.’ Now, Jane seldom left the table. The hours went by without her noticing. It took her a while to get used to the different shapes of the pieces, but she got a little better each day. Sometimes, Ken would look over her shoulder and admire her achievement. She would look back at him as he stroked his beard. Then she’d take his arm, squeeze his hand, and whisper: Thank you. You’re a good man.

Ken had always got on well with Lara, sharing jokes

Jane never understood and joining in when she teased her mother about her love of soap operas, suggesting she thought they were real life. He'd wept at Lara's funeral while her mother had struggled through the day frozen in grief. Lara's real father hadn't even shown up. People said he was probably drunk in a sports bar, throwing his benefit money away on some lacklustre horse and cursing as it fell at the first fence. Ken said he couldn't believe someone could behave so badly. He'd been a tremendous support to Jane after the tragedy. Despite having a high-pressure job, he'd taken over the cooking, shopping and cleaning and comforted her when waves of sorrow swept over her. Jane's anger with the boyfriend would still resurface, though less often now. Ken was alarmed when she once said, 'Don't worry, I'll get him one day. Why should he enjoy life after what he's done?'

Jane's obsession with jigsaw puzzles didn't diminish as the months passed. She took on more complex challenges with thousands of pieces. Then she heard that you could enter competitions to complete puzzles in the fastest time. At first, she was reluctant, but Ken persuaded her to participate. He would drive her to the venues and stroll around the hall, hands in pockets as she amazed the judges with her speed. She was winning trophies at bigger and bigger events. People

said she'd soon be the national champion. 'Why stop at that: World Champion,' insisted Ken.

But Jane had noticed a change in Ken. His outward optimism and cheerfulness remained, but she sensed he was tired and sad deeper down. The job and domestic chores were getting him down, she thought. She'd been selfish and neglected him, only thinking about herself. But Ken would have none of it and insisted he was happy with things the way they were.

Jane's birthday was coming up, and Ken was full of apologies. He had to go on a business trip to Japan the day before. It was unavoidable, but he'd phone her twice a day. Before he left, he arranged a pile of presents on the coffee table with instructions that they must not be opened before he left. His parting words were: 'Now don't do anything stupid while I'm away'.

Jane rose early on her birthday and admired how well the presents had been wrapped. Ken was a perfectionist, and it was a shame to open them. She untied the ribbon on the first present with the greatest care and tried to avoid tearing the wrapping paper. Inside was a bottle of her favourite perfume from Milan. The next present was a large box. She guessed it was a jigsaw puzzle -she could hear the pieces rattling inside. But when she'd stripped away the paper, she

was surprised. The picture on the box was similar to the first one she'd completed. It appeared to come from a series. There was no roaring fire, and this time, the sun shone through the small window, dazzling the shelves. The cats were rubbing against the man's legs with their tails up as he sat upright, reading his newspaper. Oddly, the box had been resealed with Cellotape, but Ken had put a note inside: 'Found this in a charity shop. Couldn't resist it. Thought it would remind you of your first puzzle, xxx'.

Jane didn't think the puzzle would pose much of a challenge but decided to complete it to please Ken. She would have it ready to show him when he returned at the weekend. Soon, the picture began to take shape. As she became absorbed in selecting the pieces, she occasionally thought about Ken in Japan. How would he cope with the customs there? How was his flight? Would he like sushi and miso soup? She looked forward to him phoning when he had time.

The puzzle was almost done, but something was odd. The pieces representing the man's newspaper didn't quite match the picture on the box. Perhaps they'd been marked by the previous owner. Anyway, she proceeded to slot them into place. On the box, the writing on the newspaper was small, so you couldn't read what it said, but the letters on the pieces

were legible and looked like they'd been written with a black Biro on a background whitened with correction fluid. She put the last pieces of the newspaper in place, sighed, rubbed her hands and sat back to read what the newspaper said.

Then she screamed. The front page read: 'So sorry Jane. I pushed Lara off the bridge. I love you and wanted you for myself.'//

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Paul Goodwin lives in Somerset, England, where he writes fiction and non-fiction. His stories have been published by Literally Stories, CommuterLit, CafeLit, and Marrow and LitBreak magazines. His books include *Forewarned* (Biteback Publications) and *Something Doesn't Add Up* (Profile).

*[Editor note: We left the English spelling of certain words.]*



# ANATOMY OF A TRUMPET

A SHORT STORY BY PETER SHORE

We are on the wings of a fluttering angel descending on Hillside Memorial, one of two Jewish funeral homes in L.A.—this one, the one along the 405-freeway, convenient for visitors of the dead to do a hit and run.

We are close on a trumpet. Once upon a time its brass a majestic sheen, the lead pipe and valves now scratched, the instrument attached to a red and black guitar strap—a life's worth of tunes, but out of key.

Medium shot on a casket, the trumpet, a signature prop, is clutched by dad, ninety-three and dead, dressed in a purple suit, yellow tie, solid makeup job and a hairpiece that's working just fine, right on time for the big finale.

In a draped area in the back of the chapel standing over the casket are the Saidel Brothers. Close in on me, Howard, owner of five college degrees; fifty-four, in an unworn black suit and tie my wife Adela bought at the Men's Wearhouse in Albuquerque on the way to the airport. My yarmulke-less receding hairline covets 1.5 tortoise shell readers, the smile you see, nothing but humor and relief that the father-son game is over. My little big bro

Scotty, thirteen years older, yarmulke-covered bald head, and meager build, with San Diego sun-tanned wrinkles and dressed frumpish in black jeans, black dress shirt and black sport coat byproducts of last night's Costco, run twenty minutes before closing. Looking down on dad, Scotty's face might as well be in the frozen food section packing a million tiny icicles of anger.

“He can't be buried with his trumpet,” Scotty says.

“Those were his wishes, bro.”

“Jews can't be buried with metal.” Scotty starts the show— heavy breathing, not hyper, but crying has arrived. “He played that trumpet at every single one of my birthdays.”

“Until your twenty-first,” I say.

“And my high school graduation. Dude, there's no way we can let Dot bury his trumpet. That's insane. It's a family heirloom.”

“She told us over at the free buffet this morning he wanted to be buried with his trumpet and it's in his Final Arrangements video.”

“I thought she was joking and I'm not watching that video, it's morbid.” Scotty's crying spins out, becoming unbecoming for such an old guy. “We can't let this happen. It's sac religious and I need it. I can't move on with my life knowing his trumpet is buried with him forever. Can't we just take it?”

The side drape dramatically opens revealing Dot, stepmom

from Planet Putz—Scotty’s nickname for dad’s second wife, formerly Miss Kentucky 1971, a freshly minted widow dressed in a black sequin dress.

“You absolutely cannot remove the trumpet,” she says. “This was your father’s wishes and it’s in his video. I have the power as his executor.”

“Executioner,” Scotty says.

“And only heir,” she says.

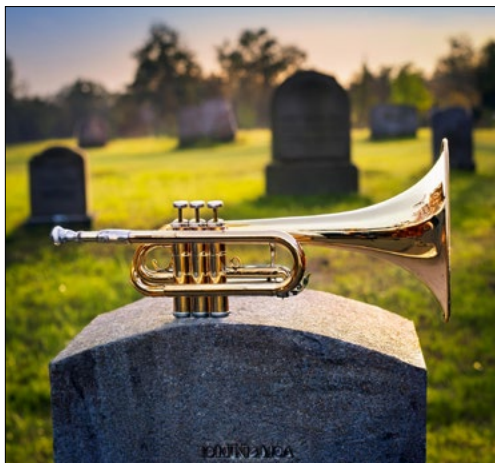
“Are you kidding?”

Scotty asks rhetorically, his preferred method of questioning. “We find out during his funeral he didn’t leave us anything?” His forehead crinkles as he looks to me to mediate, but before I intercede, I’m taken out of the moment by a powerful waft of Old Spice, dad’s cologne.

“Dad’s cologne is making its final appearance,” I say.

“Yeah, it’s so gnarly, did they drown him in Old Spice?” Scotty asks Dot as he notices a floor fan blowing hot air. “Is that how he died?”

“The sense of smell is evocative,” I say. “Creates an immediate connection with someone, particularly someone dear. The



use of a loved one's favorite fragrance on their remains at the visitation can bring comfort to the family during a very stressful time, immediately creating a touching memory of better days. Some people are so connected to a particular fragrance that the fragrance, even on someone else, can elicit a wonderful, nostalgic response.”

“Dude, did someone write that for you?” Scotty asks.

“You have five minutes to say your goodbyes, boys,” Dot says. “The funeral needs to start on time and your father's friends are waiting to say their goodbyes. Trumpet stays. He wanted it in his arms exactly like that. It's in his Final Arrangements video.”

Dot looks at her iPhone and turns it to the boys. Dad's face. Dot hits play. Dad's talking.

“I want my trumpet in my arms,” Rusty says in a closeup on video.

Dot tucks the iPhone into her purse and exits frame. Scotty starts crying. I remain stoic, alive, and well and move to stand over our dead dad. Every parent dies, but not all of us can say goodbye the way I'm about to. I am Howard. You are Howard. We are all Howard.

“Dad,” I say. “Don't take this the wrong way, you look better dead. Surprised, not surprised you didn't leave us anything. But nothing, literally? No photos, or clothes?” I take the time and take

in that the game of father and son is over. “You were awesome when I was a very little kid, and I’ll always miss dad one point zero. I saw the part of your video where you want me to deliver a great performance for your eulogy. I’m no actor, so I’ll try to do you a solid. I’ll help with your lasting impression because I know you believe your legacy is important and the audience will be paying attention to what I say. Have a good day.” I tug on Scotty who’s hysterical. “Your turn.”

“I’m too mad, can’t say anything right now. He left me nothing. I don’t need his money, obviously. It’s the principle that he left me nothing. I must have the trumpet.”

“Let go,” I say tugging at his coat.

“Let go of my coat. I can’t deal right now.” Scotty touches the trumpet’s mouthpiece. He sniffs his fingers. “J&B,” he says with his eyes closed. “Memory of him playing it at my bdays.” He opens his eyes and looks at me. We both scan the room. Scotty pulls at the trumpet. It’s stuck in dad’s *rigor mortis* arms. “I need the trumpet.”

“Leave it, dad’s final wishes.”

Scotty tries to move dad’s arm. He leans into the casket, and with one arm against the inside of the casket, and the other on the trumpet, he yanks it out. Out of frame, Dot shows and snatches the trumpet.

“Where did you come from?” I ask.

“You literally appeared from nowhere,” Scotty says.

“Scotty, how dare you disobey your father’s final wishes,” Dot says. “The trumpet stays. It’s in his video.” She tucks it under dad’s arms in its final resting place. She takes off one of her six gold costume jewelry necklaces and ties it around the trumpet’s valves to Rusty’s forearm—connecting the instrument to him for eternity.

“I never saw his will,” Scotty says.

“And you never saw his video,” Dot says.

“I can’t handle it,” Scotty says. “And not how I want to remember him.”

“You’ve run out of time; Artie is waiting to say goodbye. That’s a wrap, boys.”

Scotty dips into the casket and hugs dead dad, inconspicuously tugging at the trumpet. He whispers, “dad, how could you? I know the trumpet is your first born but come on... and your hairpieces too. I could have used them.”

A kitchen timer ding. Dot holds the culprit—one of those dial styled gizmos and says, “Time’s up, funeral needs to run on time.”

The door opens. *Ta-dah*. Artie, oh Artie, you’ve aged like raw hamburger meat sizzling on the Venice boardwalk. Camouflage black cargo pants, V-neck black tee, and Member’s

Only black jacket. Call the fashion police! Good for him, kept his tan, but his hair abandoned the island of Dr. Morose. Artie stands checking out the casket, avoiding a look see at his dead pal. Me and Scotty step back. Artie shuffles closer to the casket, chickening. Dot holds Artie's hand and guides him to the casket. Artie peeks.

“Oh, Jesus, Rusty,” Artie says. “You are dead.”

Scotty leans into my ear and says, “I’m going to run over to the Target across the street during the Rabbi’s opening monologue and get a toy trumpet so we can do a swap. Dad wouldn’t know the difference.”

Rabbi Heller pops out from behind the curtain. Classic Jew—mid-sixties, maybe five foot three, wire-rimmed glasses, wavy dark brown hair (dye-job), dark brown three-piece suit, and maroon velvet yarmulke.

I ask, “Where did you come from?”

“Yeah, you literally appeared from nowhere,” Scotty says. “Is that in dad’s video too, characters just popping into scenes?”

“Service starts rolling in ten minutes,” Rabbi Heller says. “The order of eulogies is Artie hitting lead off, Scotty up second, Howard third, Miles hitting clean-up and closing, each doing a tight five.”

Rabbi Heller leans over the casket. Get this, he says, “Rusty,

that's the order, right?"

A beat. Dad's voice says, "The order of eulogies is Artie hitting lead off..." Dot holds up her damn iPhone. Dad's Final Arrangement Video Starring Dad's face is paused. She presses play. Dad's video rolls, "Scotty up second, Howard third, Miles hitting clean-up and closing, each doing a tight five."

"Turn that off—it's morbid," Scotty yells then exits out of frame.

Rabbi Heller stands at the podium in the chapel facing a congregation of a dozen or so wishing to send Rusty Hyman Longacre off to the afterlife. Miles Longacre, the youngest of the Saidel brothers, who kept his father's last name after their parents' divorce, sits front row to the right of Dot. Miles is fifty-one, wearing mustard yellow slacks, a Kobe Bryant Lakers 8 jersey, and a purple vintage sport coat, eerily like Rusty's death costume. The aisle separates Miles from us, my wife Adela of eighteen years, our two kids Gabe, age fourteen and Rose, age seventeen in the front row, with Scotty on the far left shielding us from Miles.

"Welcome, but before we officially begin," Rabbi Heller says. "Some housekeeping. Given we've got the Depends crowd in house today, I'll skip the part about where the bathrooms are, but in case you're in the swollen prostate crew, it's just outside the chapel." Rabbi Heller waits for the joke to land. It doesn't.

“Our staff working the service today were big fans of Rusty, and to Dot and the boys, we are all sorry for your loss. There are four eulogizers this morning and they’ve agreed to keep to under five minutes so we can vacate the chapel no later than eleven-thirty. We need to turn the room for the Karlin’s who lost their beloved Mitchell—great man, great doctor, great philanthropist, who gave so much to this community. Mitchell left us too early but did it on his own terms. God bless you, Mitchell. This gives us an hour and change to celebrate the life of Rusty. Who doesn’t love a quick service? Raise their hand.” The audience offers smeared looks of confusion. “I knew Rusty for forty years, seven months and twenty-three days. Our relationship was more like a prison sentence. Kidding. Guess that one didn’t land either. We’re here for Rusty’s celebration of life.” Dot raises her hand. “Yes, Dot?”

“He said not to call it a celebration of life,” she says. “He wants everyone to be sad that he died.”

“Is that in his Final Arrangements video too?” Scotty asks.

“Yes,” Dot says.

“Rusty was one of the funniest comedians I’d ever met, but what he really wanted to be was a Dixie Band trumpeter. I admired how he wished he volunteered for youth basketball in South Central, but what’s clear is he didn’t have enough money to bribe enough to have get a packed house. But seriously folks, Rusty loved nothing more than his trumpet. That’s my time.”

Rabbi Heller waits for the applause, but since he needs to turn the room, I get his attention by pointing at my watch and then Miles says, “Rabbi Bro, it’s not Dame time.”

“Let’s bring our first eulogizer up,” Rabbi Heller says. “Lester was Rusty’s business manager for many years and had a front-row seat to his mediocre finances.” Lester, an overly tanned-white haired man in his late sixties, sitting in the third row, waves his hand, declining to come up to the podium. “Lester, Rusty wrote a part for you as the first eulogizer.”

“I changed my mind,” Lester says.

Dot stands and turns around. “You have to Lester. It’s in the Final Arrangements video.”

“Rusty wouldn’t mind,” Lester says.

“It’s in the video, Lester—let’s go,” Dot says moving into the aisle.

Scotty’s staring at the ceiling. I whistle and motion my chin for him to get going. He squints. I play a pretend trumpet. He gives me a thumbs up and leaves as Dot is at Lester trying to get him to stand. He refuses. Dot wraps her arms around his upper torso and lifts him. Lester had pissed his pants which explains why he didn’t want to perform. This scene will go on for a bit, so I slip out too.

Scotty stands over the open casket. The trumpet is tied to

Rusty's arm with Dot's necklace. Some things never change. Dot and Lester bicker on the other side of the curtain. Scotty unties the necklace. He asks me to lift dad's trumpet arm. It's immovable. I wedge my hand underneath dad's arm and Scotty pulls up on the trumpet—dad's arm goes snap, crackle, pop. Rusty's arm is a backwards V. Scotty faints. I do what I normally do in a crisis. I calm. My sympathetic nervous system chills me. I plug Scotty's nose. He gasps and arises. I get him to his feet. He puts his hands over his eyes, cracks them, then eyes the casket.

"I broke dad's trumpet playing arm," Scotty says. "He'd kill me."

"He's dead," I say and move dad's broken arm back in place.

Scotty cringes then stashes the trumpet under the casket as Dot magically appears and yells, "Put. Back. The. Trumpet."

"You literally appeared from nowhere," Scotty says.

Rabbi Heller cracks the curtain as Dot places the trumpet back into the casket as if the piece of metal were a sleeping newborn. Scotty stands in the corner like a punch-drunk boxer in between rounds of a WBC welterweight fight.

"The Karlin's are starting to assemble outside the chapel," Rabbi Heller says. "And we need to stay on script for Rusty."

Me and the little big bro acquiesce back to front row of the freak show. Rabbi Heller lowers the mic, leans down and says, "sorry for the disturbance folks. Let's call up Artie, Rusty's best friend and joke writer."

“I can’t believe I broke dad’s trumpet arm,” Scotty says. “I’m so traumatized.”

“We almost had the trumpet,” I whisper to him. “When the casket leaves the chapel, it’ll be closed. It could have worked.”

“I can’t get his broken arm out of my head. Do I have PTSD now? You’re going fourth, so you should run across the street and buy a trumpet from Target.”

“They don’t sell toy trumpets,” I say. “I checked online.”

“Best Buy is next door to Target,” Scotty says.

“They don’t sell trumpets, I checked.”

“Dad left us nothing and that trumpet was my entire childhood,” Scotty says.

“Time to enter adolescence,” I say.

“Are you boys done with your little dialogue scene?” Rabbi Heller asks me and Scotty.

Dot leans over with dagger eyes and says, “Boys, this wasn’t in your father’s video, keep quiet.”

She pats Artie’s back to get him on the move. He stands on uncertain ground, wobbly. Dot produces his cane and now he’s able. He slithers to the podium and gazes at Dot who’s looking behind her. The crowd is ready. She gives Artie a thumbs up.

“Rusty and I were best friends for fifty something years,” he

says, still looking at Dot and patting down his whitewash comb over with his skeletal hand. “Dot, dear Dot. I’m so sorry for your loss. Looks you and I can now get on with our lives together.”

The congregation gasps. Scotty leans over to me and asks, “does that mean Artie’s been boning Dot?”

“Now’s the time to make a run for the trumpet,” I say.

“Folks, I didn’t mean it like that,” Artie says. “Dot and I aren’t having an affair, anymore.”

Squirm, Dot, squirm. But she doesn’t. We knew dad knew about it. I heard it bothered him at first, but after a while he got alright with the arrangement. He and Dot stopped sharing a bed after he had his double hip replacement and despite him announcing he was the hippest guy in town, he developed a thing for Oxy. Moron.

“I wanted to keep an eye on her when he was dealing with his surgeries,” Artie says. “That’s what friends are for you know?”

Dot’s crying is mysteriously vague. Maybe embarrassed. No better time than the present. I slip out the back exit and along the side of the chapel I go, but before I enter the temple of doom, a groundskeeper who’s having a smoke, flipping through a copy of *American Turf Monthly*—the horse handicapper’s rag, says at me, “Your pops was funny. He cast me as his digger. I dug his hole.”

He offers me a smoke, priming me to join his tribe. I ignore the

stick. “Crazy story how he got that trumpet.”

I take the smoke to give the digger the impression he and I have a bond as smokers, a once honored stigma. The bond will lower his guard so I can pry if need be.

“His dad bought it for him for his thirteenth birthday present since he didn’t get a bar-mitzvah.”

“He told you that?” He flicks his Bic.

I don’t light up and say, “I’m waiting to savoir it. Where did hear about his trumpet?”

“I read in Jazziz—they bring the stories behind the music.”

“Never heard that story.”

“Your daddy wanted his grave to have a sloped bottom, leaning left. Saw it in his Final Arrangement video. Been here twenty-three years, first time I ever saw a how-to funeral video. Thing was kind of a crowd pleaser if you ask me.”

I thank him for the smoke, chin a bye-bye and hit the chapel door depositing the American Spirit in the trash.

I enter the casket room, lock the door, and then head down to lean over dead dad. His broken arm is in a solid V. Broken arm on dead guy wasn’t in the script—sorry dad, sometimes even the great script needs a punch-up on the set. The trumpet slips out like a lubed fill in the blanks. I put the trumpet above dad’s hairpiece. When the Saidel Brothers get their shit together, the

swap will be a cinch, according to me, the wise one.

“Thanks for that stirring eulogy, Artie,” Rabbi Heller says on the other side of the curtain. “Scotty, Rusty’s second born, is up. Come on down, for the price is right!”

I plant down on the front row next to my wife and kids as Scotty stands at the podium about to give his eulogy. But he’s distracted by Artie and Dot holding hands in the front row.

Scotty turns to Rabbi Heller at the rear of the stage and says, “You can’t let Dot bury the trumpet with dad. It’s metal. Jews can’t get buried with metal. You should know better.”

“Dot paid extra,” Rabbi Heller says. “Proceed with your eulogy, I need to turn the room.”

“You know my dad would want me to have his trumpet.”

“Then he would have put it in the Final Arrangements video.”

“Plus, you’re being blasphemous with letting him be buried with metal.”

“Those were his final wishes,” Rabbi Heller says. “Please, get on with the show.”

Scotty faces the congregation. His mouth can’t make a word. He begins crying. He waves for me to join him. I stay put. Scotty waits. He lowers his head. It sinks in. He must perform a solo.

“The trumpet was his first born and the reason why my parents divorced,” Scotty says as he sleeve-dries his tears and continues his pathetic monologue, “He played the same trumpet at my first birthday and every b-day until I turned twenty-one. He told me I wouldn’t need a trumpet player once I was old enough to drink. That joke never landed.

He brought the same trumpet to my middle school and high school graduations. When I was getting my diplomas, he played When The Saints Go Marching In and imitated Louis Armstrong. Literally, from the audience. It got laughs. My friends said I had the coolest dad ever.” Scotty looks at me, wipes his tears with his yarmulke and then looks at Connie Stevens and the publicist from the Lakers. Connie gives Scotty an A-OK hand gesture. “He blew the trumpet as my alarm on school days. He blew the trumpet when I refused to take out the trash. This all happened before Howard and Miles were born since they’re way younger than me. When Cee-Cee, our sister died last year, he played Taps, the bugle song they use in war movies. But my best memory is when he let me play it on my birthday. I could taste the J&B on the mouthpiece. It had a smoky peat, but sweet like caramel corn.

He wasn’t the dad who did sports with me or took me on vacations since my parents divorced when dad refused to get rid of his trumpet so he could be a good husband. He was a good dad. He cared about me. He loaned me money for my first real estate deal when I dropped out of college. Yeah, I paid him back.

and kept giving him and Dot fifteen hundred bucks a month for the past twenty years to help pay their mortgage. And now Dot won't let me have his trumpet. Do you think that's fair she's burying it in his casket?"

"No," the congregation yells.

"See! Dot," Scotty says. "Let me have the trumpet."

"It's your father's wishes," Dot says sitting on her hands in the front row, as if to warm her cat claws. "Finish your monologue."

"Everyone agrees with me Dot—release the trumpet."

"I made a promise to your father," she says. "Those were his final wishes." Dot looks at me and mouths, final wishes.

"Release the trumpet," Scotty says as he waves his hands to get the crowd going.

"Release the trumpet," the congregation yells.

Scotty stares at Dot as the congregation chants, release the trumpet, release the trumpet. As the chants get louder, he says to Dot, "And you paid Rabbi Heller extra to allow my father, a total Jew, to be buried with metal."

"Boo Rabbi Heller," the congregation yells.

"Release the trumpet," Scotty chants.

"Release the trumpet," the congregation chants.

Rabbi Heller, preventing an insurrection, nudges Scotty aside

and waves his hands for peace in the Middle East as if he was Gaddafi. The congregation silences. “We’re here to honor the memory of our beloved Rusty Hyman Longacre. Say goodbye is always complicated. But it’s not goodbye. We will keep his memory alive by keep an ongoing dialogue with him and hold him in our heart and keep photographs near —”

“—and let me keep the trumpet near,” Scotty says then grabs the mic to yell, “Release the trumpet! Release his first born!”

Rabbi Heller snatches Scotty’s yarmulke and covers the mic like a dirty secret. The congregation gasps. Scotty returns to his seat yarmulke-less, his exposed bald head leaning on my buff shoulder. Agitated with a heavy breath, I slide to the right, forcing Scotty to take his head back.

Breathing heavy is usually a precursor to a panic attack. For me, it’s air fueled adrenaline. My pipes are flooded with exhilaration. The eulogy I’m about to deliver will be a lie and I’m feeling good about it. Sure, I’ll get emotional, the tears will be real, but the whole speech will be a lie. I’m doing dad a favor by cementing his legacy the way he wanted—please the mourners. My send off for dad is to help leave his legacy intact by controlling how he’s viewed. A eulogy is the perfect device. The crowd is vulnerable. Eulogizers have the power to imprint how the dead is remembered.

A lot of his old nameless friends on the fringes of show

business are here. Connie Stevens is in third row. I'll play a few lines to her. I'll hold a few seconds looking at the long-time publicist from the Lakers. The story how my father made him eat raw hamburger at thirteen instead of getting a bar mitzvah as a rite of passage will be a real crowd pleaser. They knew him one way. I knew him another. As eulogies go, I'm an experienced actor. This will be the third eulogy to a third family member within thirteen months, but I'm about to deliver the performance of a lifetime.

I whisper to Scotty, "My eulogy is going burn the running time in our dramedy. Now is your shot to take back the trumpet. Easy access. Near his head."

Me and the bro fist bump. I button my sport coat and get to the podium. I clench the fists, lower the readers, and look at the screenplay formatted two-pager.

"When my mother passed away last year," I say and exhale loudly. "I exhaled, I felt relief. When my sister passed away, five months after her, I exhaled. I felt some relief." My wife is tearing. It's working so far. "Last Sunday, on Mother's Day, I got the call. Dad wasn't doing well. He was in hospice. We needed to see him ASAP. I knew he wasn't doing well but didn't know where on the not-doing-well scale he was. We planned on seeing him over Memorial Day Weekend. But last Sunday, when I got the call, I wasn't ready to exhale. He was the one supposed to hit a

hundred, supposed to outlive all the other comedians from his era. He was supposed to live long enough to see his beloved Lakers get their act together.” Scotty jaw drops as he stares at me. I eyebrow up, signaling him to make a run for the trumpet.

Scotty moves his fingers in circular motion for me to keep going. He’s enthralled. “It’s been five days since he passed. His wife Dot, myself, my wife and children, Scotty and Miles and a few others were there with him last week, by his side. Thank you, Dot for allowing us to help dad transition. He was not in any pain, he wasn’t suffering. He was lucid and responding. But something caught my attention. He had a mic in his right hand and his trumpet in the left. It’s how he knows how to get your attention. When he wanted to say something, he put the mic to his mouth and moved his lips. But as the days went by the mic and trumpet became heavier. He died a good death, with Dot by his side. With a mic in his hand, he exited frame, not when the opening act time allowed, but when he wanted to. He left on his terms. The way he lived his life. He set the bar on how to live a full life. He set the bar on how to die, the right way.

My dad’s ninety-two is everyone else’s hundred and twenty. He grabbed every minute from life to the very end. Death is a funny business. It plays tricks with you. You hear I’m sorry for your loss a lot. I’ve heard it a lot this past week and heard it a lot since my mom died last April and my sister the following

October. Having become an expert in grieving this past year, his is a different kind of loss. Because I don't feel relief. I wasn't ready to exhale.

There's only one Rusty Longacre and we each own a little piece of him. We all have our Rusty stories. He was so many things to so many people. Stand-up, musician, second husband, father, grandfather, uncle, brother, cousin, Brother Rusty. But it wasn't until he died that I realized who he was to me. Death forces you to stop and try to make some sense of someone else's life by processing the memories. You try to create a little home movie in your head. It usually doesn't play the way you want it to. That's just how it works.

Here's what I came up with for dad and here's what stuck out as if they're a deck of cards I'm laying out on a poker table: hamburger, swimming naked in the pool at our house, a frozen knife, scratching his arm, Vegas in the 70's and helping people; a lot of people. He had me eat raw hamburger meat with Lawry's salt as a rite of passage into manhood at age thirteen because I didn't get a bar-mitzvah." It gets a laugh.

I hold for a beat to play it out—the way he taught his kids. "He loved swimming naked, and would walk back into the house, and eat breakfast." This is the part I'd love to tell the crowd he had a crooked dick, leaned abnormally left. "Yeah, no towel, dripping with pool water, he'd have his first meal of the

day, which spoiled my appetite.” It gets a laugh. I hold. “When I did something bad, he pressed a frozen knife on my forearm for five seconds. There was always a knife in the freezer. The other punishment was scratching his arm. Five minutes on the forearm without stopping. He intentionally wanted me to remember how weird these punishments were.”

Dad had no clue what he was doing. Nothing intentional about his parenting style and didn't contextualize punishment in a way that taught me anything as a child. “It was brilliant and funny. I bragged to my friends I never got spanked, never got grounded. His punishments made my friends think he was the coolest dad ever. It was all in his master plan. Vegas in the 70's; watching him perform, playing backstage with Connie Stevens' and Flip Wilson's kids, sitting on Tom Jones' lap one night, Elvis' lap another, dad streaking after a show, torches of my youth made for a greatest childhood. As the home movie in my head played over and over, what I was left with was the strong impression of him helping others. It hit me a few days ago he was a humanitarian.” Who am I kidding? No one is a humanitarian.

This is the part of the eulogy where I'm portraying dad as a three-dimensional character and Scotty is buying it, clapping silently. “In between the jokes, joking around, the *kibitzing*, the funny sounds he made, *bingda-bingda-boom*, the stage time, the trumpet, the constancy of him being on; he always

helped people. Yes, being funny and making people feel good is a way of helping people. But underneath that veneer was his drive to make people feel good about themselves, to give them confidence, to give them love, to care.

Throughout his sobriety, he reached out to guys who had problems, taking them to meetings. When he got his ten-year chip, and I stood next to him as a kid telling me he just won an Academy Award. He thanked people, told a few stories, then handed me his chip, told me not to lose it, and to give it back to him when we got home.

I remember him helping younger comics. Inside the body of a Jewish comic from Chicago was a preacher named Brother Rusty. When I left my career as a film director to go back to school to become a psychologist twenty years ago, everyone, except my dad, thought I was crazy. He was also a Navy guy. He loved talking about Veterans.

When I got married, he was the only one who didn't think I was crazy. He got it. When we had our first child, he got it. When the second one came along. He got it. He got it all." He didn't get any of it, but that passage had a nice flow and gave the crowd a sense he was connected to life events in my life. "As the years passed, our conversations were always about basketball, the VA and my kids and my family, but always the topic of family first. He drew a lot of pride in seeing me serve Veterans and to have a

family.

All of this came into focus after he died. Death forces you to make sense of a life. I've received a lot of well wishes since he passed away, each saying in their own way what a great guy he was. Pat Proft wrote, Rusty started a lot of careers. Helluva comedian. And a good soul. That summed it up. He helped. He was funny. He was a great person. His legacy belongs in each of us. When you see a trumpet, think of Rusty. When you see a young stand-up comic, think of Rusty. When you see a preacher, think of Rusty. Try to make others feel good about themselves, ask people how they're doing and try your best to make people laugh along the way. Rusty will be by your side coaching you, rooting you along. I'm sorry for each of your losses, especially my kids. Grandpa Rusty was the only ninety-two-year-old person who went before his time. But it's time to lay him to rest so he can play his trumpet in heaven, see his dad Hyman and his mom Lena, and get back on stage. I hear Elvis has been waiting a very long time for his opening act to warm up his crowd."

I flatten the single tear with my finger as the congregation, except for Dot and Miles, give a standing ovation. Rabbi Heller steps into frame squeezing me out. I head back to where I belong, my kids hugging me. I sit next to my wife and Scotty who leans in and whispers, "dude, did you hire Denzel

Washington to write that?”

“You fucked up,” I say. “The window to snatch the trumpet is gone.”

“I’m still traumatized. Can you do therapy with me on the way to the burial?”

Rabbi Heller says, “I know Miles was scheduled to deliver the closing eulogy, but unfortunately, we have gone over our allotted time.”

“Yo, rent-a-Rabbi!” Miles stands and says, “That’s not cool. At all.”

“I’m sorry, but we’ve gone over,” Rabbi Heller says.

“I’m Rusty’s only cool child,” Miles says as he walks to the podium. “They all came here to hear my monologue since I’m the famous one and I’m representing Dot.”

“I’m really sorry, Miles,” Rabbi Heller says. “But that’s a wrap.”

“You all want to hear my monologue, right?” Miles asks the congregation from the podium. Silence. “Come on, why else would you be here? I mean, me and Howard were supposed to be abortions. I should have a chance to talk about me and my dad and how I gave him a second chance at his career by having him open for me on the road. Dot, come up on stage so

we can kumbaya.”

“Release the trumpet,” Scotty shouts.

Miles takes the mic off the stand, paces the stage, and says, “I didn’t write anything, unlike my brothers who needed to prepare. I’m going off raw emotion which is truth and authentically organic improv. Please let me do my monologue.”

Rabbi Heller says, “I’m really sorry, but the Kaplan family is waiting in the wings.” He points to the exit. There’s a mass of mourners waiting—the faces pressed against the windows.

“Rabbi’s double-dipping,” Miles says.

“Another Rabbi is doing the Kaplan gig.” Rabbi Heller faces the congregation. “Rusty wanted the Preservation Hall Jazz Band to accompany the casket on its way to his final resting place. Please join the procession. If the first row can follow the casket.”

The curtain behind the podium opens. The closed casket is on a gurney ready to roll by twin ushers sporting obligatory black suits and maroon ties. Rabbi Heller raises his hands pinching his index fingers and thumbs holding an imaginary conductor’s stick and on cue the ushers push the casket into the aisle as up-tempo New Orleans Dixie Jazz music fades up. The casket passes Scotty who’s wailing and mumbling, release the trumpet, release the trumpet. My wife and kids follow the

casket. I give Scotty a brotherly push. Artie, Dot, Miles, Lester, and the rest of the congregation begin the final march.

“Time to let go,” I whisper to Scotty as we leave the chapel following the casket through a mosh pit of mourners.

“The trumpet is the only thing that makes me happy,” Scotty says.

“You’ve got your chicks, beach house in Diego and condos in Catalina.”

“Not at all. I need dad’s trumpet. I mean don’t you need anything of dad’s or anything, ever?”

“All I want in this moment is to be present. The root of suffering is attachment.”

“Dude, stop the psychobabble. I’m going to be severely depressed knowing it’s buried six feet under, and I’ll never touch it or taste his J&B again.”

“Take a shot of scotch,” I say.

I stand at the edge of the chapel at the beginning of the road that will lead us to the climax and remember what my Eastern Religion professor at NYU film school would say at the end of each class. In the end, only three things matter: how much you loved, how gently you lived, and how gracefully you let go of things not meant for you. So, I tell Scotty, “It’s just an object.”

“Not at all. My past is wrapped up in that instrument. It

reminds me when I was super happy. It connects me to dad forever. If I don't have it, I'll lose touch with dad."

"Take a picture of it, blow it up to hang on your wall. Make a wallet size version, keep it on you. Get a tattoo of it."

"Don't be an idiot," Scotty says. "Jews can't get tattoos."

The Kaplan Klan pushes past Rusty's rolling casket, swarming the chapel to celebrate the life of their beloved dead body, knocking down an oldster or two. The assigned Kaplan Rabbi and Rabbi Heller face off at the chapel entrance—a UFC style stare down, nose to nose until Connie Stevens widgets her arm in between the Kosher meat and while music fades up, me and Scotty drift towards the fountain of youth at the roundabout.

On the road outside the chapel is the seven-piece Preservation Hall Jazz Band playing When the Saints Go Marching In. The casket moves through the dwindling Kaplan Klan to the open road. Me and Scotty follow the casket, followed by a Dot, Miles, and Artie and the rest of dad's congregation trails like snails on a dry beach in August as we begin our march to dad's everlasting whatever.

"That's dad's song and his favorite band," Scotty says to me as his lower lip quivers. Here comes the cry. "I didn't know there'd be a band."

“It was in his will,” Dot says from a few feet away.

“The trumpet wasn’t,” Scotty says back at her.

“You’d know if you watched the Final Arrangements video,” Dot says louder and flashes her iPhone, dad’s frozen image from the video appears.

As the procession continues, the mid-morning light streaks a palette of grief like a Jackson Pollack scatter plot, filled with micro images of childhood memories like a flickering slideshow in a dark basement. Scotty’s stupid trumpeting birthdays through the years. Me at Ponyland, the little kid’s amusement park where divorced dads spent their negotiated custody time. Dad put me on Destroyer, the fastest pony, and blew his trumpet as if I were on Secretariat in the starting gate at the Kentucky Derby. Every Sunday (dad’s day) he’d meet me at the finish line when Destroyer romped me the fun, but dad would take credit when he dropped me off to mom.

Tambourine clanking cuts the home movie in my head. We’re in wide shot of rolling hills, a corpse occupied Earth, headstones and mausoleums filled with vaults making my Hillside Memorial visit markedly solace and yet dad has the gall to continue the path towards his final resting place. The ushers push the casket up a sloping hill. We’re on the one-way road leading to our climax. The band slows their tempo so the

musicians can catch their winded breath.

Connie Stevens approaches me and Scotty while I contemplate the purpose of eulogies and Scotty stares at the ground. She says, “I really loved your father. He was a great man. He loved his trumpet, but he also loved his boys.” She points at the trumpet player. Black man, late sixties—black suit, black tie, black Stetson hat, but a rainbow of emotion—his horn, an extension of his soul and loudspeaker of God’s musical call signs. “He played in my band when your daddy opened for me at the Flamingo in Vegas in 1978.”

“Plot twist,” I say.

“Maybe he can help,” Connie Stevens says.

Me and Scotty catch up to the trumpet player who’s blowing a solo. Scotty asks, “How much would you sell us your trumpet for?”

The trumpet player takes his mouth off the piece, killing a mid-riff buzz. His clinched eyebrows, pierced lips, narrowed piercing stare telegraphs agitation.

Scotty says, “I’ll give you a thousand dollars.”

The band carries the tune as me, Scotty and the trumpet player get off the road and onto the grass in between Irving Fuller 1935-2000 and Brent Wynberg 1964-1981.

“A grand for my trumpet?” the trumpet player asks.

“Our dad’s trumpet is buried in his casket, and we need to swap,” I say.

“Jews can’t be buried with metal,” the trumpet player says.

“Exactly!” Scotty says. “Our dad played that trumpet in his act.”

“Rusty was a funny man,” the trumpet player says. “That piece is a collector’s item.”

“Yeah, for my collection,” Scotty says.

“Ask his wife,” the trumpet player says.

“She’s burying the trumpet to piss me off,” Scotty says.

“What’s that joke he had about women?” the trumpet player asks.

“Cunt hairs can move battleships,” Scotty says.

“Yeah, that one.”

“Bottom line,” I say. “The trumpet is supposed to be buried with him. It’s in his will and the Final Arrangements video.”

“Rusty made a video about his funeral? He was always a crowd pleaser. Guess we’re actors in his last show. Even though it wasn’t in the script, I’ll swap my piece out for his. Be an honor to play Rusty’s trumpet.”

“I keep my dad’s trumpet,” Scotty says. “And your trumpet gets buried with him as the stand-in.”

“I’d be a man without a trumpet,” the trumpet player says.

“We’ll buy you a new one, the best kind,” Scotty says. “We just need to figure out how to do the swap before he’s six feet under.”

“Been eyeing a Bach Standard in silver,” the trumpet player says. “Give me a grand for my piece and buy me a Bach.”

“Wowzer,” Scotty says.

“It’s yowzer,” the trumpet player says.

“That’s a great deal,” I tell Scotty. “He’s our last option.”

“You mean only option,” the trumpet player says.

The baritone trombone player, yards ahead, hollers at the trumpet player, waving him back with those rhythm wrists. The trumpet player fist bumps me and Scotty—his knuckles like doorknobs. He rejoins his people and plays on as the procession drifts uphill towards the burial site. I lock on Dot. Her stance tells me she’d been onto us.

Scotty and I argue over money. He thinks a grand and a new trumpet is too much. I convince him he has zero leverage then say, “We got our guy but need a plan to make the swap.”

Scotty says, “Dad would be so pissed we’re rewriting the ending of his Final Arrangement video.”

“This has nothing to do with his video,” I say.

The casket is parked at the open grave ready for a famished Mother Earth to swallow another brother. There is a canopy and four rows of fold up chairs. Dot and Artie sit front and center holding hands. Me and Scotty stand on the fringe of the canopy. On the road behind us is the band playing a slow tempo When The Saints Go Marching In. Rabbi Heller stands at the mobile podium next to the casket and holds a real conductor stick above his head and motions for the band to stop. They do. Rabbi Heller nods to the twin ushers. They open the casket.

“Rusty wanted to catch some rays before going underground,” Rabbi Heller says into the mic causing reverb feedback.

Scotty paces and whispers each time he passes my head, “Hey jerk monkey, this is our last chance, what’s the plan?”

“I’m glad I let go of the trumpet years ago,” I tell him.

“If you care about my mental health, you’d do something.”

The smoking groundskeeper I had a brief scene outside the chapel is sitting in the golf cart on the road with his dig partner. We exchange nods as he offers me a smoke at a distance enticing me into joining his smoker’s tribe.

“Rusty was a dreamer,” Rabbi Heller says and then continues with an incoherent non-sequitur string of sentences as I hit up the groundskeeper for a smoke.

The groundskeeper offers me an American Spirit and flicks his Bic. Here's my photo op as the smoking imposter, but decline the light and say, "Saving it for when my dad is buried and in heaven." Hell, no will I puff. I quit December 31, 1999, in fear of Y2K and threat from my then girlfriend who I proposed to the next day. For a decade, I was two-pack Shakur per day and was no quitter. But Adela said she'd never have kids with me unless I was nicotine free—something about not wanting deformed children. You see, I sacrificed a smoker's life for the family life, and our kids turned out perfect.

I whisper something to the groundskeeper you can't hear. I ain't one of those plot spoilers. Me and the groundskeeper fist bump, then he and his dig partner ditch the golf cart and head out on foot down the way, a smokestack of Spirits trailing. If there was a foggy haze, we'd be living in noir.

I chum up to the trumpet player who's standing roadside with the muted band. He hands his piece to me. As trumpets go, this is on the light side. Shiny and silver too. Could be a dead giveaway as a fake, but you get what you get in life. I pull him back and whisper in his ear—yeah, you hear nothing. He hands his Stetson to the tambourine player who bangs it against his hand.

A beat. Sprinklers go on. Congregation scatters. Rabbi Heller sprints off. Me and the trumpet player hit the casket

using our coats as cover.

We look down on dad. He's drenched. His makeup smeared. About time he looks like a real dead guy. Dad's good arm is locked onto the trumpet. The damn sprinklers are doing a fine job getting me and the trumpet player Saigon typhoon soggy. I need an assist and tell the trumpet player not to break dad's arm—two broken arms will make knocking on heaven's door difficult. The trumpet player, too wet to talk, jimmies Rusty's arm by sliding his hand under his forearm. The trumpet slips out. I hand the trumpet player Rusty's trumpet as he slides in the stand-in. Operation: Release The Trumpet is complete.

Me and the trumpet player galosh our way across the road and take cover in the indoor/outdoor building that houses caskets above ground in vaults for the Jews who don't like dirt. We take refuge like men on the run in an open room, a makeshift kitchen with stacked plastic flower holders lined on the counter. We paper towel dry off. A dry and beaming Scotty enters the scene and asks, "Can I now have my dad's trumpet?"

"As soon as I get two grand," the trumpet player says.

"Wait, two grand, you serious?" Scotty asks.

"I'm attached to Rusty's piece," he says clutching the trumpet. "It's heavy. It's soulful. It's mine."

"We had a deal," I say.

“And the deal was you’d get me a trumpet to replace mine,” he says. “I’m keeping Rusty’s as collateral.”

The trumpet player wets his lips, puts this mouth on the piece and belts a few somber notes of *When the Saints Go Marching In*.

“Dude, come on,” Scotty says. “Stop playing. Release the trumpet.”

Scotty yanks it from the trumpet player interrupting dad’s favorite song. He closes his eyes and hugs it. The trumpet player yanks it back. Scotty grabs the bell of the trumpet with both hands and tugs. The trumpet player cold-cocks Scotty dropping my poor little big bro to the ground. Now we have a situation.

“WBC welterweight in the early eighties,” the trumpet player says.

“You didn’t have to knock him out,” I say looking down on an unconscious Scotty.

“Every K.O. I got in my career gave me more leverage,” the trumpet player says. “Moved me up the ranks. I want five grand for Rusty’s trumpet.”

“That’s extortion,” I say.

“This is more than a trumpet—it’s a priceless family heirloom,” the trumpet player says. “I’m on tour, flying out in

the morning. Catch me if you can. Until then, Rusty Longacre lives on through me.”

Extreme close-up of a trumpet, it's brass once upon a time living life as a majestic sheen, the lead pipe and valves now scratched, the instrument attached to a red and black guitar strap—a life's worth of tunes will eternally be in key.

Close-up on the trumpet player walking down the road, the trumpet, a lifelong signature prop for Rusty Hyman Longacre, is clutched by a reborn seventy-something musician with his new instrument.

Out of frame, soars a horizontal body in a black sequin dress, tackling the trumpet player. Dot hops to her feet, snatches the trumpet, and marches to her own beat, back to the casket to lay it in its promised final resting place.

We are close on the Saidel Brothers—me, the wise one, shaking Scotty's torso, the trumpet-less unconscious one who's arms are spread like wings. I begin chest compressions. My little big bro doesn't wake. I pound sand. There are things in life you can't control, but you can control your legacy. Be of service to others, ward off greed as it creeps in, let go of things that cause you grief. There's no such thing as a good death, only a good enough death. Let those you leave behind give the eulogy they want, let them tell their story. Let us all define who you are by sharing the different ingredients of you that make a whole person. We'll keep

you alive if only you let us go.

Scotty twitches to consciousness, and holds up an imaginary trumpet then mumbles, “release the trumpet.”

Medium shot on a casket, the trumpet, a signature prop, is clutched by dad, ninety-three and dead, dressed in a purple suit, yellow tie, his makeup, and hairpiece besieged by water, projecting an image of an emaciated corpse but his trumpet is working just fine, right on time for the big finale—the happy ending Rusty wanted in his Final Arrangements video, a real crowd pleaser.

We are on the wings of a fluttering angel ascending away from Hillside Memorial, one of two Jewish funeral homes in L.A.—this one along the 405-freeway, convenient for visitors of the dead to do a hit and run.//

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Peter Shore is a clinical and forensic psychologist living in Portland, Oregon, and has worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs since 2008. He is a nationally recognized expert in the areas of telemedicine and Suicidology and has published peer-reviewed articles, co-edited a Springer Publication, consulted on numerous research grants. In addition to holding degrees from New York University (BFA, Film & TV, Tisch School of the Arts), two master's degrees, and a doctorate in clinical psychology, Peter recently graduated from Bennington College with an MFA in writing and literature.

# So You Wanna Get Published in a Magazine?

An Article by Michael Barrington

I am often asked how do I get so many of my articles and short stories published; nine already this year. The glib answer I typically give is, “With difficulty.” I have written ten books and published more than fifty short stories or articles, but getting a story into a journal or magazine always has an air of mystery about it.

As a young writer, I started producing nonfiction articles because they were easier to write and were relatively easy to get published; book reviews, travel, and general interest stories. I wanted my name out there with my bio, so that readers would be attracted to and buy my novels. I wanted to establish my brand. But at heart, all I wanted to write was fiction and occasionally fantasy.

I had a truly great story which I honed, fine-tuned, had a professional editor review and beta tested it with two people. It was a masterpiece, a work of art! I thought I had done my homework by researching several publishers who appeared to want my genre, sent it off, and waited expectantly. Most rejected it, one did not respond. I was crushed. I was also very naïve! The immediate rejections were a blow

to my ego and brought me back to reality

I knew I could write fiction and write well, but obviously not good enough for publication. My sister played piano and spent years practicing, wanting to become a concert pianist, and I realized that if, when she started, she had told us that within one year she would be on some world stage, we would have laughed at her naivety. And yet here was I doing almost exactly that, believing that masterful writing was pure intuition and inspiration. Writing nonfiction was relatively easy, it was mainly a question of arranging factual items in an entertaining fashion. All I had to contend with was shelving my ego when, after submitting what I believed were exciting and brilliant pieces, and into which I had poured my heart and soul, they were shredded, cut or manipulated just because the magazine's art department needed more space, or a late advertisement had arrived. But I didn't really care. I wanted to write fiction.

If I were to take writing fictional short stories seriously, then I needed to hone and develop my craft. I remembered Hemingway's words, "There is very little to say about writing a short story unless you are a professional explainer. If you do it, you don't have to explain. If you cannot do it, no explanation will ever help." I had read Chekhov, loved the writing of Edna O'Brien, admired Alice Munro, was

inspired by Annie Proulx's *Breakback Mountain* and wanted to write like Anne Patchett. It was obvious there was no shortcut to closing the gap between my head and my hands; success would only come, I believed, through hours of practice. It would take dedicated time and lots of it. If I produced the right kind of material, then editors would have no choice but to be thrilled with my submissions!

So, I decided to set up a strict writing schedule and, in addition to the novel I was working on, committed to writing one short story each week until I was either tired of the process or felt I had nothing left to say. And I would do this for twelve weeks. I did not need prompts. There was no shortage of material in my head. I just had to express it on paper. Without deciding on length, I knew from experience they would be about 2,000/3,000 words, since that was my typical writing rhythm, my sweet spot, and I don't usually write to a formula. But I set no limits. It would be creative writing, pure and simple.

Whether I kept the finished product or not was not the point, it just had to be completed in a week. I pushed myself. My intent was not to build up a portfolio of stories that one day might be published, but to simply write, to develop my talent, to hone my craft. I spent hours editing, scrutinizing each word and phrase, frequently ending up with my

original version! But I wanted more. I recognized incredible writing when I read it. How could I emulate it? How was I to write the perfectly understated story but emotionally whole? Where were the words? I stretched myself using enigmatic, lyrical images, the power of ambiguous emotions. I searched for metaphors, similes and agonized over selecting a phrase. It was so difficult at first removing big strong emotions, love, hate, envy and searching for more subtle shades, too difficult to name. But I was learning. Just after week eight, I decided to test my results and sent out two pieces to beta readers. The feedback was positive. I was improving.

I was learning about myself not just as a writer but as a person. I usually write fast. A thousand words a day was easy, two thousand very doable. With so many stories inside me wanting to come out, I sometimes got ahead of myself. I couldn't write fast enough. And then it all changed, not radically, not dramatically, but I realized my new process was slowing me down considerably. A light bulb had gone off in my head. I usually got the words onto the paper as fast as I could, then started to edit and edit and edit. But now I was almost hesitant, cautious before putting anything down. I realized if I produced my work more carefully, took a more reflective approach with more attention to the subtleties of character development, word

choice, turn of phrase, nuances, and taking a less primary approach, my work would be of a much higher quality. Joyce Carol Oates-like? Not exactly, but getting there.

I already knew that writing a novel was radically different from the short story. The latter is an art form in itself, with a key being the use of economy in all aspects. With a limited mode of expression, I needed to help my readers read between the lines. I understood the elements of fine writing. Now I had to execute. An added challenge was that I was working on limited space, and every bit counted.

So, I began to purposefully experiment and challenge myself by trying various formats. And this was new territory for me. Newspapers, magazine articles, letters, emails, text messages all became instruments I could use.

I had to ask myself why the rush? What was driving me? Why couldn't I spend time smelling the roses and simply stroll through a labyrinth of exquisite, breathtaking words and phrases, savoring each one? And I began to slowly understand. Speed was not only holding me back from becoming the writer I wanted to be, it prevented me from being vulnerable, from fully entering into my stories. I needed to become more like a 'method actor' and become a 'method writer.' I needed to live my stories. As the process deepened, it helped me add better definition and a broad

spectrum of color to my characters, who were now becoming more human, more believable. It changed my writing style. I was now focusing on trying to get things right the first time around instead of just putting words and ideas onto the page. I was becoming more thoughtful, deliberate and aware of myself.

Writing a first draft had always been easy for me, but trying to turn it into a riveting piece of literature was not. To make it a piece of shimmering, potent



prose that would stand out from masses of submittal material, needed still yet more work. So I slogged away. When I thought I had worked a story as hard as I could, when there were no more iterations to be made, I would shelve it and start another story.

Three months later, after randomly selecting two stories for publication, (I had written fifteen at the time and decided that would be where I would stop the experiment), I had them scrutinized by beta readers. It was time to test

the market again. But why two? I believed that if I could get one story published, I might be able to repeat the experience by immediately submitting a second to the same publisher. I went through the typical writer's tiresome drudge of sifting through countless journals and magazines trying to match my genre, style, and content with those of a particular editor. I scrutinized back issues and tried to envisage their readership.

Having finally identified two journals, one a quarterly publication, the other a monthly, believing that statistically with twelve issues a year, my chances of being accepted would be higher in the latter. Making sure I understood the rubrics and all the requirements, I submitted the same story, a fictional fantasy (2,600 words), and waited. Both acknowledged receipt and indicated I would hear back in sixty days, but only if they were interested in publishing it. I was shocked when just two weeks later I received an unusual and rare email thanking me for my submittal, complete with a three-sentence paragraph of feedback explaining I had not developed my characters sufficiently and the plot was difficult to follow. Rejection was OK, but the comments! I was pissed and wondered what the editor was smoking when she (it was a lady) read my piece. I knew my work was good, but it seemed that my fantasy story had

gone completely over her head. A little confused but undeterred, I continued to write.

Five weeks later, the other journal responded. They loved my story, wanted to publish it and were requesting permission to also use it in an anthology they were preparing! I responded by thanking them and agreeing to their publication of the story. I also submitted another fantasy fiction to them (2,700 words). It was accepted immediately.

So how do I get my short stories published? My answer has not changed; ‘with difficulty.’ But I will probably never fully understand or fathom the mysteries of the publishing process or the apparent randomness of story selection. I have also developed a skin that is almost impermeable and bullet proof to editorial rejection. Yet, I continue to submit in the hope, belief and expectation that there is somebody out there who can recognize a well-written story worthy of publication. But at the end of the day, I have to write for that is who I am.

So was my crazy, obsessive and self-imposed, fifteen-week regimen, worth the effort. Absolutely. It became a daily routine, once I was into it. Sometimes I finished a story in a few days, others took longer which gave me time to work on my other project, namely a novel I am writing. Will I ever repeat the experiment – probably not. Would I recom-

mend it? Yes, in some form – maybe take a couple of weeks off from your normal writing schedule, hibernate with your laptop, focus solely on one piece until you have worked and re-worked every single word, then see how it reads. See if it has changed your writing rhythm. If you are a struggling writer, this disciplined and single-minded approach might help keep you focused and release your creative juices. It helped me learn about myself as a writer and that in turn has caused me to write a little differently, how I approach my craft. I know my skills improved, I now have a different mindset and I write at a different pace. But I also continue



to write because I have to. And therein lies my pleasure. Publishing be damned! //

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Barrington is a frequent contributor to this magazine. He lives near San Francisco and writes mainly historical novels: *Let the Peacock Sing*, *The Ethiopian Affair*, *Becoming Anya*, *The Baron of Bengal Street*, *No Room for Heroes*. *Passage to Murder* is a thriller set in San Francisco. *Magic at Stonehenge* is a short story collection. *Take a Priest Like You* is a memoir.

He has published more than 60 short stories and also blogs on his website: [www.mbwriter.net](http://www.mbwriter.net).

# HIKERS

A SHORT STORY BY EVAN KAISER

Radiant beneath a flaming mid-September sunset, the verdant hills of western Massachusetts beckoned like some primordial homeland. And the communing twosome had yet to reach their destination — a must-see lake shore universally espoused. But there were only a couple of hours of fading sunlight remaining, and a trailhead closer to the water promised a more efficient outset the next day. Meanwhile, back in Lenox, a dinner at a fine restaurant awaited, reservation set weeks in advance.

“Hey, babe, we’d better be heading back.”

Henry Doppel’s fiancé knelt by the trunk of a massive oak a few meters off the trail. Henry stood mid-trail twenty meters further on, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the ball of his hand. His words generated no response. He smiled, stole closer.

Charlotte had her phone out, snapping pictures of wildflowers at the base of an imposing old oak. Henry observed for a while and smiled.

“Hey, babe,” he repeated softly. “It’s getting late, and don’t forget about dinner. Waddaya say?”

Charlotte turned her head and squinted.

God, she's hot, though! What am I doing with this woman?

Charlotte was a year older than Henry but could easily have passed for ten years his junior. He would never have approached a woman of such vivacious beauty in a million years, but the propositioning had been all hers. That was eighteen months in the past, the day after Charlotte's boss and Henry parted ways.

Henry's solo accounting office was nearest Charlotte's office in the lower Hudson valley, and her boss, a solo practitioner personal injury attorney, needed some numbers crunched in a depo. Ultimately, said boss paid Henry a token amount, the case got settled, and Henry said goodbye to the counselor and his lovely secretary. Charlotte called him up the next day. Why? Henry had no clue — he was not deluded regarding his own threadbare attributes. So, Henry's perplexity over her motives was a bother from the first. But he'd be damned if he'd ever turn down a fox like Charlotte! Naturally, he'd see how it played out.

Well, Henry drew an inside straight. The pair were mutually smitten. Henry's every utterance proved an

enchantment — as far as he could tell from the gorgeous, bottomless brown peepers staring at him across various tables around town. Conversely, Charlotte's tale of financial ruin and heartbreak, shared in instant confidence, utterly bewitched drab, dour Henry. And their carnal attunement was considerable, Charlotte's praise thrilling Henry more than his own fulfillment, which was phenomenal.

And what was Charlotte's story that so captivated Henry? Two years before they met, Charlotte had been married and then abandoned by a financier twenty years her senior, who'd disappeared after transferring his firm's funds to a Latin American bank. That had left Charlotte in a condo which was then promptly seized by the Feds. It was then she headed north to take her legal assistant job, placing her in Henry's picturesque town an hour and a half north of New York City. As a consequence of this miserable recent history, Charlotte faced bank and tax troubles with which Henry was only too happy to help.

“Where does this bill come from, anyway?” asked Henry. “You have no money!”

“Right? They're crooks, Henry! Can you fix it?”

“You'd need a tax lawyer, I think. Unless...”

“Oh, Henry! Can't you just make it go away?”

Serious legerdemain would be required. But Henry was up for it. He was in love.

“Pro Bono!” he laughed.

Henry recategorized Charlotte’s prior income related to her ex. He excised references to the former husband from her tax forms. Her former address went up in smoke. As letters of inquiry from the banks and the Feds rolled in, Henry dispatched professional responses that materially severed Charlotte from her old consort. Charlotte’s financial and legal headaches evaporated.

Charlotte radiated gratitude. Still, accounting services are not a rare commodity, and generally don’t demand romantic interplay. And in the case of Henry and Charlotte, one would never have imagined such an apparently odd couple would last a month — initial infatuation or no. But Charlotte teased out Henry’s latent interest in birds — which scratched his itch for labeling and categorizing — and proclaimed that she loved birds, too! And Charlotte raved as well over the old-timey jazz Henry fired up on Spotify.

Henry was old enough to settle down, he figured. Charlotte vowed it was time to try again. Henry proposed. Charlotte assented.

Henry was agog! Lucky boy!

Now, since that glorious day, it hadn't been all red roses and sunny beaches. For example, was Henry frustrated that he couldn't pin down his lady love on a wedding date? Certainly — in Henry's mind, plans set sooner translated to more preferences met. And wasn't he miffed, repeatedly, when his intended shared a flirtatious phone call or embraced some male "old friend" on the street? Of course — where did all these 'buddies' come from during Charlotte's brief sojourn in town, anyway? And how about the nosedive in hanky-panky mere weeks after their engagement? Irksome? You bet! But...

Eh. Every relationship has its ups and downs. Wait it out, Henry, old boy.

And no gainsaying, Henry had a beautiful woman on his arm! He wrote off any uneasiness to his own messed up self. Charlotte was a miracle for the likes of him — not to be bungled!

Never forget — Charlotte's the normal one in this arrangement.

#

Charlotte stood by the tree and scrolled her pics for Henry's benefit. He grinned again and nodded.

“You gotta post them, sweetums,” he said.

Charlotte didn't respond directly. She just stood up, dusted herself off, and smiled. Henry checked the time on his phone.

“We're good, but we should leave now. It'll take us twenty minutes to get to the Jeep, then forty-five minutes to the B&B, then you gotta figure another hour, or hour and a half to clean up... So, that could leave us as little as thirty minutes to find the restaurant. Lenox is at least twenty minutes from our place.”



“Relax,” Charlotte scoffed. “Even after a beautiful day like today, you're still so wound up! We'll get there when we get there.”

“Well, if we miss the rez...”

“Then we'll eat somewhere else.”

“Okay.”

Henry stifled his agitation — but only to the degree his

nature permitted, which wasn't much. Had time suddenly become an infinite resource? Not in Henry's book! Not wanting to aggravate Charlotte further, he channeled his pique into his feet rather than into more verbiage. In minutes, Henry found himself far ahead of his girlfriend, who had tarried again by the side of the trail.

What's she stopping for at this point? Isn't it too dark to see anything by this point?

Shadows had spread, though they were nowhere near twilight on a cloudless day.

Over the next few minutes, Henry occasionally forced himself to pause, allowing Charlotte to catch up. Each time she did, he'd endeavor to conceal his impatience. It didn't work. Finally, Charlotte had enough.

"I told you to relax," Charlotte said, irritation palpable.

"I am relaxed. Take all the time you want," replied Henry, unconsciously checking his watch for a second before dropping his arms once again.

Charlotte sighed and brushed past him. Seconds later, Henry returned the favor.

Finally, early twilight did at last descend. Henry lost sight of his wife-to-be — not because of fading sunlight, but because he'd gotten too far ahead. The temperature ticked

downward.

*Geez, we should have been back to the Bed & Breakfast by now! Probably still another fifteen minutes to the Jeep. She's unbelievable!*

A distant figure materialized, approaching from the direction of the trailhead.

Henry's instinct in the past, often tested by Charlotte's unhurried pace, had always been to walk beside her whenever they crossed paths with strangers during their woodland strolls. And this time, she was once again far behind him, her binoculars glued to her face, lured by some new arboreal distraction.

His instinct once again foiled, Henry couldn't very well turn and accompany the intruder back toward Charlotte. That would be weird. So, vexed, and by nature attuned to threat, Henry simply registered the fellow's defining features as he passed, as best he could. Pinning the dude with tough-guy thoughts. At that moment, Charlotte trailed Henry by over thirty meters.

Setting out pretty late in the day, aren't you, Bub?

The twilight hiker, to Henry's eye, fit the profile of a nature tramper. An older fellow, he sported his thin, graying hair in a ponytail under a floppy, wide-brimmed

hat. He tucked his long pants into high socks and sported a fully equipped backpack. An assortment of tools hung from belt and zipper. Altogether though, innocuous — a hiker on a hiking trail. So much for the heroic ideation. Like a gazelle eyeing a wildebeest on the savanna, Henry sized him up in a heartbeat, promptly ignored him, and turned again to the task at hand.

Screw it. It's getting cold. She knows the way back.

With his fleeting alarm over the stranger dispensed with, Henry was done dallying. They were under twenty minutes from the lot — *finito!*

Charlotte's a big girl. No reason I can't wait for her in the Jeep! She can join me whenever she finishes ogling whatever's so freaking important in the freezing cold. How can she even see?

A minute later, though, worrying he had gone too far, the fickle Mr. Doppel stopped in his tracks. Finding a decent sized tree to lean against, Henry cast his troubled eyes back to check if Charlotte was on her way yet. Glanced at his watch. Drew a deep breath. Shivered.

We're cutting it close. I bet we end up with only half an hour back at the room to wash up. Let's go, Charlotte!

Henry labored to distract himself with the surrounding

wonder of the forest. After all, he hadn't ever been a reluctant co-traveller. If anything, he had been the more enthusiastic hiker of the two, ever since Charlotte first coaxed him along on a sanctuary ramble. Henry had even undertaken the lion's share of planning for this mini vacation, which revolved entirely around hiking and birdwatching. Henry gazed up into the canopy and inhaled the earthy aromas, striving to cleanse his mind with the serenity of the natural world. Tufted titmice, cicadas, and a distant jet overhead constituted the entire aural landscape. For a few wistful seconds, he wished he had set their dinner reservations later in the evening.

She always takes longer than I think she will. Why didn't I factor it in? Could've set it up better, left her enough time. This is on me, as usual.

Henry gazed back up the dirt path. It was hopeless. There was a schedule to keep!

"Babe? Charlotte?"

Henry narrowed his eyes and sifted through the twilight shadows up the trail.

Tell me you've found a tanager, Charlotte. Or an Indigo Bunting. Something worthwhile, not just some dumb wildflowers.

Groaning, Henry plodded rearward to collect his fiancé. As he did so, his already minuscule generosity of spirit leached away.

We won't even have time for showers, the way we're going. And if I say so much as a word, she'll torpedo dinner altogether.

He passed a gargantuan oak. And froze.

“Wait a second,” he said to nobody.

Spun around. Stared.

Henry recognized the spot. He drew up close and recalled the patch of wildflowers at the tree's base. He and his paramour had reconnoitered right there not twenty minutes earlier. Could Charlotte have turned around and headed back into the forest without telling him?

Nah — no way! Even Charlotte wouldn't pull a stunt like that!

Which way to go? Panic rising, Henry twirled like an uncertain weathervane. Might he have stormed right past Charlotte just now, as she knelt at the side of the trail? Absolutely! He momentarily allayed his fears that way, blaming, yet again, his own long-confessed obliviousness. For a few minutes, he was calm enough to conduct a meticulous search not only for Charlotte, but for any clues.

He started by reconnoitering a hundred meters in both directions.

Nothing.

Again, this time a hundred and fifty.

Nada.

“Shit-shit-shit!! Charlotte! Come on! I mean, come on! This cannot be happening!”

Henry's face glistened with sweat despite the nippiness. He repeated the hundred and fifty meter search, this time scouring beyond the edge of the path, on both sides — every branch, every pebble.

A depression in the brush? Yes! Dispersed vegetation across a few inches off the trail, some darkened earth...

My God. How did I miss it? It's obvious! The hiker! What's wrong with me?!

Shivers. Fog. Vertigo. Numbness. A whirlwind of disorientation. Should he dive back into the forest? No time to lose! Or was it better to run ahead and collar others in the parking lot, assemble a posse? Or should he just dial 911?

Easy call. Henry was, if anything, a by-the-book kind of guy.

The signal was weak, and he had to sprint a quarter mile toward the trailhead before he could get through.

“Hello? Nine-one-one? I need to report a missing person!”

He explained his predicament in a shaky voice. The 911 operator assured him help was on the way and instructed him to wait right where he was. Studiously obeying, Henry dared not stray to seek any other help. He simply shuffled his feet right where he was, in the middle of the dimming trail.

This is taking eons!

When should he call again? Henry was hoisting his phone toward a gap in the canopy and peering at the signal icon when the troops arrived.

It was a massive contingent. The lot by the roadway was almost a mile away, so the noise of the rescue vehicles arriving had never reached him. Instead, he first heard the tumult of the cops, EMTs, and firefighters barreling toward him seconds before the dust raised by their footfalls rolled in. As it approached, the swollen assembly served only to intensify Henry’s agitation until a cop popped out of the chaotic crowd.

“You Henry Doppell?”

“That’s right.”

“You reported a missing person.”

“An abduction, officer! Charlotte Springer is her name. She was right behind me, and this guy, this old guy with...”

“Hold on. Where did this happen? Nearby?”

Henry led the cop and the rest to the side of the path. He pointed at the disturbance of brush and soil.

“I think it happened here. Like I said, she was right behind me, and this guy walked by me in the other direction. Then, when I looked back, she was gone!”

“Okay. Let’s start at the top. What does Ms. Springer look like?”

The cop produced a notepad. But once the subject progressed beyond Charlotte’s physical appearance, Henry’s narrative flew apart, like a loose ball of string flung down a flight of stairs.

“Before we go any further, can I tell you about the guy? Before I forget? Okay. Listen. This sonuvabitch was six foot — easy — and had a ridiculous, overloaded backpack. This backpack, I gotta tell ya, well, anyway... This dude is up that trail,” here Henry pointed a shaky finger, “right now!” Henry paused, frowned. “Or, I mean, he could have gone around the other way to that whatchamacallit, that marsh

around to the north. But if he took her, who knows where he went, right? What was the question? He had a long nose. Does that help? Actually, I shouldn't say that. I take it back. I'm not sure about the nose. There were a lot of shadows. Aren't you gonna take samples, by the way? Isn't that blood? It could be, couldn't it? Oh, and before I forget, Charlotte's got two brothers, one in Maine and the other, I dunno, is in Oregon now. I think? Maybe? He's a wild man, anyway. I just mention that, you know, for your records. Anyway..."

On and on Henry went, long after the cop had shut his notebook. Those in the rescue party exchanged knowing glances.

A woman squeezed through the gaggle of first responders and stood with arms crossed, casting a quizzical expression at Henry but not saying a word.

Henry went on.

"Yeah, I'm used to walking on ahead. Charlotte tends to dawdle! It could be on a hike or just shopping — whatever. Even if there's someplace to, you know, really be. If something catches her eye, forget it. I'll look around and, like, 'where'd she go?' Ha, ha. But I'm telling you, this guy. This guy. He had all the gear. You know what I'm saying? This is an itty-bitty hiking path, when you get down to it,

and what does he need it all that crap for? The entire circuit here is five hours, tops! And look, he's got a canteen, he's got a backpack, he's got ropes, he's got a freaking knife! And the pockets on this character! Who knows what all those are for?!"

As Henry spilled out the last few words, his excited eyes finally fell on the raven-haired beauty standing beside the policeman. She regarded Henry blankly. He stopped talking and gulped.

"Um. Sorry, folks."

One of the EMTs scoffed noisily and spun away in scorn. The cop followed the direction of Henry's gaze, and his demeanor conveyed that he had put two and two together. He stared unblinkingly at Henry, and his glare demanded a response. Henry winced and tried to grin.

"Yeah. So, I don't know how I missed her, but yeah. This is Charlotte Springer. Hi, Charlotte."

"Okay, everyone," said the cop, addressing the disassembling troops. "We can all go home. Mr. Doppell says he's sorry."

"Idiot."

"What a jerk. Geez."

In minutes, the rescue team had departed, leaving Henry

and Charlotte to themselves. A breeze arrived with the looming dusk, and Henry shivered, shoving his hands in his pockets. Charlotte, arms still crossed, stood like a beautiful, timeless statue. Finally, Henry broke the silence.

“I thought...I didn’t see how you could have...I looked up and down! I was worried, Charlotte! I was so worried!”

Charlotte shook her head. Her expression conveyed more perplexity than anger.

Say something! I know I’m an idiot. I’m sorry! What do you want from me?

Charlotte sighed.

“Why wouldn’t you walk back to the car at least,” she asked, “before calling the damn police? What the hell’s wrong with you?”

Charlotte shook her head some more, turned away, and padded back to the car. Henry followed a few paces back, keeping his distance. When they reached the Jeep, he waited for Charlotte to start the engine before sliding into the passenger seat. They drove back to their lodging in silence.

Even after the hullabaloo on the trail, they weren’t particularly rushed for time. Henry still couldn’t help

stealing glances at the clock, though, as they cleaned up and got dressed. They arrived at Clancy's 75 Club in Pittsfield five minutes early and, thanks to their reservation, were seated right away, despite the crowd. Charlotte, in a fashionable, semi-casual blouse and skirt, was, as always, effortlessly stunning. Typically rumpled Henry regarded himself as dressed up because he wore a collared shirt. They accepted a table in a corner in back.

The highfalutin menu was predictably expensive. Henry unthinkingly turned up his nose at the prices.

“What’s the matter now, Henry?”

“Nothing. What?”

Charlotte scoffed.

Uh, oh.

“Just the prices. You know.”

“We’re on vacation. Skip dessert, if you like.”

Charlotte folded her menu and began scrolling her phone. Henry laid down his own bill of fare and scanned the restaurant. The place earned impeccable ratings online and, despite the interregnum between summer and peak fall foliage, on a Friday night at least, they were packed. Guests all appeared to be from out of town, a few not having bothered to change out of their hiking or birding or

‘forest bathing’ attire. Still, many others were dressed to the nines — including one fellow in particular, seated alone in a window seat.

What? No. No way.

The waiter appeared.

“Anything to drink?”

Charlotte ordered scotch on ice.

“Sir?”

“Huh? Oh. Soda water, please.”

When the waiter had gone, Charlotte asked Henry what was bugging him.

“Nothing. Just, I think I recognize the damn hiker from the trail — he’s sitting up front. Same guy just before, you know, I called the cops. Remember?”

“Sure. So what?”

“No what, Charlotte. Forget it. Doesn’t matter.”

Charlotte fidgeted, frowned, and ultimately returned her attention to her phone. As soon as her eyes dropped, Henry returned his gaze to the hiker and studied him forensically.

The man was in his upper fifties, possibly early sixties. His getup was lavish — herringbone, single-breasted, dark

burgundy jacket, pitch black tie and black shirt, suit pants, and inky, patent leather shoes. In place of the ponytail was a man bun — singularly incongruous, to Henry's way of thinking, for a man that age in that setting. The fellow exuded an air of fitness and confidence — summoning the waiter with haughty aplomb, ordering, fiddling with his phone. Then he stared out the window. Henry's threat meter flashed red.

Ah. Your natural plumage. I see you, motherfucker.

The waiter returned to take their orders. Charlotte requested a veggie option. Henry ordered steak.

“Rare, Henry? Since when?”

“Since today. I can try new things.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes and excused herself and repaired to the ladies' room.

Soon thereafter, the bloke in the suit pushed away from his table and headed for the restrooms as well. Various lunatic scenarios played in Henry's head. He tried to bat them aside.

Coincidence. When ya gotta go, ya gotta go.

And sure enough, Charlotte returned to the table with no untoward delay. She immediately brought out her phone again and started tapping away. The 'hiker' dude strolled

back to his solo table a few seconds later.

Henry couldn't find a way, without inviting a disdainful rejoinder, of asking his partner whether she had noticed the hiker in all his finery squeezing past her by the restrooms. In truth, there was nothing about Charlotte's appearance to suggest even an abridged licentious encounter.

Calm down, Henry. You're already in a heap of trouble. Don't push it.

Henry and Charlotte ate their meals in uneasy silence. Waiting for the check, Henry cleared his throat.

"Charlotte, I'm sorry I kinda ruined the hike today. Okay?"

Charlotte gazed blankly at her beau.

"It's fine, Henry. Forget it."

Henry kept talking.

"I think I'm getting more and more agitated about our not having set a wedding date," he said. "It's a box unchecked, Charlotte! A humongous black box that presses my buttons! So, *mea culpa*. But you see the issue."

"Mea culpa?"

"Absolutely. Totally. And I think, you know, you can help me out here. It's a simple thing, Charlotte."

“Ah. An intervention.”

“Yes! So, can we set a date?”

“This second?”

Charlotte ostentatiously swiped her phone, facial expression hard as nails.

I did it again.

“No, no! Later, Charlotte. I was just hoping we could agree...”

“No, Henry. Let’s do it now. We have phones, don’t we? Shall we run off to a judge tomorrow? Ha, ha. Just kidding — Henry Doppel elope? That would be one for posterity, wouldn’t it? No, not your style. After all, we have to leave time to plan, don’t we? So, year after next. Pick a month.”

Henry fumbled with his own phone, but Charlotte wouldn’t wait.

“Let’s say April 26. Twenty-twenty-six. That’s a Sunday. Yeah? Does that suit you, Henry?”

“Come on, Charlotte. Don’t be like this.”

“Be like what?”

The waiter brought the check. As Henry scanned the numbers in his usual painstaking way, Charlotte groaned. She closed her eyes for a second, blinked them open,

grabbed her jacket, and strode out. By the time Henry finished paying, she was long gone. He texted her without response. Casting a dirty look at the back of the hiker's head on his way out, Henry stormed out — inviting stares from the restaurant staff — and then back to the motel. But Charlotte had disappeared.

When do I call the cops? What if I get the same guy as before?

But that didn't become necessary. A response from Charlotte finally appeared on Henry's phone.

I'm fine, Henry. Headed home.

Are you kidding? Your stuff is still here!

Be a good boy and pack it for me. Drop it at my apartment.

Drop it? Won't I see you?

I don't know.

What about tonight? Where will you sleep?

I'm taking an Uber all the way home. Get some rest, Henry. Enjoy your holiday.

Charlotte was obviously done, though Henry kept texting for a while before giving up. He headed home himself the next morning, arriving in town just after noon. Stopping by Charlotte's apartment before his own, he discovered she

had already changed the lock. Forlorn, Henry trudged back down the stairs with Charlotte's bag. Her landlord grabbed him on his way out.

"Charlotte told me you'd come around," said the surly proprietor. "You can leave her stuff with me."

"Did she say when she'd be home? I'd like to speak to her."

"Actually, she said she'd be gone a while. Paid up her rent three months."

Alarmed and mystified, Henry handed Charlotte's bags to the fellow and then ran by Charlotte's legal office. She was nowhere to be found. And confounding Henry further, her boss and coworkers wouldn't even speak to him. Despondent and guilt-ridden, he figured Charlotte's truthful recounting of their Berkshires misadventure had turned her friends against him.

Henry took an extra week off from work. Slowly but surely, he shrugged off his melancholy and slid back into his old routine — eight to six at the office, evenings in front of the tube, Sunday brunch at the diner, and an occasional flurry of dating-app rendezvous.

And beneath all that, a disjointed train of thought occasionally surfacing, but never coalescing. An unsolvable, abiding puzzle.

What happened? Am I so much more compulsive than a billion other guys in the world? Any worse at the end of our affair than at the beginning? Makes no damn sense.

Years later, Henry hooked up with one of Charlotte's former co-workers, who conveyed the rumor that Charlotte had "made out alright for herself, living abroad." Better than 'alright,' in fact. Latin America, apparently. Henry settled down in his provincial burgh, fathered three kids, and never stopped wondering about the man in the burgundy suit. //

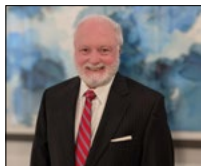
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Evan Kaiser is a retired physician who practiced primary care medicine in southeastern New England for over twenty-five years. He currently lives with his wife in the Providence, RI area and enjoys painting, reading, cooking, and birding.



# An Interview with Russell Little



Russell G. Little is a writer and practicing divorce attorney. *Murder for Me* is a fictionalized compilation of the many people he's encountered over his lifetime and thirty-two-year career. He lives in Houston, Texas, with his wife of thirty-two years, Melinda.

**Q: You are a practicing divorce attorney. What inspired you to transition into the role of Author, and what Was it about the cases that you felt would make compelling fiction.**

My love for fiction and writing predates my time as an attorney. I always aspired to be a writer, I just transitioned to attorney as a part of my life journey. As you move through your life, you come across a few, a very few individuals, unlike anyone else. I remembered those people as I came across them. And a few of those, I marked as potential characters in a book someday. During my legal career, I started my first book maybe twenty times. After my last child left for college, I finished *Murder for Me*.

**Q: From the time you started writing until you finished, what obstacles did you face?**

Ignorance was the first and most powerful. Ignorance of the work it involved. Of the necessary planning. The time. The Process. So many things. And I was able to overcome them by work and a refusal to give up. By continuing to fail, get angry and

about it, and then to get back to work. That's why I tell aspiring writers to get to work. Don't wait.

### **Q: What is your writing process like?**

I have intellectual goals with each book. I have the story in my head, list my characters. I then outline the story. As I do it, I'm making lists of characters, traits, and side stories. I then re-outline. This goes on awhile as I form the story, and then I begin. I must say as I develop characters, I re-outline. I actually love that stuff.



### **Q: What is the appeal to the reader for murder mysteries from your point of view?**

The tension and conflict. There's something so exciting about a story that feels like a puzzle. I've heard that it's a safe space to explore intense, relatable experiences.

### **Q: If you had to start over, what would you do differently?**

I'd start earlier. I'd finished my first book in college, not in my fifties. That's why I tell young people that ask me this question to get to work.

Writing is a skill that must be developed, and you have to work at it every day. The sooner you start, the better you can be.

**Q: How does being an attorney help you as a writer?**

If you read either of my books, you'll see that the law is integral to the story. The unspoken rules that those in the real world work by are also included. It's how the story is guided like a stream through the land. And it's how the characters struggle and manipulate each other. I frankly can't imagine how a non-attorney could write this kind of book.

**Q: Where do you see yourself in five years?**

My purpose right now is to finish the third book, *Murder by Trial*. To write a character that the reader cannot forget even as the characters' personal traits shock the reader. That's my purpose. A whole different level of character development. Serious multi-dimensional development. This is what I'm working on and will for the foreseeable future.

Learn more about Russell Little at [www.russelllittleauthor.com](http://www.russelllittleauthor.com)

Find his books on Amazon [HERE](#).



# A FOOL AND HIS MONEY

## A CHAPTER OF A NOVEL

### BY EVA SANDOR

*Meet Malfred Murd, jester in exile.*

*Sacked from his cushy gig on the Royal island, playing bootleg shows in dirtwater towns where crowds are scarce and meals are sparse, and with only one remaining fan— an infuriatingly optimistic magpie— Fred’s fortunes can hardly get worse. Or can they?*

*This story is the first chapter of FOOL’S PROOF, Book #1 in a 4-book comedy-fantasy series that’s been hailed as “Funny, engaging and brilliantly written... The inevitable comparisons to Terry Pratchett are accurate.” —Andrew Shanahan, author of Before And After*

## CHAPTER 1

The guard watching over the evening market was a big, tall, strong wench of exactly the kind who watches over markets the whole world round. She had the standard town emblem sewn on her sleeve, the typical ill-shorn hair stuffed up under her helmet’s molded brass curls, the all-too-common dribble of spit in one corner of her mouth from the big clod of maidenroot she chewed. It had lost its flavor, though perhaps

not its effectiveness at preventing brats; she hooked its herbal cud out of her mouth with one finger and flung it into the mud beside a cattle trough, looking up just in time to see trouble coming— a street jester, shoving the crowd aside in his zeal to make some complaint.

With a yawn she pulled a bolt from the pouch slung beside her crossbow: a small blunt one, enough for a man. And now here was the jester.

The long striped tassel of his hat hung limp. His face glowed red with indignation. Something far more annoying than the summer flies, the stink of livestock for sale, and the wall of rain clouds threatening the sunset had worked him up.

“Hoy. Guard. There’s a penny-poacher over there, do you see him? Him!

The one with the bird! Get him off our territory. Damn it deep, it’s already hard enough to make a living around here.”

“So whata ya want from me?”

“Shoot him with a stinger bolt, for Ye Gods’ sakes. Or something. Can’t you see he’s stealing our audience? Look. Look! They’re putting coins in his hat— and that’s no street-license hat. He’s obviously some rich man’s private Fool. So what’s he doing out here, poaching from the likes of us?”

Shoot the greedy wight! There are laws!”

The guard’s watch was over at sunset. She glared down at the street jester.

“Till a town officer gets here, I’m the law, fella. So go on back and juggle ya balls. I’ve got work here. Someone’s tryna—” she craned her neck—“I dunno, do a suspicious.”

Before he could reply to this, a great din erupted from the market square. Something black and white flashed up out of the crowd, then plunged back down into it, screeching and cursing as if the voices of a dozen angry sailors had somehow come together in one throat. A mass of men surged toward the guard and she could see that every one of them belonged to the Public Amusements Guild, with his tassel and his baton and a tag with writing on it pinned to his shoulder. They were chasing somebody.

Somebody in a drab, old-fashioned linen smock like the kind a monk would wear, and ridiculously oversized women’s workboots, and a hat whose beautiful embroidery and numerous bells made it shine out like a well-polished lamp among cheap candles.

The Fool under it had a face so unexceptional the guard really couldn’t have described it. But Great God Almighty, the man had flair! Even as he ran for his life, he was able to turn a very accurate handspring, kick his booted heels

together and shout a few bars of some song that went “Help Me, O Help Me, Woman Are You Blind.”

The guard watched him and his pursuers sweep past, fascinated, and her finger lay motionless beside the trigger of her weapon until she realized it was too late to do anything at all. The fellow complaining to her had been swept away with the strange parade. Nothing was left but footprints in the clay road that led down to the river, where a weird little ferryboat shuttled people to the Whellen Country.

Vendors began striking their tents and packing away their wares. The wind kicked up and everywhere the evening turned a soft and sparkling gray. Rain gathered on the brim of the guard’s helmet and dripped down her neck as she put the small crossbow bolt back in its pouch.

She gave a contented little snort. The Whellen Country!

She had been raised to want no truck with that place, nor with the crazy old hag who ruled it, but somehow she found herself wishing she were there. She wanted to watch the rich man’s fancy Fool, as he learned the hard way that he ought to keep his jingles out of other people’s business.

One by one the crowd of squalid street-license hacks on the riverbank quit making their threats and obscene

gestures. Malfred Murd, seated on the downstream gunwale of a departing ferryboat, leaned out from the knot of other passengers for a final glimpse of the knapsack which had hauled his meager belongings and his still more meager bankroll from one pisspot of a town to the next for all these weary months, and— what was infinitely worse, worse to the power of hundreds, of thousands— a final glimpse of his hat.

Even now, as some cut-rate provincial gagflogger dared to set it atop his lousy head, the hat had dignity. Sunset kissed the tarnished engraving of its bells, caressed its matted velvet, and whispered endearments to its faded comical embroidery of roosters laying eggs and nullicorns dancing with very non-virginal hunters. But the towering scrawny oaf seated beside Malfred elbowed him, and he had to turn away for a moment and then— just like that— when he looked again the hat was gone.

The magpie *Corvinalias* was still diving into the crowd after it, over and over, doing a fair imitation of an enraged falcon, but Malfred knew it was useless. His midsection felt strangely full: not of food, certainly, but of more than its usual bitterness. What else could happen? Oh, right. It began to rain.

He sat and got wet as the other passengers all reached

into baskets and boxes and bags. Everyone else had a waxed canvas hood or an oiled silk wrap or at the very least a cone of braided straw. The fellow who'd elbowed him now kneed him, and shouldered him, and ankleed him in the process of unfolding a set of freakishly long, lean, sinewy, tanned and windburned mostly-naked limbs. The wight had a bag around his sunburned neck, so he was clearly a flyer— that is to say, a long-distance road going foot messenger — but he was the most ridiculous one Fred had ever seen. Most flyers were quick mannish little wenches, who sped between the carts and wagons of road traffic like dragonflies between cattails. But this one reminded him of a big-nosed, sad-eyed and frequently-kicked male greyhound, which opened the bag and drew out a long, long oiled-silk rain poncho that flapped and fluttered and stuck to Malfred's wet face.

“Hoy, Stilts. Do you mind? I'm not your deep-damned clothesline.”

The flyer muttered a reply in the thickest Yondstone accent he had ever heard: it couldn't have been more of a caricature if a goat had yodeled it from a stony mountaintop. A dozen juicy Yondy jokes were on the tip of Malfred's tongue and he saw his chance to make a couple of brass pennies before the trip was over, but then

he realized that, without his hat, the other passengers couldn't know he'd ever been a Fool at all. So he held his tongue, wondering miserably how he was going to pay the ferrymaid.

But there was no ferrymaid. No oars, no scull, no sail. Only the craft moving straight as a shot across the rain-roughened water, passing buoy after buoy. Malfred's hair stuck to his forehead and his smock became a great damp floppy awning and the twin blister factories that served him as boots let rain come in— for although twenty years of professional acrobatics, dancing and stunts had left him as brawny as a common laborer, the boots had been made for Lumpy Lettie, the royal family's head charmaid, and his legs simply weren't thick enough to fill them. He turned around on the bench and knelt, drawing his feet up behind him and getting the seat of his breeches wet too. He sighed and stared down at the turbulent river.

This was probably a winchboat. He had seen such things before; on the Isle of Gold there had been plenty of winches, powered by ponies or oxen or workers' strong backs. There had been a clever system by which food and drinks could be winched up to the royal chambers in an ornate gold-trimmed rosewood crate. There had been a water mill and seven windmills.

Keep thinking about machinery, he told himself. About rain. About anything. Anything except what the hottest hindmost Hell you're going to do with no license, no money, no hat and no future.

A black and white speck was following the boat, pulsing and flashing through the gray veil of rain, drawing ever larger and closer. With a fierce grunt of effort Corvinalias made a final wingbeat and flung himself aboard, landing hard on Malfred Murd's shoulder. His long black claws dug into the linen of the smock and he clung there, sputtering and trying to wipe his eyes and beak on the ragged stubble growing on his pet's jaw.

"Ye Gods, those low-rent fools can fight," he gasped.

"I had to brawl like a gull back there. Broke two toenails and bent one of my remiges. I got a couple of licks in— I think I bit a piece off some poxy wight's ear— but it was no use. They took the hat and all your shinies, Fred. I'm really sorry."

"You're sorry?" Fred burst out.

"What am I supposed to do now? Look. Look. I bet I can do the whole Topsy Turvy routine right here and no one'll give me so much as a half-penny." Without warning, he stood on his hands and began wriggling his legs as if they

were two actors performing a puppet show. His smock flopped down over his head and he coughed at its musty stink. Not a soul laughed, although he did hear a yelp from the Yondy flyer as one of his boots hit something. When Fred turned back upright he expected to find every face in the boat glaring at him with disapproval, but for some reason most of them were smiling. One or two of them even winked at him and hoisted imaginary cans of drink to their lips. That gave him confidence enough to lean across toward the wench who sat on the opposite gunwale and say: “Did I give you a laugh, good wife? How about giving me a couple of brass pennies? For the fare.”

The woman shook her head.

“Ain’t gotta pay any fare. Not till tomorrow.

A holiday ain’t over till the midnight bell.”

A few of her neighbors gabbled and babbled in approval. They spoke of taverns and barrel music and picture booths and coin puppets and dancing under a wyrmflight lamp; a tavern was the only one of those things Fred had ever heard of. He turned to Corvinalias.

“Well? Are you going to explain what you’ve chased me into now?”

Corvinalias purred soothingly.

“Fred, Fred. Don’t get angry. I didn’t chase you. You know that. I only ever make travel suggestions— it’s those other Uman-beings that chase you. Shhh, shhh. It’ll be all right. I’ll catch you a nice big juicy mouse. Or a frog. Or a lizard. Or a whole pile of locusts. And then I’ll — whoa.”

Corvinalias’s supple neck whirled his head around as if it were a flag in a sudden change of wind. His gaze was upon the Yondy messenger’s bag.

“Did you see that?”

“See what?” Fred’s voice had an edge to it now. He was becoming agitated. Corvinalias purred some more.

“It’s all right, it’s nothing. We magpies can see all kinds of things Umans can’t. It’s— well, all right. It isn’t nothing.”

He hopped higher on Fred’s shoulder, pressed his beak against Fred’s ear until the whiskers around his nostrils bent, and whispered: “It’s shinies. That fellow’s bag is full. Of. Shinies.”

Fred couldn’t help but gaze at it himself. Really? Someone trusted a bagful of coins to this dolt? Oh, if only one or two of them would fall out. And oh, if only those were more than just brass pennies. Oh, my God, be good to me, and make a few fall out that are moon-marbled silver, or glistening gold.

But the passengers began to shift themselves closer to the gangplank stored in the bow; the giant bony flyer stood up and a gust of wind plastered the tail of his poncho to Fred in a great damp slippery slap; fine soft gravel hissed along the hull of the boat and someone flopped the gangplank down; everyone swarmed off the ferry and Fred's god was not good to him at all.

Nothing fell out of the Yondy's bag. Indeed the fellow vanished into the crowd that was flowing from the waterfront toward some kind of noisy glow. Fred was about to demand that Corvinalias tell him just where in the furthest foulest hell they were, but before he could the bird cried "Jackpot,

Fred! Meet you later!" and launched himself away.

Fred left the ferryboat behind and drifted through the streets. Very clean streets, he couldn't help but notice, paved with limestone cobbles so uniform they might have been tiles on a floor. No bothersome puddles here; instead the well-drained cobbles simply glistened in the rain, reflecting a galaxy of lamps on posts. He gazed up at the lamps for quite some time: whoever could afford them all? Even the King didn't send his servants out to hang this many lamps, and certainly not in a mid-sized street full

of commoners. Were these commoners? They were all so well dressed, and as clean as the cobbles... then Fred heard a hissing, and smelled something burning. He pulled his foot hastily out of a gutter in the middle of the pavement where a dark-gray cable rushed swiftly along. It had run smoking against his boot and as he stood cursing at the long, charred scar it had left, someone grabbed the collar of his smock and yanked him out of the path of a wagon, clamped to the cable and trundling along at what would have been a brisk round trot if there had been any horses. The people in the wagon all turned back and stared at him as if he were the oddity.

Fred heard music, and jogged toward it, thinking to ask the piper or the fiddler or the dulcimer-drummer what the situation was like around here for illicit busking. But there were no pipers, or fiddlers, or dulcimer-drummers— only lit-up pavilions full of people dancing: skipping and jigging and kicking up the Dizzy Dan around fellows who stood turning cranks on the sides of kegs. He had no idea who played the music. Nor any idea why children were lining up to put their eyes to a hole in a crate, or what was inside it to make them laugh or scream or applaud.

Neither could he guess who this woman might have been, with her face on all the banners hanging limp and wet

about the town. They were crude folk art and not realistic. Every year the Royal Family had proper portraits done; Fred had fumed at the way he was always shown sitting off in a corner, with his thumb stuck in a pie or some such nonsense, but at least those portraits had looked like them.

These showed him only that the woman was old, and had some kind of gray tiara on her head. One of the banners had writing on it, but the letters were sloppy and Fred really couldn't tell what HPE XSSHN DA was supposed to mean— if that was what it said. But then he turned a corner and found himself in a square dominated by a big coaching inn. Under the eaves of its long veranda hung a banner which had clearly been painted by a professional scribe: ALL OUR PRAISES TO HER HIGH HONOR, DAME ELSEBET DE WHELLEN! HURRAY FOR YET ANOTHER PROSPEROUS YEAR!

It took Fred aback. He actually froze in mid-stride and looked around. He was in the Whellen Country? But then where were all the slaves, groaning at the bars of some dread gigantic capstan? Where were the bitter lakes of sweat and tears? Or the furnaces, belching filth as they poured forth shoddy brittle tin and cloudy glass? Come to think of it, hadn't these de Whellens been extinguished, or at least brought to heel like their co-conspirators the

de Brewels, who— let's not kid ourselves, thought Fred, remembering the tribute they paid the Crown— were still rolling in gold?

This couldn't be right. He ran his wet hands through his wet hair, flummoxed. If this were the Whellen Country, why then, he'd be a blue-arsed ape. He'd be a rubber pumping bucket. He'd have a seven sided blister on his little pinky toooooooee...

There was. There was something by his pinky toe. Fred whipped off his burned boot and shook it and, Great God Almighty who is beyond and between and within, it was a coin. Hell's holes, a coin!

It was a single brass penny, dull and greenish in the lamplight, warm and stinky as a sweaty foot, but Fred could not have been more excited if it had been a wish-granting magical gem. His mind began racing, thinking of what he might buy with a brass penny. A drink, by his god, that's what he wanted.

He strode toward the inn, boots squishing. But the closer he got, the more it bothered him that the patrons going in and out looked clean and prosperous, laughing under their lacquered rain hats, gesturing with hands full of rings. Fred knew what he looked like. Dodging another cable wagon, he scanned the street for the shabbiest people he could find.

Some bedraggled travelers trudged by; he watched them go until he spotted others who looked worse; and by this means Fred soon came to know that off the square, behind the prosperous inn, there was a seedy one where strangers like him took their custom.

It wasn't really even an inn: only an open shed and some stalls meant for travelers' beasts. No glass lanterns here, no cheerful pavilions; just a few rickety tables and some smoky rag-wrapped torches, stuck into sockets in the ground. Low-budget drinkers sloshed through puddles on the gravel floor and dodged drips from the leaky roof. The emblem of a Brewel Country throwball team was painted on one of the inside walls, but visitors had carved so many species of genitalia over it, as well as one or two misspelled curse words, that it was hardly legible. Fred gripped his brass penny more tightly and set himself to figuring out the least poisonous thing he could order.

"Sherry Lorroso," he heard someone say, and a laugh burst from his mouth. Who knew he still could laugh? Really, it was just too absurd.

Lorroso.

But after Fred's laughter died he felt like weeping instead, weeping for one last taste of that exquisite dark nectar the King's butler used to bring up from the cellar in quaint

bottles thick with dust, and pour into red crystal glasses on a very old, historic bronze tray. His body moved of its own accord, sleepwalking toward a crooked square window where a sullen innkeeper rattled crockery.

“Another Lorroso here.”

He ordered as if in a dream. He didn't know how much it cost. It didn't matter. The moment Fred took the dirty glass mug, someone tapped his shoulder.

“New in town, are ya?”

A bumpy-faced fellow whose hair was longer and dirtier than the wig balanced on top of it leaned conspiratorially against Fred, who flinched in reflex.

“Well? Are ya? New?”

“Mmm-huh,” he replied. He didn't know where to look as he tried a sip of the sherry. He gagged— it tasted like distilled horse piss. The fellow was still leaning on him.

“Where from?”

He forced himself to keep sipping, and the fellow leaned harder, until Fred said,

“South.”

“Silver Bit? Oldmarsh? Coastwall?”

The fellow's bumpy face was inches from his own, his

breath ranker than sweaty boots, his insistent stare making it obvious that he could, and would, lean on Fred all night waiting for an answer. Fred set his jaw, squirmed the fellow off his shoulder and said, “Further. Now go away.”

For one blessed moment the bumpy fellow was quiet, eying Fred’s diminishing drink. But then he was at it again. “Ain’t no land south of Coastwall. Not till opposite shore of the Midland Sea. I know, for once I used to be a sailor.”

Fred twitched as he downed the last of the reeking mug and set it down with a thump.

“Oh, there’s something before the other side all right.”

He turned away— but not before he saw the bumpy fellow snatch up the mug and lick the inside of it, his tongue inching against the glass like a big pink leech.

The fellow gave a belch of surprise.

Really! You were a servant at the King’s Palace?”

“You don’t mean the Isle of Gold?”

Fred flicked a dismissive hand, which did in fact wave the fellow’s stink away for a moment, so he did it again, harder.

“Well me, I come from Coastwall, come up here to get work as a poet.”

That actually got Fred’s attention.

“You. A poet.”

“Oh, aye, I’ve as good as got my license—guild just wants a written sample. Now, truth is I don’t actually know my letters. What I do know is a wight back in Coastwall who’s a scribe and he fixed me up.”

The fellow tapped one grubby finger on the side of his greasy nose.

“Wrote it down neat as you please, under the table like. Meanwhile I know my poem by heart. I bet you can’t top this:

‘Dear Dame Elsebet. You’re the greatest yet.

Fifty years you’ve ruled here fairly, trouble has come rarely. You are wise and strong and skilled. Put me in your Guild of Poets.’ ”

During his months of exile, Fred had let a lot of his standards slip.

Shaving every day had soon given way to shaving every week; paying some hostelry for a tub of bathwater had become jumping into a cattle trough when the farmer wasn’t watching; human meals like soup and sausages had turned into whatever vile tidbits Corvinalias brought him, jabbed on a razor and charred over a skimpy fire. But everyone has some depth to which he will not stoop—

and Fred's was letting this blister think he could beat him at poetry. In twenty years with the Royal Family, he had composed poems beyond counting. He hadn't written them all down, but they could have filled a book: intricate, winding fourteen-line sonettos with not a rhyme in them, but only the whisper of agreement; lilting, looping mirandelles with their interplay of repeated words; doublets, heptoons and punchy little snap-songs that could be taken as bawdy or pure, depending on the listener.

Grudgingly he decided to give the bumpy fellow a sample of the latter:

“A clever young scribe from the Fen said ‘mistress, come sharpen my pen.

And if you should think it has run out of ink—why, sharpen my pen yet again.’ ”

That one had occasioned a lot of giggling and raised painted eyebrows among the Old King's even older sisters. It was a classic. But the bumpy fellow only turned out his sticky lower lip, narrowed his eyes and after a maddening delay said, “I don't get it.”

Fred took a deep breath and, wrapping the tail of his smock around his hand, picked up the vile mug. In pointed silence he strode back toward the innkeeper's window, hoping with all his heart that distilled horse piss cost less

than a penny.

But the fellow followed Fred, grabbed his shoulder and whined, seeing as how you're rich, can't ya get me a drink too?"

"Hoy,

"No. And I'm not rich."

The fellow became insistent, tugging at Fred's sleeve.

"Sure you are. King's servant musta got a fat pension—whatever the King touches, it's gold, ain't it? On the Isle the buildings is all gold. I seen 'em from the deck of my ship."

"Go squeeze a boil," growled Fred, yanking his sleeve out of the bumpy fellow's hand.

The fellow scowled.

"Hoy. Watch it. You don't want me to get cross, do ya?"

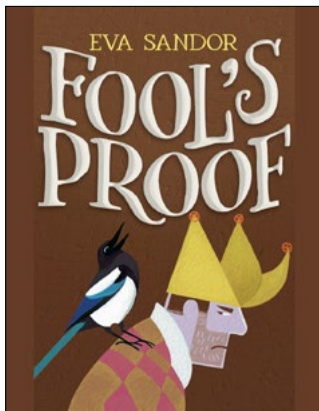
"I do. I want you to get 'cross the yard. To the latrines over there, and shove your thick head in."

Fred thought that was good and witty. He strode away.

But the fellow got revenge. He waved his arms overhead and boomed out: "Hoy, mates! This rich fella says he just bought a round for the house! And he's getting the next one, too!"

A frenzy swept the shed. Some of the squalid customers

converged upon the window, ordering more; others simply downed their drinks and fled, leaving their tabs unpaid. The bumpy fellow was one of these. He slipped away as smoothly as a braised eel, leaving Fred squarely in the path of the meanest-looking barmaid he'd ever seen.//



Want to read the entire novel?  
Click [HERE](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Even as she was writing loving descriptions of applewood smoked bacon, luxury real estate and computer parts, advertising copywriter (and longtime illustrator) Eva Sandor had a feeling she would someday create a fictional world full of humor, speculation and joyous wordplay. Join her there and treat yourself to “funny fantasy that hides a serious soul”.

# THE SMELL OF SALT

## AN EXCERPT OF A NOVELLA

### BY ALICE BABUREK

The case was deemed unsolvable. And that's when Liz Trevor gained notoriety for her relentless pursuit. It caused a rippled effect. No partner. No children. No pets. And very few friends.

The missing was no longer missing. Liz persisted that the missing person was not missing at all, as his distraught wife had thought to be. It took fourteen long months, many sleepless nights, and a bushel full of money to find the so-called victim. Of course, he was none too happy when Liz found his hiding spot. It meant Charles Weston, a hedge fund analyst who not only embezzled money from investors but defrauded an insurance company, would stand trial. The guilty verdict saddled Charles Weston with a lengthy prison sentence and “restitution.”

This case put Liz Trevor in the spotlight. Something she did not like at all. Her private investigation agency consisted of three people; two were distant cousins who needed a job. Unlike what people thought of Liz, she had a huge heart and a nose to solve the impossible. She was so good at her job that the dead manipulated her into taking care of their unfinished business. But unlike living clients, the dead

never paid the bill.

Liz knew instantly when a spirit needed her help. She could smell them—the smell of salt. Her sense of smell magnified beyond the normal sensory perception of living people. Both cousins, Hayley Walters, and Andrea Foster, assumed Liz had a special connection to those who were “in-between” and the need to finish “business” before being able to find their way into the light. So, when Liz set them down to inform them of their next case, it came to no one’s surprise.

“Ladies, what we have here is a typical cold case,” said Liz as she handed Hayley and Andrea each a manila folder. “Inside, you will see the details of the unfortunate death of Leslie Higgins, age 23, classified as a homicide back in 1982. There was little evidence collected. A piece of rope was used to bind her wrists and the chain from around Ms. Wiggin’s neck. Cause of death—strangulation. Other than these two pieces of evidence, nothing else had been collected by the local police. Granted, DNA wasn’t even conceived back then, so there may have been other clues or evidence. It wasn’t a surprise when the detectives could not solve the murder.”

Hayley and Andrea scanned over the typed notes. Each remained silent. “A reward was offered, which resulted in

no leads whatsoever. Ms. Higgins had just arrived in Sarasota, Florida, a week before her death. No next of kin is listed. Her parents died when she was twelve. She grew up in an orphanage in Jersey. By eighteen, she decided to try her luck in New York City. There, she spent the next four years of her life as a freelance journalist,” explained Liz.

“What made her decide to move to Sarasota?” asked Hayley as she closed the folder. She removed a piece of gum from her jeans and shoved it into her mouth. Andrea’s hand shot out toward Hayley. “Sorry, Hayley. It was my last stick,” she said with a forced smile. Andrea’s eyes narrowed at her cousin.

“A job. The Sarasota Gazette sent Higgins a letter and asked her to cover a story for them. They were short on investigative journalists. I guess Higgins was good at what she did for a living.” Liz leaned back in her high-back chair.

Hayley sighed and then snapped her gum. “Is this a paying client?” Andrea placed her folder on the desk.

“What difference does it make? You still get paid. I don’t hear Andrea complaining,” replied Liz.

“Well, cuz, is this one dead or alive?” asked Andrea. She already had her iPad out scrolling.

“Dead...and she doesn’t want to reveal her killer,” added Liz. Both younger women looked at one another.

“That’s messed up,” commented Andrea. “Who wouldn’t want to give up the name of their killer? I thought that was the whole purpose of this...whatever we do...I guess we call it justice, but to them...as in the dead, we give closure so they can move on up!” She put her hands up in the air.

“I know. It’s frustrating. I asked her several times to no avail. She won’t give up the name,” said Liz.

“Why are we wasting our time then? We have a butt load of cases from paying clients who want to help in any way they can. Unlike the dead...making it more difficult for us,” said Hayley. Her cybersecurity and IT data analyses degrees were crucial in solving crimes and searching for lost people.

“It’s not a waste, Hayley. I get it. People who are stuck here instead of there,” said Andrea, pointing to the ceiling. “They deserve justice, too.” The twenty-three-year-old crossed her arms. A blond ponytail swung behind her round head. With a pair of huge wire-rimmed glasses perched on her tiny nose, she looked more like a scientist than a forensic and digital evidence technician.

Hayley uncrossed her long, muscular legs. She stood almost six feet tall. With short brown hair and a lanky upper body, she looked like a track star even at forty-eight. “You’re nothing but a bleeding heart, cuz.”

Liz stared at her cousins. The only family she had on this

earth—alive. Unlike either of them, she had the instinct of a natural tracker. And, of course, she had her unusual ability to converse with the dead. Even at the delicate age of sixty-five, Liz knew her job would take her beyond the normal expectations of private investigating. Her short, round stature and white-cropped hair made her look like a typical grandmother. But there was nothing typical about Liz.

“Let’s take a vote,” insisted Liz. “All in favor of a living client, raise your hand.” Hayley raised her long arm. “All those in favor of a dead client, raise your hand.” Two hands shot up.

Hayley rolled her eyes as she crossed her arms. “There’s nothing easy about this case. I still feel it wastes our time when we have so many other ‘doable’ cases. But majority rules.” She shrugged her shoulders.

Andrea and Liz smiled. They knew their cousin was a softy down deep inside, even though she tried to conceal it. And with nothing left to say, all three women got to work.

The Leslie Higgins homicide would prove to be one of the most difficult cases the Salt & Pepper Private Investigators Agency tackled in their fifteen years of existence. Even though it had been only eight years since Andrea Foster joined her cousins, she had proven a valuable asset. There

was no denying her solid background, entailing forensic and digital evidence. It had cost Liz a pretty penny regarding the electronic and technical equipment needed to support Andrea's investigative skills. But in the end, it had seemed to be its weight in gold.

Hayley had researched the dead women's background as far back as she could, considering there was no mainstream internet until the 1990s. Finding out about the life of Leslie Higgins would have to be investigated the old-fashioned way. She had already booked a flight to Sarasota, Florida.

"You're leaving tonight?" asked Liz. Her desk was cluttered with stacks of paper. She liked having things at her fingertips.

"Yes. I'll be at the Marriot. I'm hoping it won't take me more than a few days to track down a relative or even a friend of hers. When will you be arriving?" asked Hayley. Liz was busy scribbling notes down on a yellow legal pad.

"In a couple of days. I want to visit the Sarasota Police Department and talk with their cold case detective. I might be able to even speak with the first officer on the scene—if he's still alive." Liz gave a half grin.

"How will you explain to them why you are investigating a cold case?" asked Andrea as she walked into the office, snapping her gum.

“Most of the time, I don’t. They are happy someone else is looking at a case that remains unsolved. I wing it,” explained Liz. Suddenly, she could smell it—salt. She abruptly stood up with her nose in the air.

“Are you kidding me? She’s...she’s here?” whispered Andrea. Liz always smelled the apparition before seeing it. A ghostly swirl faded in and out in the corner next to the steel drawer cabinet.

The other two women followed Liz’s gaze. They couldn’t smell or see anything. But remained still and silent.

“Leslie...we need your help. I know you don’t want to reveal the killer. I’m not sure why that is. But we need your help?” asked Liz. She narrowed her eyes. The woman’s body was transparent. A linked chain hung around her neck, then disappeared below. The smell of salt intensified, and Liz thought for a brief moment she might sneeze. The woman’s hand outstretched into emptiness. A rope dangled from her wrist.

“Leslie, please. We know about the chain and rope. What else are we missing? You need to guide us in the right direction.” But as Liz took a step forward, the apparition dissipated into nothingness. The smell of salt lingered in the air.

“Did she give you any other clues?” asked Hayley. She remained seated behind her desk.

“Unfortunately, no. She keeps showing me the chain and rope. I’m hoping they still have the evidence collected at the scene. But any good detective knows to resubmit the items for DNA,” explained Liz. She plopped down back into her worn chair.

“Now you know why I don’t like working for dead clients. Plus, they don’t pay—at all!” said Hayley.

“It’s so amazing watching you, Liz. It’s freaky. I wish I could see them like you do,” exclaimed Andrea wide-eyed.

“Well, I smell them more than anything. I have to figure out what she’s trying to tell me. She keeps showing the same thing over and over. We’re missing something. Maybe once we’re down in Florida...” Liz didn’t bother to finish. She ran her hand through her thin grey hair.

Hayley arrived in Sarasota by midnight and headed straight to the Marriot after picking up her rental. She was surprised by the nightlife. People packed inside the hotel’s bar. After checking in, she decided on a nightcap. Her loose blouse and tight jeans were a bit out of place. Many of the patrons were dressed for a fancy night out. But it

didn't stop Hayley. She couldn't care less about being stared at. She was used to it. Her height made her an oddity before anything else.

She squeezed in and found an open stool. She then ordered a dry martini. Hayley rarely drank. But this was a special occasion. It marked her fifteenth year of private eye sluicing with her cousin. One she stumbled upon by pure chance. She sipped her drink and glanced around. People were laughing and conversing with one another. Music piped from above.

"Excuse me," said a voice next to her. She turned to look at the man beside her. He was attractive by all standards. He was almost as tall as she and, from his manly looks, roughly the same age. His short black hair was streaked with grey, giving him a "Sam Elliot" look. He had a shaven face and a single stud in his left ear. Definitely a man of this century. His body is lean and muscular. A dark blue shirt and tie with dress jeans that fit snug. He smiled as he watched Hayley look him up and down.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he said, moving a tad closer. Hayley turned to face the bar as she sipped her drink. She did not answer the man.

"I'm sorry. Bad pick-up line. I'll leave you alone. Enjoy your drink," he said as he turned to move away from her.

Hayley was by no means looking for male companionship. Her job filled her life. But sometimes, she needed distractions. Maybe she could justify him to be just that—a distraction.

“Sure!” she called out to him. He abruptly stopped and stepped back towards her. By now, the music had died down.

“My name is Jim Neighbors.” He held out his hand. Hayley reciprocated immediately. It was warm and soft.

“As in Mayberry, the television sitcom?” asked Hayley, still holding his large hand in hers. He released his grip and smiled.

“I get that all the time. My last name is spelled N-E-I-G-H-B-O-R-S. And I can’t sing,” said Jim.

“I’m Hayley, spelled H-A-Y-L-E-Y. And I can’t sing either.” They both chuckled together. She placed her empty glass down on the bar. Jim signaled the bartender.

“What can I get you?” asked the middle-aged man.

“Another for the lady...and I’ll take whatever is on tap,” said Jim. He placed a fifty-dollar bill on the counter. The bartender swiped it up, then moved down a bit to make Hayley’s drink. A couple of minutes later, he returned with both drinks and change.

“Thanks,” said Jim and left a ten for a tip. He gulped the beer and winced.

Hayley watched him before taking a sip from her glass. She was not used to drinking, and one was definitely enough. Jim wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“Do you live here in Sarasota?” asked Jim.

“I don’t know,” replied Hayley. She never gave out information. There were predators everywhere.

“I see. I get it. You’re not going to answer any questions, are you?” he said, tilting his head. Hayley stared into his dark blue eyes.

“No...I’m not. I appreciate the drink, but I have to go.” Hayley slipped off the chair. Jim backed up into another man.

“Hey...asshole...watch it!” said the intoxicated man.

“Sorry, buddy,” replied Jim. He lifted his hands in the air.

“I’m not your buddy, idiot.” The drunk man shoved Jim knocking into Hayley.

“Come on now, take it easy. Just call it a night.” Jim turned to face Hayley. The inebriated guy lifted an empty glass from the bar to swing at the back of Jim’s head. Hayley was quick. In three consecutive moves, the drunk man was lying on the floor, trying to figure out how he got there.

“Go home and sleep it off,” shouted Hayley standing above the dazed stranger. Jim couldn’t believe what just happened. This woman took a drunk man to the floor in seconds. A wide smile crawled across his face.

Hayley stepped over the man as a crowd gathered. She pushed people aside and walked away. Jim hurriedly followed her through the lobby of the hotel.

“Wait up, Hayley!” called Jim. Hayley glanced back over her shoulder. She stopped in front of the elevator and pushed the number three.

“Where did you learn to do that?” asked Jim. Hayley let out a sigh.

“You seem like a nice guy...but I’m not that kind of girl. I hope you get lucky, Jim; it just won’t be with me. Good-night.” The doors of the elevator swished open. Jim stepped back as Hayley entered the elevator. He couldn’t help smiling as the doors slowly closed.

Liz Trevor’s flight was bumpy. The storm delayed the landing in Sarasota. She arrived two hours late. Hayley remained in her hotel room working on the information she did have. Liz had texted late last night stating she would be arriving first thing in the morning. But as usual, the weather did not

cooperate.

Liz glanced at her cell phone then sent a quick text to Hayley. She headed for the baggage area to pick up her suitcase. By then, Hayley should be waiting outside. Almost twenty minutes later, Liz stood outside in the heat. The humidity soared above normal for this time of year. Early August was always hot—but then again so were the rest of the months for the state of Florida.

Hayley had rented an SUV. She maneuvered over to the side lane marked “arrivals.” Liz was standing there busily looking at her cell phone.

“Need a ride?” called Hayley through the passenger window. Liz glanced up at her cousin. She was happy that the two of them were close. Almost like sisters.

“How are you?” asked Liz as she opened up the back door and slung her small bag inside.

“Fine. I was surprised by your text. How were you able to get a flight out so quick?” asked Hayley. Liz slipped into the front seat and shut the door. Hayley put her blinker on and proceeded to blend in with the exiting traffic from the busy airport. Minutes later there were racing down the freeway.

Liz glanced around at the scenery. It had been a while since she had been in Florida. In fact, the last time, it did

not end so well.

“They had a cancellation. I snagged it. A bit pricey, but that’s nothing new. Anyway, I want to get to the Sarasota Police Station as soon as possible. I’ll check in at the hotel later. What are your plans for today?” asked Liz.

Hayley moved in and out of traffic with ease. The sun was beating down through the windshield. Both women were glad they brought sunglasses.

“I was planning on driving around where Leslie Higgins stayed the brief period she was here. Maybe someone remembers her or the unsolved murder,” replied Hayley.

“Good idea. Can you drop me off at the station?” asked Liz. Hayley gave a slight nod. The outside of the police station was a standard brick building. There was a parking lot attached to the side. Hayley pulled the rental in and left the engine running.

“Text me when you’re finished. I’ll come back and pick you up.” Hayley released the door lock. Liz opened the door.

“Good luck. Hopefully, someone remembers something.” Liz got out of the car and strolled to the side door of the station. Seconds later, Hayley had blended into the traffic.

Liz tried the door and it was locked. She hurried to the front glass door. It opened with ease. As she stepped into the police station lobby, she noticed the cameras above. An officer sat at a huge desk behind a bulletproof partition. She looked like she was in her early twenties fresh out of the academy.

“May I help you?” she asked with a smile. Liz smiled back.

“Yes. My name is Liz Trevor. I’m here to see the cold case detective on staff.”

“Do you have an appointment?” asked the female officer.

“No. I’m from Cleveland, Ohio. I’m a private investigator with the Salt & Pepper Agency. We’re working on a cold homicide case,” explained Liz.

The young dispatcher gave a slight nod. “Give me a moment. You’ll want to speak with Detective Jim Neighbors. Have a seat. I’ll see if he is in.” And before Liz could say another word, the dispatcher was on the phone.

Liz sat down in one of the empty chairs. She took out her phone to text Hayley. Suddenly, the side door buzzed open. A handsome man in his mid to late forties, tall, lean, and muscular, stepped into the lobby. His square jaw and

groomed hair accentuated his male appearance. Tight jeans, shirt and tie, and cowboy boots. A gold badge hung from his belt along with the black holster on his hip.

“I’m Detective Jim Neighbors. What can I help you with, ma’am?” he strolled up to Liz and outstretched his large hand. Liz stood up and shook the detective’s hand.

“I’m Liz Trevor, a private investigator with the Salt & Pepper Agency in Cleveland, Ohio,” she replied

“You’re a long way from home, ma’am. We don’t get too many PI’s here in Florida. How can I help you, Ms. Trevor?” asked Jim as he crossed his arms.

“Please...call me Liz. Is there a place we can talk privately, Detective Neighbors?” asked Liz.

“May I ask what this is in reference to?” asked Jim.

“The Leslie Higgins cold case from 1982.” Jim’s eyes widened. He had reviewed the murder book more than once.

“You’ve got my attention. Let’s go back into one of the empty interview rooms.” He gestured to Liz towards the locked door. A buzz sounded seconds later. Jim held the door open for Liz, then took the lead. They walked down the narrow hallway to the last room on the left. He punched in a code, and it opened. Inside sat a small square table and

three folding chairs.

“Please have a seat,” said the detective. She sat down across from Jim.

“I won’t take up too much of your time, Detective Neighbors. Would it be possible for me to look at the Leslie Higgins murder book?” asked Liz.

Jim studied the older woman. He could use of new set of eyes. But he had to make sure of her identity. But before he could say another word, Liz had pulled out her ID and credentials. She slid them over to Jim.

Jim gave a slight nod and examined the documents then looked back up at Liz. “We don’t get too many private investigators looking into our cold cases. In fact, I don’t remember any. Usually, it has to do with a missing person or civil cases concerning child custody.” He slid her papers back.

Liz immediately placed them back within her worn leather briefcase. “I was hoping to review the murder book.” She waited for his response.

“We don’t normally ‘share’ information, especially when the case is open. May I ask your interest in Leslie Higgins? Especially since you are from Ohio.” He leaned back tilting the folding chair.

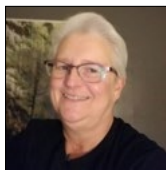
“Let’s just say...I’m looking into for a friend.” Liz did not give up any more information.

“That’s pretty vague. Did you know Leslie Higgins?” he asked.

“No...not while she was alive,” replied Liz. “Detective Neighbors, have you made any progress on the cold case?” He let out a sigh.//

If you would like to read the entire novella you may download it FREE [HERE](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alice Baburek is an avid reader, determined writer and animal lover. She lives with her female partner and four canine companions. Retired, she challenges herself to become an unforgettable emerging voice.



# THE LONELINESS OF THE LADDER

A SHORT STORY BY PAUL KIMM

It was the first time Eric had picked up the landline phone in months, if not years. He only ever received communication from his agent, and he always emailed, or messaged before calling, and then only to his mobile phone. After holding the plastic receiver in his hand for the duration of the conversation, he felt its physical absence after returning it to its cradle. At the end of the call the Academy had said someone else would be in touch to discuss practical details, the precise dates, which hotel would host the event, the transport to the ceremony, how he'd receive the prize money. They said his debut book, *The Loneliness of the Ladder*, was a work of such depth, a work that exhibited the beauty of aloneness, the solitary working life of a simple man, a sublime meditation on the working-class experience of a life of labour. They used so many variations of the words 'work' and 'loneliness' within the five minutes they spoke. The first of those words having only ever meant money in return for time, the second word never having had any relevance to Eric until he started writing about his work.

Following the news from The Academy, Eric remained in his armchair and fell into a reminiscence about ascending a forty-foot ladder for the first time. It was within his first month as an apprentice. The job was to paint the soffit and fascia on the gable end of a Victorian three-floor home in the wealthier part of town. There were no windows on the side of the house, the required work was to paint the hefty, ornate wooden eaves that hadn't been touched by a brush for at least twenty years. He and his boss hauled the ninety-pound ladder off the roof of the van, angled it to the wall, its weight increasing against their arms, pummeling their biceps, as they got it into a vertical position. His boss ran the extension as far as he could from the ground, then told Eric to go up and run up the rest of its length to the height of the gable point. As he ascended, the ladder lurched and dipped in arching bows to and from the wall with increasing proportion in unison with Eric's steps. By the point he was at the top half of the ladder each two steps further came with a two-foot undulation to and from the red bricks. Once at the top the sound of the street shrunk away, and Eric realised to himself that he had become the highest person for the day on that street of over a hundred houses.

His thoughts were moving to consider the scraping, sanding, and dusting down of that same vertiginous gable

when his mobile phone started buzzing on the table next to him.

‘Eric, I just heard! You didn’t call me!’

‘Hello, Hugo. I was about to. Just letting it sink in I suppose.’

‘Well, congratulations of course! This is going to do absolute wonders for sales, Eric. And, sorry if I’m getting ahead of myself, and I know it’s far from your favourite thing, but there’ll be media responsibilities too.’

‘I know Hugo. I know, but can we talk about that another time? Soon, but not today. It’s a lot to get my head around. I suppose I have to go to the ceremony first of all.’

‘Yes, okay Eric, we will of course need to attend the ceremony, and, yes, let’s talk about details soon. Today is all about congratulations and keeping it quiet for a few more days until the media is informed. Then we’ll talk more about the award ceremony.’

‘Thank you, Hugo. Yes, let’s speak soon.’

‘Yes, and just remember, this is a serious step. Not just the prize money, but the sales that’ll come. This will make you rich, Eric.’

‘Thanks, Hugo, thank you. We’ll speak soon.’



Until the age of fifty-two every penny Eric had ever made came from holding a paint brush. In the early days his wages were handed out in the yard at the end of Thursday's shift, a sealed square envelope with the gross salary, tax deductions, and net pay scribbled in Biro on the blank, preprinted form on the front. A brown packet that held a fold of notes and a few loose coins, usually a little over a hundred pounds per week. Then in the nineties, the brown envelopes were replaced with payslips inside blank white envelopes, the money deposited into his bank account that cleared the day after receiving the payslip, taking the arrival of his earnings from Thursday evening to Friday mornings. In the end there was no need to wait in the yard, no paper, just a weekly emailed attachment and the deposit in the bank.

This was Eric's sole income, pay-

ment for painting the houses and buildings of his town and surrounding areas for almost forty years, up until a few years ago when he sent off a short story into a competition about 'workplace fate' and won a hundred pounds for writing about a decorator who falls off a step ladder on a high scaffolding platform when his mind drifts to a tragedy in his earlier life. A completely made-up story, and just a confection he'd sent off, then been surprised to win third prize and the money. A story he later regretted writing for being purely fictional, cloyingly plotted, knowing that a decorator would never fall clean off a ladder for simply thinking about something. He was happy with the hundred pounds, but it was after that he focused on making his writing as honest as he could, even if that meant being dull, monotonous, boring, without plot, without purpose, nothing other than describing the act of the work he did.

That was the entire intention of his book, having no expectation it would ever be published, that an agent or editor would ever get past the first few pages, and definitely not far into the close to six hundred it ended up being. With its sprawling sentences, sentences he had a near aversion to ending, describing rungs, the give in them as he stepped up them, how some pillowed under his feet more than others, that he'd know them by number, the seventh

wobbling most, the ninth the firmest, how, depending on wind, angle, the ground the bottom of the ladder stood on, the required height, the necessary level of extension, how all these elements brought miniscule adjustments to the experience of walking up a ladder. Then the main part, being at the top, commencing the work, be it preparing for painting, the scraping, sanding, filling, sanding again, an initial priming coat if necessary, the undercoat, the additional light sanding, then the final coat of gloss on the surface of a window frame, a soffit, a fascia, sills, brickwork, wooden panelling, gutters, or pipes. His only purpose to describe the years of the same process, the being at the extended height of the ladder, the only sound being traffic whirring past, nearby birds, an occasional distant plane, and the self-made sounds of the brush slaps inside the paint kettle, the scraping of old paint, the crisp rattle of sandpaper on old wood and Polyfilla, the metal scratch of moving wet filler from one scraper to another. Sounds, touches, smells that were with him for decades, tens of thousands of hours with just himself and these sensations. That was all the book did, describe that work, his labour and its tedious processes, the book he was sure no one would ever read, and was now, a few years after sending it off, and hearing from Hugo that he would be certain to find a publishing house who wanted it, about to win a major literary prize.

Over the coming weeks Eric allowed Hugo to arrange everything. He just asked that he email, rather than call, to let him know what he needed to do. Hugo sorted out the travel arrangements in the UK, the rental of a black-tie outfit, the flights, communicated with the Academy on other operational details. He sent all the information to Eric to which Eric replied each time with a quick ‘understood’ or ‘got it’, and the final email reply of ‘I’ll see you at Heathrow then.’ The airport was the first time they’d met in person for several months, a month after they had received the news of the award. Hugo reassured him everything was arranged and asked Eric if his speech was ready. The speech was the only other thing Hugo had asked Eric about in the emails, each missive containing some organizational update about bookings, schedules, procedures, and a request for a quick update on how Eric’s drafting of his speech was going. None of Eric’s replies to Hugo had responded to these particular questions, including Hugo’s repeated offers to help with it if needed.

He’d never written a speech before, never given one, had never spoken to more than half a dozen people at any one time, and then only with a team of fellow decorators at breaks and lunchtime, and then not a speech, perhaps a comment on the work they were doing that day, or some

mundane news from whatever tabloid one of them was reading, or a question about the contents of each other's packed lunches, but never had he stood up and addressed any group of people. In the decades of decorating work, there was no place for speeches, and other than those on television by politicians and royalty, Eric wasn't sure he'd even listened to any before. Yet, he didn't want any advice from Hugo, he knew he wouldn't feel comfortable using Hugo's way of speaking, that he'd be a poor actor, would sound like a reluctant school child reading in front of the class if he delivered a speech written by Hugo, or anyone else. He also knew, when they met in person at the airport, that Hugo would push him on the progress of his speech. The fact was he hadn't written one, he couldn't come up with suitable words that matched what the book was about, essentially the act of nothing, except the act of his years of work, his decades of graft.

Whole chapters of the book described in minute detail, the painting process, whilst up a ladder. In strict minutiae the sounds, movements, smells, and time taken to do each step of painting a window for example. The movement of the brush licking its paint onto a lath, the cutting in up to the putty and glass, the maintaining of straight, smooth lines that glide first and second coats across the cleaned, sanded, filled, primed, and undercoated wood. The gallons

upon gallons of emulsions, undercoats, eggshells, glosses, primers, emptied onto endless walls, windows, doors, door frames, lintels, plinths, skirting boards, coving, ceilings, sills, architraves, beams. Between each long chapter depicting the intricacies of his work, shorter chapters marked the meagre milestones in his life, few and far between, the time spent in his life up a ladder far exceeded the hours of anything personal and private. The lack of marriage, or any meaningful relationships, the few friends who were more occasional acquaintances in his local pub, the never changing job, and always for the same firm, the keeping of the same house, just a ten-minute walk from the childhood home his parents raised him in, the house where he received the call from the Academy just one month before, being only the second house he'd ever lived in. There had been rare moments of travel, primarily for work, to paint portacabins on remote sites, or larger jobs on offices or schools far enough from his hometown for the firm to invest in budget hotels for the decorators on the job. He'd never left England until the day at Heathrow with Hugo, his first time in an airport, his first time on a plane, and his first trip to a foreign country.

As instructed, they met at the agreed entrance, Eric standing next to the busy sliding doors for ten minutes un-

til Hugo arrived. When he did, Eric simply followed Hugo's motions. This was something Hugo had done hundreds of times no doubt, and the way he had his documents ready, knew when to put his suitcase and bag on the series of conveyers, the confidence with which he knew which direction to take after each stage, removing his watch, belt and wallet into the grey bucket at security control, and the calm, controlled air he had about him at all stages, all quietly impressed and slightly annoyed Eric, but he followed suit at every step. They conducted the whole thirty minutes of getting through these stages without saying much other than Hugo giving some direction. Once through, Hugo checked his watch as he fastened it back on his wrist and commented it had been a quick one, and suggested they have a drink in the bar before boarding.

'You can tell me about your speech over a drink or two, Eric.'

Eric was surprised to see what seemed like an entire pub was ensconced in the airport. Hugo asked him what he wanted to drink and told Eric to take a seat at one of the few empty tables. The only spare table he could see had four seats, and he felt self-conscious sitting at a table that they only required half the seats of, but he couldn't see a two-seater anywhere. As soon as he sat down, Hugo came

along with the pint of lager for Eric, a glass of white wine for himself, and sat down opposite.

‘So, could we talk about your speech, Eric?’

‘There’s not a lot to say about it. I’ve not done a lot.’

‘Would you care to share it with me?’

‘Well, it’s not written down as such. I’ve got my ideas on what to say.’

‘And?’

‘And, what?’

‘What ideas? What points are you planning to cover?’

‘It’s not really points, Hugo, but just the obvious things to be honest. Say I appreciate it, it’s very nice to be recognized, and thank you.’ ‘Eric, I’m not sure that’s sufficient. You have to talk about the book as well.’

‘They’ve obviously read the book, Hugo. They’ve made their minds up about it, so what should I be saying?’

‘Talk about the title, the significance of its meaning. Talk about the loneliness of being up a ladder, how you wanted to illustrate that, how your routines, the detailed processes of your work, render a deep sense of aloneness, oneness, quietude. Talk about the spirit of the book.’

‘I don’t know, Hugo. You know how I feel about all that.’

To me it's just a book about painting houses.'

'Okay, fine, okay, Eric. Let's not push it then, but how about I draft something out for you on the plane. I can knock together something more substantial, more fitting for the occasion for you to look at before the ceremony tonight. I'll give you my draft when we get there, and you'll have time to look at it. The Academy won't mind if you read some of your speech from notes.'

'Okay, Hugo. If that's what you think.'

Eric didn't feel comfortable on the plane, the space felt tight, and he didn't like the rumble and roar of taking off, mostly he kept his eyes shut for the duration. He was grateful the flight was only just over two hours, and already figured after coming back in a couple of days' time, it would be something he'd continue to avoid doing in his life. It was not for him. Once cruising, Hugo took out his laptop and started working on what Eric figured must be the speech for him. He didn't want to read a speech Hugo wrote, and so didn't look at his laptop screen to see any of it, and felt he had a good idea of the kind of thing Hugo was writing anyway. Instead, Eric was content to sit with his eyes closed, his palms resting on his thighs for most of the flight, only opening them to take the plastic sealed sandwich and plastic pot of water from the flight attendant,

both of which didn't eat or even open. He wanted to try to sleep away the time on the plane, but the confined space and Hugo's tapping on his keyboard didn't allow for this.

What really prevented his ability to sleep was thinking about having to read a speech written by Hugo, what words he would have to stand in front of an audience and say, vocabulary like 'loneliness', 'solitude', 'oneness', 'peace', and even the one he really couldn't stand, 'zen'. These were words he'd heard Hugo use before when talking about the book. The book which Hugo had always said he loved, right from the offset, to which he'd come back to Eric's submission within less than a month, but to which he'd said the only problem was the title. Eric's original name for the book had been 'Painting Houses and Other Buildings', but Hugo had persuaded Eric that this 'let down' the real heart of the novel, that this was a story of a solitary, lonely man, one who found a calm, and introspective, meditative approach to life, within the monotony, repetition, and singular nature of his job of several decades. A great novel about a real working life, its impact on the human soul, and the dignity to be found in those years of hard, lonesome toil. This was not the book Eric thought he had written, he'd written about painting houses every day, but other than proofreading edits, this was the only request for change

Hugo had requested and so Eric had agreed.

After landing, and during their departure from the airport, Eric and Hugo didn't speak much other than for Hugo to say he'd print off his draft speech for him when they got to the hotel. A driver sent by the Academy was there to meet them with both their names written on a card, 'Hugo Blythe & Eric Wilson.' The driver took their bags for them, and once in the car informed them the hotel was approximately thirty minutes away. For this half an hour Eric and Hugo continued not to speak.

Arriving at the hotel they both couldn't help but notice scaffolding on one side of its five floors. Hugo commented on the irony that it seemed to be getting newly decorated. Eric smiled at this, but it reminded him of his first paid short story about the invented painter and decorator falling off the invented scaffolding to his invented death. That he should be collecting his literary award in a hotel that was being repainted seemed as uncannily constructed as the contrivance in that story. As the car pulled up to the entrance a member of the delegation was there to meet Eric and Hugo.

'Welcome, Mr. Wilson, Mr. Blythe, welcome. My name is Rupert Stein.'

'Please it's just Hugo and Eric. That's okay with you,

Eric?’

‘Yes, just Eric please. Thank you.’

‘Of course, Eric, Hugo, welcome. Then, just Rupert for me please. Everything is organised and ready. We’ve checked you both in and you’re able to go straight to your rooms. We have adjacent rooms for you on the fourth floor. As you’ve likely observed, the exterior, as it turns out, is undergoing renovation. My apologies for the obvious, but I can assure you, completely unintentional irony Mr. Wilson, Eric. We apologise. Please forgive us and continued apologies for the smell of paint.’

‘No problem at all. As it happens Eric no longer smells the scent of paint after decades of using it. That right, isn’t it, Eric?’

‘More or less, yes, that’s right. Thank you.’

‘Wonderful then. Thank you, and again, we are sorry for the inadvertent irony.’

‘It’s not a problem. Thank you.’

In the lift up to their rooms Rupert explained the time for the pre-ceremony drinks was six o’clock, and would end at six-thirty, so that this gave thirty minutes before the ceremony began on time at seven. There’d be a few short speeches from some of the delegation and judges and then

time for Eric's speech at seven-thirty for which half an hour was scheduled. Hugo explained that Eric's speech may be somewhat shorter, but if questions were appropriate from the audience to take it up to eight, then the timing would be achievable. He didn't look at Eric as he said this, yet Rupert agreed that was absolutely fine. Once Rupert left them at their doors, Hugo told Eric he would email his draft speech down to reception for them to run up with a printed copy for Eric. They had almost an hour before going down, so plenty of time to get into their formal attire, and for Eric to have quick skim through Hugo's draft.

Once in his room, Eric accepted he didn't have thirty minutes of speech of his own, he wasn't even sure he had much more than thirty seconds, so understood he would need to rely on Hugo's words, words that didn't describe the purpose of his book, but his book was published, now winning an award, was likely to receive many more readers, and much like a painted door, once the final coat of gloss has gone on, that door was no longer Eric's responsibility. The book, *The Loneliness of the Ladder*, not even his title, was likewise no longer his responsibility. He simply wished, like a painted door, after someone said, 'nice job', he could simply say 'thank you' and walk away. But he shrugged this off and changed into his formal wear, clothes of a type he'd not worn before, his first ever bow tie, which, even though

a clasp fastening one, he'd practiced putting on several times back at home. He was lacing up his second shoe at the moment someone from the hotel staff knocked and delivered the three A4 pages of speech Hugo had come up with.

Sitting on the end of the bed, the lace on his left shoe still untied, he unfolded the papers to read through. Yet, when he saw the block of text, and some of Hugo's 'key words' sprinkled through it, the kind of words he'd predicted Hugo would use about feelings, meaning, depth, emotion, fate, and no words about his work as a painter and decorator, he couldn't face reading it through. The words Eric felt closer to, words like 'bristle', 'handle', 'rung', 'wages', 'priming', 'overtime', 'scraper', 'sanding', 'payslip', not one of these on the page, not even the word 'paint', but in place of these, dotted through each of Hugo's sentences, were 'destiny', 'soul', 'aleness', 'heart', and even the dreaded, 'zen'. It was enough for Eric, he'd read it as and when necessary, when accepting the award, but not until that required moment. He folded it into four, put it in his inside pocket, and leant down to finish tying his left shoe.

The hall was already bustling with a large number of people, a number Eric didn't wish to know the total of. He milled around the open double door entrance for a minute,

and then when he saw Hugo in animated conversation with a couple of people, he went to join them.

‘Eric, there you are. You’ve met Rupert, and this is Cynthia, another member of the delegation.’

Eric shook their hands, said it was a pleasure to meet them, to which they said the same, followed by their short opinions on how much they enjoyed his book. Eric said ‘thank you’ several times in response, but nothing more. All the same, this prompted more assessments of his book to follow, and Eric couldn’t help noticing how their descriptions were littered with the type of words Hugo used, all the abstract terms for varying degrees or ways of being on your own, all of these words Eric was confident he hadn’t used once in his writing, except that one word shoved into the title, and only in the title, the title that Hugo had insisted was more appropriate, the title that Hugo had assured him ‘spoke to’ the experience of Eric’s life. As their conversation continued, Hugo echoed these words back at Rupert and Cynthia, enthused and buoyed by their critiques. Eric interjected nothing, except continued ‘thanks’, and then began to tune out of what they were saying until he heard Hugo’s voice rise in more excitement.

‘Well, of course ‘loneliness’ was the perfect word for the title, and why not alliterate it with ‘ladder’. The ladder, in

itself, being the loneliest place a painter can be. You can't have two people up one ladder after all.'

'Yes, you are quite right, Hugo.'

'Thank you, Cynthia. I've said to Eric many times, and I know it's perhaps not a word he loves, but the experience of reading his novel is really quite a zen experience, don't you agree?'

Eric didn't have anything to say to Hugo at this, and no reply to Cynthia or Rupert. He looked around the room and wondered if a single person in there had ever been up a ladder, painted anything practical, had done a day of work the kind of which he'd done for decades. He stepped out of the conversation, and the three of them continued to talk. The whole room seemed deep in chatter, and Eric slipped out of the room unnoticed. He went to the lifts, and up to the top floor. Exiting the lift, he walked to the side where his sense of direction told him the side with scaffolding was. Along that corridor none of the rooms appeared occupied, and some of them had open doors with building materials inside. Eric looked into a couple of these rooms to see the equipment there.

In the third room he entered he found a bunch of decorating gear. He inspected the paint kettles with their gloss brushes sitting in their overnight water, a couple of rollers

on poles, an array of scrapers, a couple of packs of sandpaper, tins of undercoat and gloss paint, packets of filler, dust sheets, and a few discarded rags next to the white spirit. He picked out and examined a few of the gloss brushes, and chose a stubby, well-worn two-inch. He then took one of the empty kettle pots, prised open a tin of white gloss, poured some into the kettle, wiped the rim with the brush, patted it out on the inside of the kettle, replaced the lid on the tin, and went over to the sash window. It opened easily, and he stepped out onto the scaffolding boards in one stride, and walked along, in his tuxedo, the pot of paint and his brush in hand. Two rooms down he found a freshly undercoated frame, checked its smoothness and dryness with his palm, and then dipped his brush into the shining white gloss paint, slapped the excess on the inside of the brim and started combing the brush across the top casing, then the jamb under that. Before cutting in across the lath he returned the brush to the paint kettle to refill the bristles, and a small blob fell onto the back of his hand. He wiped this down his right trouser leg, laid the brush across the diameter of the pot and put it down, removed his jacket, tossed it onto the scaffolding boards, unfixing his bow tie, and stuffed it in his pocket. He browsed across the row of undercoated windows, counting five, calculated an approximate four of work, and checked his watch. A quarter to

seven, the light would hold out long enough at this time of year to finish the job. He rolled up his sleeves, bent down to retrieve his paint kettle and brush, and got to work.//



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Kimm is from a North East coastal town in England. He writes short stories about his working-class upbringing and early adulthood, and other things. He has had publications in Literally Stories, Northern Gravy, Fictive Dream, Mono, Bristol Noir, and several others.

I'm Eli Birdie, and as a writer who spent four years on an artistic side quest, I have stolen

0:09 / 5:23 • Intro >

10 Visual Storytelling Tips... for Writers!

Click to watch: [https://youtu.be/GLVGn\\_fBZmU](https://youtu.be/GLVGn_fBZmU)

# AN ILL WIND

A SHORT STORY BY ANJI BROWN

“Ilsa turned the page of her music to the second movement. As usual, she felt that slight shiver, a mix of nerves, anticipation and excitement as she prepared to become the centre of attention, her solo melody accompanied by one of the world’s foremost pianists, their instruments weaving together all too briefly in one of her favourite moments of Rachmaninoff. She reached for her clarinet as the audience settled again in rapt attention.

A sudden loud crack like a gunshot drew gasps from the auditorium as one of the piano strings snapped. Suddenly released from its high tension anchor, it whipped across Ilsa’s throat killing her instan\_”

‘Just a minute, Jill, I still don’t see how that would work,’ interrupted Gail.

‘Whaddy mean? Like, piano wire - it’s classic.’

‘I just think the clarinet player would be further away, towards the back of the stage. It would more likely take out the front desk of violins – if they weren’t shielded by the piano lid.’

‘Shit! I thought we had it, Gail. Like, how long is a piano string anyway? I didn’t check.’

“That’s okay, I think they probably work better as a garrote anyhow.”

‘So how are we gonna murder Ilsa then?’ asked Jill. ‘Like, we need to come up with something pronto.’

‘Electric shock through her music stand?’

Jill gave this some thought. ‘Then she’d be a goner before the end of the overture. It would look like an accident rather than murder, so, like, no need for alibis for either of our suspects.’

‘The second clarinet and the piano maestro? The ambitious, overlooked, second-best player and the jealous, spurned lover.’

‘Yeah,’ Jill replied.

‘Hmm,’ Gail thought for a moment. ‘The only way I know to kill someone with a piano is\_’

‘Drop it down a mine shaft.’

‘Ha, the old ones are the best. Maybe we’d better stop there,’ laughed Gail, as they dissolved in hysterics.

Gail felt like it was her first proper laugh in ages. She was still recovering from being unceremoniously dumped. Their year-long affair had been intense and exciting - but it had to be kept secret! That might have been part of the appeal. But in the end, she’d been duped; used in a malicious, calculating fashion, and Gail was really not the

forgive and forget “let’s stay friends” type. At the moment she was grateful for Jill’s ebullient sense of humour; one day she might tell her friend what had been going on for the last few months.

She glanced across at her friend, currently trying to get her breath back. She and Jill Stewart had met in their



first year at Warwick University, both studying English Literature and both members of the same tutor group. Now in their third year, they had bonded in an unlikely friendship, having discovered a mutual love of classical music. Together, they had recently joined a reading group at the local library, the Homestead Book Club, when their professor had suggested his students gain more experience in discussing and defending their views on literature with a wider, more varied audience than their usual student set. So far, they had found the literary ladies rather

condescending and set in their ways where books were concerned, choosing traditional or popular novels to read rather than anything more challenging. Although they were quite convivial socially, the small but dedicated group were dominated by the very forceful Monica.

Gail refilled their wine glasses, musing,

‘I wonder how the rest of them are getting on with this? Whose bright idea was it to also try drafting a short story idea this week anyway?’ she said.

‘You know it was yours, so we need to have something for those po-faced ladies next week’, replied Jill. ‘They seem to think all we know about literature is, like, text speak and “50 Shades of Grey”. Anyway, I’ve had a go, so it’s your turn to come up with a murder plot.’

Gail thought for a moment, and then, with a gleam in her eye, replied,

‘Okay, I’ll do a bit of research and have something to share next meeting.’

‘Hiya, pet, I’ve got yours in’ said Steve, pushing a large glass of white wine towards Jill as she dashed through the door of the pub, late and out of breath.

‘Great, just what I need. Cheers, babe.’

‘How’s gloomy Gail today then? Found out what’s up

with her yet?’

‘Don’t be so mean, Steve. I know she’s, like, not very outgoing even at the best of times, but she’s usually more cheerful than the last few months. Like, I’ve been really worried that she might do something silly.’

‘She’s certainly not blessed with a sunny disposition like yours, pet,’ he replied. Jill punched his arm playfully. ‘I hope you realise how lucky you are. So, she seemed happier tonight anyway, like a weight had been lifted.’

‘Well, just get a shift on lifting that weight,’ indicating her glass, ‘cos I’m hoping to get a lot luckier tonight.’

‘Oh, babe,’ giggled Jill.

The other members were already gathered in the kitchen of Monica’s gorgeous, posh house. Gail and Jill grabbed glasses of wine - ‘she’s right stuck-up, but she does buy, like, good chardonnay,’ whispered Jill as they sat down. Monica Greene-Blythe took her seat at the head of the table in her vast, open plan kitchen-cum-dining room, patting her iron grey perm into place as though preparing for battle. As self-appointed leader of the group, Monica was a daunting woman, always ready to share her views and opinions on books and writing - to the exception of everyone else’s. The fact that she was married to local historian and moderately successful amateur novelist,

Gordon Greene-Blythe, cemented her status within the group – as she saw it anyway.

The ladies of the Homestead Book Club gathered from their various conversations around the room and took their places, fidgeting with bags, books, tea cups and wine glasses until an expectant hush settled.

‘Welcome, ladies,’ boomed Monica. ‘I hope you’ve all remembered your copies of *Vanity Fair*? I must say, I enjoyed the rise and then the downfall of that hussy, Becky Sharp. I’ve already had a useful discussion with hubby about it that I’ll share with you, but first I suppose we should see how you’ve managed the challenge set by Miss Mason and Miss Stewart. Remember, they suggested that we try writing our own outline for a crime story. A chance to bring out our inner Agatha Christie, you might say,’ she simpered.

From the number of pairs of eyes that were suddenly unable to meet anyone else’s, and the number of pairs of hands preoccupied with tidying cups and saucers, it was clear that the members of the book club did not have anything they cared to share at the moment.

Gail piped up. ‘Maybe Jill and I should read you what we’ve written so far, listen to any suggestions, and we can take it from there. Then someone else could take a turn next week.’

Lots of relieved nodding of heads signified their ready acquiescence as they sat back in their seats, visibly relaxing again.

‘Okay, I’ll read what we’ve got, although Jill hasn’t yet heard the latest bit, so here goes.

“Ilsa turned the page of her music to the second movement...”

Gail enjoyed storytelling and using her writing to create images in people’s minds. After university she planned to forge a career in journalism; she particularly enjoyed features on underdogs fighting for justice, and ordinary people pursuing noble causes. At the moment, she relished the chance to draw in this audience with her words, and she could see by their body language that these listeners were involved in the tale. She hoped that she could keep their interest as she began the new section.

“Ilsa started to play, but seemed to be struggling for breath, gasping for air. The musicians around her were aware of her beautiful sound beginning to waver, becoming thin. The notes struggled to leave her instrument, her fingers shaking. The second clarinet player, smirking, watched out of the corner of his eye, preparing to continue the solo. Gradually, the rest of the orchestra, and then the audience, sensed that something was seriously wrong. The

piano soloist glanced across towards the woodwind section, with frustration and annoyance in his eyes. This disruption was destroying his concentration and ruining the performance – but was there also a gleam of anticipation in his face?

Isla slid towards the ground, scattering sheets of music in a spill of paper across the stage. Her clarinet fell from her lifeless fingers – poisoned.”

Gail took a deep breath and looked questioningly around the table. ‘That’s it for now. What do you all think? Does it seem credible?’

There was a flurry of “well done”, “sounds good so far” and other appreciative comments and Gail relaxed, preparing herself for some constructive criticism.

‘What poison would act so quickly, do you think?’ It was Anna, one of the quieter members of the group.

‘Yes, and why didn’t it block the tube, or fall out?’ - this from Sophie.

‘I’m thinking a sort of paste containing cyanide or arsenic or something could be smeared inside the top of the tube and then Ilsa would inhale the fumes. Cyanide is really fast-acting, apparently,’ replied Gail. She’d been doing a bit of useful online research so was pretty sure this would work.

Monica - of course, it would be! - zeroed in.

‘It’s certainly a good effort, considering how young you both are. There’s just one thing I don’t understand though. If the poison was inside the instrument, then surely it would have affected her earlier in the concert? They were already halfway through the concerto when she died. I think that’s stretching it a bit.’

‘Yes,’ echoed Jill, ‘so, that struck me too, but I bet Gail has the solution.’

Gail had spent quite some time checking her theory, so she was excited to share her Midsomer Murders-style plot twist.

‘I thought I’d figured out a way it could be done, so I double-checked with the clarinet professor in the uni music department.

Okay, so orchestral players use two types of instrument. My ex was a clarinetist so I remember this. There’s the normal one, in Bb, and then a less common one, in A, that they just use occasionally. I don’t quite understand why, but that’s not important here. Anyway, in the Rachmaninoff second piano concerto, they change to their A clarinets after the first movement. Ilsa wouldn’t have played that clarinet until then, so our murderer could easily have tampered with it in the crush before the concert,’ she finished triumphantly, searching their faces for a flash of understanding.

‘Well, I still don’t know,’ retorted Judith. ‘I’ll discuss it with my hubby and let you know what he thinks. After all, he is a published author.’

Gail fumed inwardly.

‘Actually, Monica, I think I’ll go with my own instincts on this one.’ She could hardly contain her anger. The cheek of the woman! ‘Of course, you’re absolutely free to chat with your husband,’ she shot back. ‘Just don’t expect me to take any of his advice.’

‘Well, I was only trying to help, I’m sure. You can’t please some people, can you?’ snapped Monica, glancing around the table for support from her acolytes. Unfortunately, she was met with an embarrassed silence and the meeting drew to an awkward end shortly after.

‘So when am I going to see your name in print then?’ Steve was cradling a cup of tea in one hand and scrolling on his phone with the other. They were both lolling on the sofa in Jill’s apartment later that night.

‘Ha, don’t think I’m gonna be signing copies in Waterstones anytime soon, babe. But, like, Gail is really into this idea of being an author. She was really, like, enjoying reading out our story for the first time just now. So, she’s been doing loads of research for this sort of - ‘project’ thing we’re doing’ she replied, doing the air quotes

with her fingers. ‘She’s found out about all these, like, different poisons, and how to use them.’

‘Whoah, sounds very weird. A bit like those American documentaries - women who take revenge! Look, I’ve got one here on Insta.’

‘Yeah, right? If I didn’t know Gail so well, I might be worried. But it’s fine, so, I just think she’s, like, really into proving a point to the book club. Once she’s got it finished and, like, out of her system maybe we can get back to normal.’

‘And then I won’t need to be so worried about what you’ve been puttin’ in my tea.’

‘Idiot. Why would I want to kill you - for your money? I don’t think so!’

A few weeks later, Gail was enjoying a relaxed breakfast. It had been a late one the previous evening. Her housemates had already left and she didn’t have lectures until that afternoon. With a self-satisfied sigh, she was just reaching for her coffee when her phone lit up with a call - Jill.

‘Jill, what’s up? I’m just having breakfast, but I’ll be seeing you later, won’t I?’

‘Gail, so... it’s all over the news ... at a concert ... just like your story ... it’s the same. She was murdered, like

you wrote!’ Gail’s heart missed a beat. What was Jill saying?

‘Jill, slow down, take a breath. I can’t understand you ... you mentioned our story? Start from the beginning.’

‘So, it’s all over the news. A concert ... at Birmingham Symphony Hall. The clarinet player died - like that bit in our story. There’s no details, just that a female musician collapsed suddenly and died. It’s, like, all over my socials...just like you wrote it. I need to tell you...’

A sudden insistent knocking interrupted Jill’s gabbling monologue. Gail jumped up with a start, knocking her coffee to the floor. The cup smashed and sprayed hot coffee over her feet. She yelped with shock and pain.

‘Look, I’ll have to go, there’s someone at the door, but we’ll catch up later. And stop panicking, it’s just a coincidence, that’s all.’ Trying to gather her wits, she hobbled into the hallway, still clutching her phone to her ear. Through the pebbled glass in the door she could see two figures; a man and a woman, wearing dark uniforms. Jill was still talking ...

‘Gail, wait, listen to me, Monica rang .... I just need to explain something...’ Gail cut the call, an icy chill at her back, different scenarios running through her mind, racing, as it was, to do a quick mental check around the flat. She opened the door.

‘Miss Mason?’ said the policeman in front of her, as

they presented their warrant cards. ‘I’m Sergeant Robinson and this is PC Singh. We’d like to talk to you about Stephanie Naylor. I believe you knew her?’

‘Oh ... what ... erm, I’m not quite sure. I don’t think I recognise the name.’

‘I think you do, Miss Mason,’ PC Singh spoke. Shall we all take a seat so that we can explain?’

Robinson took over. ‘Stephanie Naylor was murdered yesterday evening, in Birmingham. I believe you knew her, and indeed had been in a relationship with her for the past few months. Could you tell us where you were last night, please?’

‘Let me think... Well, I was at uni with lectures all day, and then I went to the library until late. I had some work that was due in. You can ask my friend, Jill, if you want to check.’ Gail could tell she was babbling. But they’d expect her to be nervous wouldn’t they? Surely anyone answering police questions would be feeling worried, they couldn’t think that fact meant anything, - could they?

Sergeant Robinson went on. ‘We need to tell you that we found notebooks in Stephanie’s house, filled with the names and details of young women like yourself that we believe she preyed on. That’s how we found your details. I’m sorry to tell you it wasn’t all that we discovered. I’m afraid we also uncovered compromising video footage

from a hidden camera, featuring numerous young women. Stephanie apparently had plans to post it online, probably for blackmail purposes.’ Gail fought the impulse to throw up and struggled to appear calm, rather than showing the shivering mess she was inside. She could feel all her careful self-control breaking down.

‘Not just that, Miss Mason,’ Sergeant Robinson continued, ‘we’ve also had a call from a local couple, a Mr and Mrs Greene-Blythe, with some information concerning you, and relating to the murder of Stephanie Naylor. She was killed in Birmingham yesterday. It would appear that you were seeking revenge.’

‘I’m afraid they’ve wasted your time, Sergeant. Mrs Greene-Blythe is a vindictive, spiteful woman and I don’t even know her husband. I was at uni all day yesterday. Like I said, check with my friend, Jill Stewart.’

‘We have already spoken to Miss Stewart, and, although she was trying to be helpful whilst also being loyal to you, her story matches the Greene-Blythe’s. I’m afraid I need to ask you to come to the police station with us to help us with our inquiries.’//

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



After a career in music education, Anji Brown now lives in the beautiful, historic city of York, UK, with her husband and dog. As an avid reader, she has an interest in words and language which led her to take an Open University degree in English literature as a mature student. Although coming to writing later in life, Anji would love to share her work with a wider reading audience.

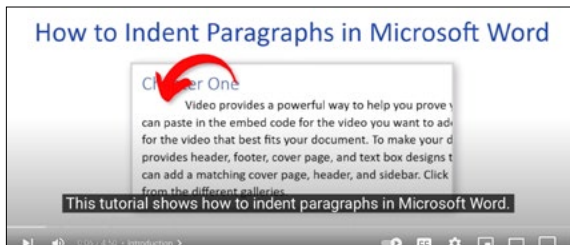
### WRITER TIP:

# Don't Use the TAB key to indent. Ever!

When you use the TAB key to indent, you are creating a nightmare for the publisher and the layout department. Your TAB causes extra indentation that can only be removed manually, one at a time.

Instead, set up your document so your indents are pre-configured. That way when you press ENTER, your next line is indented correctly.

Watch how to do it with this video:



Click image to watch video: <https://youtu.be/Q2BqBLV5MCM>

# BRIAN CASTLE

A SHORT STORY BY JOSEPH LYTTLETON

For a few days in his twentieth year, Brian Castle found himself the target of a manhunt.

Here's the story as it was reported in the immediate aftermath: At 2:17 a.m. on a Wednesday morning, an arsonist set ablaze the First Baptist Church of DeVane, Alabama. The historically Black church, where Martin Luther King Jr. once spoke, had mercifully been unoccupied at the time.

Here's what didn't get reported: At 2:17 a.m. on that Wednesday morning, Brian had been three sheets to the wind—four even.

Contrary to what law officials and news reports initially claimed, the destruction was not racially motivated, though that presumption was understandable. Brian, never the brightest kid, though occasionally quick on his feet, had been in the woods directly behind the church that night with a cigarette lighter, a backpack full of aerosol cans, and a gut full of bourbon. Upon seeing the work of his idle hands, he sobered up enough to hastily spray-paint the letter “K” in triplicate across the lawn and stumble deep

into the wilderness. Later, when interrogated about why he had sprayed those letters, Brian admitted he had hoped it would throw authorities off his scent.

Even if the subterfuge would have worked, it didn't matter: Brian turned himself in after seventy-two hours. It took twenty-four for him to sober up enough to comprehend what had happened and another day to convince himself that he, in fact, was responsible for the destruction that had made national news. The final day he spent debating his next move, and though a range of options came to mind – move to Mexico, stick his pa's rifle in his mouth, drown himself in bourbon – he ultimately decided to do the shockingly forthright thing and cop to his actions. No one was more surprised than Brian.

Because he confessed and convincingly demonstrated that his actions were not the result of an evil heart but, rather, a weak mind – it's not often a person is legally proclaimed a halfwit – Brian received a light prison sentence (too light in the opinion of the local paper's editorial board): two years. This was reduced to fourteen months upon appeal and eventually shortened to nine months with good behavior and another two years of parole. Nonetheless, Brian celebrated his twenty-first birthday in Elmore Correctional Facility with nearly 1,200

inmates, not a single one of whom bought him a cake.

When, during those alternating lonely and terrifying months in prison, he looked back on his confession and considered what it had cost him, Brian could only avoid spiraling out by reminding himself that the authorities would have found him eventually. They had forensics and DNA tests and advanced science stuff like that. It was better that he hadn't made the cops chase him down. He might have gotten shot. In a short life of dumb choices, this had been a smart one.

Upon his release, Brian had no choice but to move back in with his parents, and they had no choice but to allow him. His relationship with Carl and Maggie Castle had understandably soured some since his arrest, though it probably didn't help that, as a character witness on his son's behalf, Carl couldn't manage anything more laudatory than, "He's not a bad kid, just basically an idiot." Since Brian's lawyer couldn't locate anyone willing to offer a more full-throated statement of support, that sufficed as his entire defense.

As a teenager loosely in possession of a personality, Brian had mostly hung out with fellow low achievers in high school. When he returned to DeVane as an adult felon with few job prospects, though, his already small circle of

friends had shrunk to a period. Since no one visited while he was on the inside, other than his ma (thrice) and pa (once), the lack of a warm welcome upon his return didn't upset him. What did bother Brian, in ways inexpressible but deeply cutting, was how many "friends" had blocked him on Facebook. At least forty people were no longer in his already paltry tally, and of the remainder, at least half were people he had never met in real life. The far too quiet voice of his rational mind told him not to get worked up by internet trivialities, but he couldn't help himself. With no job and little human contact, virtual interactions were everything.

Following prison, the internet's chief allure was its anonymity and offer of a blank slate. Those were hardly the only draws, though. As a stipulation of his parole, Brian was not permitted to leave the state. Like kids growing up in small towns since time immemorial, Brian's youth had been spent dreaming about the larger world and imagining the day when he would see it all. Yet, at twenty-one, he hadn't even visited the Gulf. To sate his wanderlust, he scrolled through satellite imagery of the planet, a bleak substitute for a plane's window seat.

When not viewing the exotic topographies of central Africa through a browser window, Brian occupied himself

with message boards for fans of horror movies, adult animated TV shows, and alt-comedy podcasts. Having unfettered time, his avatar, Futzy Holly, a cartoon beaver in thick, brow line glasses, became a regular participant on these boards. Mixing topical or non-sequitur pop culture references with self-deprecating jabs and the occasional blistering rant, Futzy grew in recognition. As all groups develop hierarchies, Futzy rose rapidly to the top by sheer force of presence. No one posted as much as Brian.

Across his open tabs, he would riff in one pun-laden comment thread while eviscerating a moron's uninformed opinion on the recent Batman movie or reading someone's tale of being ghosted. The one thing Brian had in common with most of the commentators on the message boards was a woefully inactive love life.

Since his parole officer insisted that Brian make an effort to find employment, he started each morning by opening the job offering pages and scanning for one or two ads to respond to with his lackluster resumé. He didn't have the skills or education for most of the jobs, but he sent out emails anyway to reach his quota. He had sent his CV to twenty companies before he noticed "diploma" was misspelled (he never did catch the "attention to detail" typo under "Special Skills"). By ten most mornings, he

abandoned his perfunctory job hunt and was back on the message boards. Day after day, that was his life.

~~~

Roughly four months after exiting the clink, Brian met a girl online. He had drifted through 120 days of unbroken tedium – sixteen weeks without a meaningful interaction with a corporeal person outside his home – before something good finally happened in his life.

She went by the name “Hannah Mantegna.” Her avatar was the pop star Miley Cyrus with a scraggly, gray goatee photoshopped on. After nearly a month of replying to each other’s comments with increasingly flirty quips, Futzy and Hannah moved to private messages where, for the first time since prison, Brian revealed his real first name to someone online. Her name was Dani, and she lived in the suburbs of Atlanta. Brian’s infatuation with her and their hours of conversation grew so immense that fellow commentators on his regular message boards began commenting about his absence. One late night when Brian was, against house rules, quite drunk, he suggested that they meet up. Dani liked the idea.

The next morning, the flaw in this plan dawned on Brian: he couldn’t leave Alabama. He didn’t want to confess this to Dani, not in a PM. He would tell her the

truth, absolutely, but only once they had met. That kind of information was better delivered in person. So as not to have to get into the matter online, he invented an excuse for why he couldn't get out to Georgia: he didn't own a car (technically true). He then worked to convince Dani that DeVane would be a fun place to visit.

"I'll take you to all my favorite spots." It would be a short tour.

They spent days planning the visit, settling on a weekend in late September. For the first time since that drunken night by the church, Brian felt the thrill of anticipation for the future.

Then Dani's replies started to peter out.

The first day she apologized, explaining that she had fought with her boss at work and was feeling depressed. Stretching himself mentally, Brian offered comforting words. She thanked him for his kindness, and he immediately felt like a hero. He started to think of their connection as a relationship; Brian was buoyant. But the next day, she wrote back only a few times, the replies hours apart. After a week, she stopped replying altogether.

"U there?" was the last message he sent her. He sent it five times.

Dani had given no hints of what had changed, so Brian's mind raced through possibilities. The pendulum of theories swung wildly from concern ("maybe she's sick") to anger ("she's just a bitch") to rationalization ("probably a catfish"). Then the worst option occurred to him: He had told her his name and hometown. She must have googled him.

In fact, Dani was twenty-seven-year-old Danielle Rollins, a 5'3", 240-pound African American woman. Since her avatar featured a sexualized white girl, most men who interacted with her online treated her as such, and her virtual persona developed to match. As her two sisters pointed out constantly, Dani's tastes in pop culture weren't typically "Black," so on the boards she frequented, there was a default level of assumed whiteness that she never pushed back on. Technically, she never lied because no one ever asked.

"Would you send me a picture of you?" Brian asked that night he suggested meeting in person. Dani had resisted, citing her legitimate concerns about revealing too much online. Brian, equally protective of his anonymity, didn't press the matter. But that simple request had punctured the illusion of their computer-generated romance. If they met in the flesh, he would see the real Dani and everything she

hated about herself. Which was everything. So, she ghosted him.

Though their digital dalliance lasted not even four weeks, when it was over, Brian felt its crushing absence like it was the end of a years-long relationship. He played gray-toned songs with titles like “Without You” and “I Should’ve Known” or furious Scandinavian metal with indiscernible lyrics. His online posts lost their sense of humor, transforming into screeds without a target. Though no one on the message boards could have known about his abortive romance with Dani, he sensed in their confused and defensive responses that those posters he had come to think of as friends were choosing her in their breakup. He felt banished. He stopped commenting.

When he did visit the boards, he found Dani was no longer posting. So, he scrolled through old discussions and down voted Hannah Mantegna’s past comments.

Brian stumbled upon other online communities, ones that were less concerned with pop culture and decidedly more obsessed with women; specifically, what their deals were and how they were whores. Now, his open tabs were more educational. He learned the differences between Alpha and Beta males – he feared he was a Beta, but surviving prison was pretty Alpha, so? – added terms

like “cuck” and “feminazis” to his vocabulary, and began religiously reading blogs by men who professed to have unlocked the secrets to the female heart (or anatomy). Women, he discovered, had evolved to confuse and subjugate the opposing gender. Alpha males weren’t fooled by their treacheries.

In a subgroup of a subgroup on a pick-up artist’s website, Brian found an anonymous collection of ex-inmates sharing their experiences and openly discussing the circumstances leading up to their arrests. On the inside, Brian had kept to himself as much as possible so as to not invite anyone’s attention. For those nine months, he had avoided the types of people that occupied this subgroup. Now, they were the only ones he could relate to.

There was DDtranq, who had broken a man’s nose and arm in a bar fight, and Cloud69, who, wasted at nineteen, had crashed his mother’s van into a parked Lexus. MewMoonity had sold speed to an undercover cop; JohnHenryAintWeak had done the same, but meth. AuAgCu1488, who insisted he was innocent – they all insisted they were innocent, but he really insisted – had done time for battery of his girlfriend, which was obviously a crock of shit because they were still together, and why would she stick around if he’d done what they said he’d

done?

Brian admitted committing arson, but he left out two details: first, that it had been the drunken act of a listless fool, not a pyro-anarchist, and second, that he had torched a church. When pressed, he said it was an abandoned building. The group agreed that was hardly worth doing time for.

Brian liked these guys, in part because there were members in it whose pitifulness dwarfed even his own. Also, there was no judgment here, no subjects off limits. It was liberating. A couple of the regulars proudly claimed they were in the Aryan Brotherhood and referred to other people solely by their corresponding slur. Brian found some of their words distasteful, but he never objected. Free expression was a sacred tenet for these men.

He was happy to belong.

~~~

Maggie Castle noticed the change in her son. The boy had come out of prison quiet and pensive, which she took as evidence that he had gained some perspective. Brian was served well by admonishment; she clearly hadn't provided enough. Now, more than five months since his return, he was talking more, but only in pointed remarks

and dismissive, haughty tirades that she couldn't follow. Everything irritated him, and absolutely nothing elicited even a spark of joy in his perpetually heavy-lidded eyes. She wanted him to see a therapist.

Carl Castle didn't notice any difference in Brian, but if his moron of a son insisted on sassing his mother, all he needed was a fist to the teeth, not therapy. His wife made everything so damn complicated.

~~~

One afternoon, nearly six months after his release, Brian was in the middle of typing out a lengthy exegesis on female disloyalty when his ma knocked on his door.

“Phone for you.”

Though he wasn't allowed a cellphone, Brian had an extension of the family landline in his bedroom. He picked up.

“Is this Brian Castle?” The man had an accent that Brian couldn't place; maybe Russian?

“It is.”

“Hi Brian, my name's Arjun Raj. I manage the Express Mart on Court. I have your resumé here and was wondering if you were free to come in for an interview.”

“For what?”

“For an interview?” the voice repeated.

“Oh, um, sure. Yeah, I can do that.”

“Great. Would this afternoon work?”

Brian paused for a moment, almost reflexively saying he couldn't make it before remembering he had nothing else to do. Ever. Doing nothing had become such an intricate part of his day, it'd come to feel like a responsibility.

“I can do that. Maybe three?”

“Three works. You know where we're located?”

“I do.”

“Great! See you at three, Brian.”

Brian wasn't sure how he was supposed to feel, but he was pretty sure it wasn't depressed. He'd gone so long without a response to his emails – he didn't even remember applying to Express Mart – he had given up all expectations. What was he supposed to do now? Sitting back in his chair, he stared at the block of text he had been about to send. He deleted it.

Following a still intact reflex, he entered a few keystrokes and was suddenly staring at Hannah Mantegna and a screen of their private messages that had ended with his repeated (needy) “U there?” His fingers hovered over the

keys.

Dani had known he was looking for work. Brian mentioned it early in their exchanges, and she had been genuinely sympathetic (“looking 4 work is the worst”), which had made him feel less pitiful. Maybe his good news would bring her out of hiding.

“I got a job.”

Sure, it was premature, but it was the Express Mart. He'd have to be a complete dipshit to not be able to land a job there.

His ma made lunch for him, as she did every day, and left it on the counter, expecting him to grab the ham sandwich and chips and retreat to his room. Instead, he sat at the kitchen table. Having forgotten the protocol for such an event, the two of them sat across from each other in silence, Brian chewing with child-like, oversized bites. He didn't mention the job interview.

After that ten-minute break, he returned to his room and immediately checked his PMs. That was how he'd spent the last week of his flirtation with Dani, compulsively checking his messages every few minutes. She hadn't responded; she wouldn't respond. He berated himself for allowing false hope to bubble up.

Just a bitch.

~~~

At two, unable to focus on the message boards, Brian left his room and slipped out the front door while his ma watched TV in her bedroom. By bike, it would take him ten minutes to reach the Express Mart, but there was time to kill, and a walk would help clear his head before the interview.

It had been a few weeks since Brian last spent a sustained amount of time outside. The temperatures had dropped. It wasn't exactly cold, but having rushed out the door without a jacket, his hands quickly grew numb and red in the brisk air. It was quiet; all the kids were in school and everyone else was working.

The neighborhood where he had grown up, where he had first ridden a bike and learned the rules of baseball and taken his first punch at the age of nine, was no longer his home. He didn't know when that happened. The familiar houses were still there, the mailboxes with the same names – Nolan, Jones, Williamson – and the front doors were the same colors as he remembered from elementary school. No, the neighborhood hadn't changed; he had.

Unmarried Graham Coulson stood on his porch in

overalls and a flannel button-up. His salt-and-pepper beard had grown whiter and mangier since Brian last saw him, while his pocked skin still looked like stretched leather. The man always had a cigarette in his hand; there it was, pressed between his forefinger and a coffee mug (probably filled with whiskey). The old man eyed Brian suspiciously as the ex-felon crossed in front of his lawn.

After fifteen minutes, Brian was in sight of DeVane's Main Street. The town's commerce district was ten square blocks of shops, restaurants, and offices. It began with two banks on opposite corners and a weathered, wooden sign that announced, "Welcome to DeVane, Alabama, Est. 1878." In its century-and-a-half of history, DeVane had once been a seat of influence in the state; those days were long gone.

It was two thirty by the time the Express Mart came into view. Still having time to kill, Brian entered Kramer's Hardware. The shop had stood on the corner of Main and Court far longer than Brian had been alive. The one employee on duty acknowledged the bell chime of Brian's entrance with a nod in his direction, but he was occupied helping Ruth Humphries, the sixty-eight-year-old widow of Glenn Humphries, whose family had lived in the area since slavery was legal. Brian slipped down the far row to

avoid any interaction.

Brian's pa used to bring him to Kramer's for lawn care products or whenever the toilet needed repair. Brian had looked forward to those trips because they meant listening to the radio – his ma didn't like music in the house, it gave her a headache – and because the wrenches and gruesomely sharp tools hanging from the walls fascinated them. He used to press the tip of his finger against the teeth of the saws until it pinched. Now, staring at the back wall and the same old assortment of handsaws, he felt the piercing metal calling out to him.

He spun away and marched out of the store. He was sweating.

He decided to show up to his interview early. That'd be a good first impression.

“Great to meet you Brian,” Arjun greeted him. The man, who Brian had pictured in his fifties, was maybe two or three years older than him, and good-looking, with long black hair pulled back in a ponytail and dark, lustrous skin. Brian felt intimidated in the man's presence—did that make him a Beta cuck?

“You'll have to give me a second. I'm waiting for one of my employees to arrive so he can cover the counter.

If you want, you can head back through that door.” He indicated the “Employees Only” door next to the restroom. “Take a seat and I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

On the other side of the door, Brian found a narrow, claustrophobic hallway, made narrower by a set of half lockers lining the right wall. On the opposite wall was a cork board with a set of notes and announcements hung haphazardly on it, and next to that, a gray and faded poster explaining the federal minimum wage.

Against the wall were two metal folding chairs. Brian sat. “Did you bring a copy of your resumé?” Arjun asked once he came back ten minutes later.

“Oh, no, I didn’t.”

“Okay, well, I think I have it somewhere. Remind me of your name.”

“Brian. Castle.” He was suddenly assaulted by a flashback to his parole hearing.

“Castle, right,” Arjun said as he shuffled papers on his desk. Brian saw his name in the pile.

“Uh, there it is,” Brian offered, pointing at a dolefully bare sheet of paper.

“Ah, yes. Thanks.” Scanning the resumé, a cloudy, ambiguous expression fell over Arjun’s face. Confusion?

Maybe annoyance.

“So, not a lot of work experience?” Arjun said after skimming it.

“No, um, just working at my pop’s office during the summers in high school.”

“Cleaning, sorting files,” Arjen read from the paper.

“Yeah,” Brian offered sheepishly.

“Okay, well, let me tell you what we’re looking for before we go any further. We have overnight shifts available on the weekends. These shifts are from ten at night to six thirty in the morning, Friday through Sunday. Obviously, not the most popular shifts, but they pay an extra two fifty an hour, and in a few months there’ll be the possibility of switching to day shifts. Does that interest you at all?”

No, actually, it didn’t. At all. It sounded miserable. But what else did Brian have going on? The last time he had gone out on a weekend, it was dinner with his parents, and he’d fought with his pa.

Brian nodded.

“Great. We’re looking for someone that can start right away. This weekend, preferably. Are you available?”

“Y-yeah. I could do that.” Brian’s heart felt like lead as he

found himself accepting the job he absolutely did not want.

“That’s really great. Well, look, why don’t you come in on Friday, around nine thirty, and we’ll have you fill out the paperwork, your W-2. We’ll also do a background check. That work for you?”

Brian nodded mechanically. The words “background check” had interrupted his cognitive function.

All of a sudden, he was standing outside. He couldn’t remember how the conversation had ended or what he had agreed to. All he knew for sure was he hadn’t told Arjun that his record included felony arson.

He walked home in a fog, unsure whether to go back and explain or just leave it. The information would be revealed in the background check. And so what if it did, he didn’t want the job anyway.

Thirty minutes later, he entered the family home through the back door. His ma, who was washing a dish over the sink, was startled by her son coming in from the outside.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

Brian ignored her, slipping past and returning to his shelter. In his computer chair, he made up his mind: he wouldn’t even bother showing up on Friday. It was a shitty job, anyway. Something better would come along.

Moving the mouse on his desk, his computer came back to life. On his screen was the last thing he had viewed before he left, his exchange with Dani (because of course he checked it one last time). To his astonishment, there was a new message from Hannah Mantegna waiting for him: “Congrats! That’s GREAT News! What’s the job?”

Brian stared at the words without comprehension, gallons of acid churning in his gut. He felt like crying. He always felt like crying.

Brian clicked on the “x” in the corner. Hannah disappeared.

~~~

He took the job. If the store manager did a background check on Brian, he was apparently unbothered by his stint in Elmore Correctional.

Friday to Sunday each week, Brian manned the till at Express Mart, the only store in DeVane that stayed open twenty-four hours. He worked on his own, mostly restocking the shelves for the morning rush and shoos two inebriated homeless men away from the entrance. By the third week, he knew both men’s names, Milton and Dixon. They provided intermittent distraction during the shift.

The weekend gig allowed no room for a social life, which, it turned out, was a relief. Brian had an excuse to continue his slide into obscurity. Also, the job was easy. A night shift that no one else wanted was hard to screw up. The worst reprimand he ever got was an unnecessarily long lecture from Arjun about ensuring the dairy products weren't left out. Other than that, so long as he showed up on time, his employment was secure. Punctuality was one virtue Brian had learned at Elmore.

For the next half year, Brian worked at the store without event, without issue. He was able to pay a minimal rent to his parents and save a little, all while regularly checking in with his parole officer. It wasn't a particularly fulfilling existence; that would have been too much to expect. But it was uncomplicated. He still spent most of his free time on the internet, frequenting the ex-cons group, though he lurked more, commented less. He would also check his former online haunts to see if Dani had started posting again. She hadn't. No, Brian's life wasn't great, but it was unremarkable, and that was the best outcome he could allow himself to hope for under the circumstances. He could live with it.

One Friday shift in March, roughly a year after his release, he was flipping through a Playboy magazine when

a man entered the store. It was just after three. No one was around, not even Milton or Dixon. The man was wearing a puffy black coat, an all-black baseball cap, and a wool scarf pulled up to cover his mouth. The only identifiable characteristic was his piercing blue eyes. He was jittery. Brian immediately understood the situation: a robbery. Even before the man pulled it out of his pocket, Brian knew he had a gun. He had been trained for this. Arjun told him he should not be surprised if such a scenario arose. The manager didn't say this, but it was obvious: This was why no one else would take the shift.

“Empty the till,” the gunman demanded in a husky voice, handing over a plain tan tote bag, his black pistol pointed at Brian's chest. Brian followed his training: obey the robber, hand over any easily accessible money, don't be a hero. All things he could do. There were multiple posted signs that explained the employee on duty couldn't access the safe. This guy was going to take away, at most, a few hundred dollars. An acceptable loss, for the store and Brian.

Brian set the bag on the counter, and the robber picked it up.

“They're gonna catch you,” Brian said, surprising himself.

“Excuse me?” the robber barked through his scarf.

“I’m just saying,” he shrugged. “They have, like, ways of tracking you.”

The robber stared at him, and for a moment, Brian wondered if the man was going to shoot him. He didn’t feel afraid, not really, more intrigued by the possibility.

“No they won’t,” the robber finally said, confident. He turned to the door.

“How do you know?” Brian asked, sincerely curious.

“Because,” the robber said at the door, “I’m not a fucking idiot.” Seconds later, the man had disappeared into the night. Brian closed the till drawer and looked up at his little reflection in the convex security mirror over the entrance.

“Oh,” he said to himself.//

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joseph Lyttleton studied creative writing at the University of Kansas. Following graduation, Lyttleton created the self-funded travel project 10 Cities/10 Years. For a decade, he lived in a new U.S. city every year, including San Francisco, Chicago, New Orleans, and Brooklyn. He has written about his project for The Washington Post and Newsweek and was featured in U.S. News and World Report. He has been published in *Third Wednesday*, *After Dinner Conversation*, *The Lit Nerds*, and *Across the Margin*, among others, and won the 2012

Abstract Quill Short Story Contest. Following the completion of his 10 Cities project, Lyttleton moved abroad in 2017 and now lives with his partner in Madrid, Spain, where he is a freelance editor and writer. He also currently co-hosts the Madrid Writers Group. You can find him at <https://10cities10years.com>

---



Click to watch: <https://youtu.be/uL0atQFZzL8>

## Book Review:

# Bedlam Bewitched

by Cheryl Spanos

REVIEWED BY JILL HEDGECOCK

“Bedlam Bewitched” (Deadnettle Publishing, 2024, paperback, 335 pages, \$15.99) by Cheryl Spanos is the perfect light-hearted read for the holidays. Seventeen-year-old Cory decides to leave boarding school after her Uncle Horace dies and wills her a share of his Berkeley-based magical bookstore. Cory is well aware that this is no ordinary bookstore. Here, muscled men flex their pecs on romance novel covers, animated comic books perform laugh-out-loud antics, and ancient spell books reveal their secrets — but only when they feel like it. Cory has her own special powers, but they are not fully under her control and the result threatens to be catastrophic.

Cory has fond childhood memories amidst the stacks of Bedlam Books with childhood friend, Jack. But to her dismay, her Uncle Horace has willed the other half of the bookstore to Jack, who does not want to be business partners with her. Debonaire Jack wants to buy her out. But Cory is looking for a fresh start and refuses to sell. Little does she know that a financial disaster and her lingering feelings for Jack await. As her innovative ideas to save the bookstore pan out, Cory’s romantic life ignites with the appearance of a hot, motorcycle bad boy. To further Cory’s problems, Jack’s vengeful undead fiancé seems to have cast a spell on her husband.

“Bedlam Bewitched” will cast a spell on readers as they enter a fun-filled bookstore and root for Cory as she discovers that all is not as it seems in this delightful book repository. Fans of Cassandra Clare’s “City of Bones” and Stefano A. Giovannoni’s “The Dark Secrets of Oliveto” will likely enjoy Spanos’ debut novel.

“Bedlam Bewitched” is a mixture of magical rom-com, conniving swindlers, and an adorable ghostly dog made only of bones, all sprinkled with a zest of witchery. The twists and turns will keep readers’ mortal fingers turning the pages long into the witching hour.

Cheryl Spanos writes short stories and fantasy novels for teens and adults. A former software engineer, she earned a Ph.D. in Computer Science and worked in computer-aided design and full-stack web development.

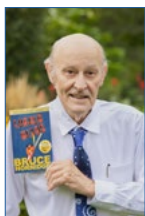
In between, her life path veered into literary and artistic pursuits. Her children’s fiction has appeared in “Hunger Mountain”, “Beyond Centauri”, and Stories for Children magazines. The short story, “Are We There Yet?”, appeared in the 2014 “California Writers Club Literary Review”, and won Honorable Mention for Mainstream/Literary fiction in the Writer’s Digest 77th Annual Writing Competition. Her middle-grade fantasy manuscript, “Tougher than Dragon Hide”, won Runner-Up for Children’s Fiction in the San Francisco Writers Conference Contest. Follow her at [www.cherylspanos.com](http://www.cherylspanos.com).

## ABOUT JILL HEDGECOCK



Jill Hedgecock is a local author of a Doberman trilogy series: “Between Shadow’s Eyes” (Book 1) and “From Shadow’s Perspective” (Book 2) and “In Shadow’s Reflection”. (Book 3). Her books are available on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and [www.jillhedgecock.com](http://www.jillhedgecock.com)

## An Interview with Bruce Hornidge



Bruce Edward Hornidge was born in 1948 in Belleville, Ontario, an Air Force brat growing up where his father was stationed in Gimli, Manitoba, and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Bruce finished school in 1967, joining his brother Brian at MacMillan Bloedel's Kennedy Lake logging division at Ucluelet on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. He was married on a very unusual snowy day in March 1973 and, with his wife, Minnie, raised two boys and a girl. He felled trees for twenty-six years. After losing his job in 1997, he became a security guard in Campbell River, Vancouver, and Vanderhoof, British Columbia. Bruce and his wife, now the Rev. Minnie Hornidge, live in Glen Williams, Ontario. There, Bruce gardens and knits. And writes.

### **Q: What allures writers to the memoir genre?**

Initially I started what became the memoir *Loggerheads* as a legacy project over a process of decades, I was thinking of my family. I wanted to write a story down about their old man.

The Clayoquot incident bothered me, it was a disrupting time in my life. I wasn't sure what would become of my writing, but I knew I wanted to help people to understand more fully the worker's perspective of the War in the Woods, not just what they'd heard.

I wanted to talk about the process of working with management, trying to fix the things you could see that you knew were wrong. I wanted to inform people, to push for the environment in a responsible manner respecting that our employment is important.

### **Q: What was the War in the Woods in Clayoquot Sound about?**

Environmental interest groups felt there was too much forest clearing taking place too fast, so they wanted to get the word out through the media and have people obstructing in a meaningful manner to get the word out to the public forum. They believed there was overcutting in the forest, and devastation to the environment world-wide. Clayoquot Sound fit the bill as a place to stage these issues. It was a beautiful tourist area, there was already a protest element there of people who felt passionately about the environment, as well as an established logging industry, and everything was visible, right down to the cleared patch called the Black Hole. They wanted to get government attention on the issue by bringing masses of people to protest in a small, focused area, and Clayoquot Sound on Vancouver Island seemed a logical protest site for the cause of saving forests worldwide.

On the other side, there was 150 jobs at stake in a small community that shutting an industry down would have a devastating effect. Even today there are people whose retirements should have been much more secure than they turned out to be with the shuttering of the Kennedy Lake division in Clayoquot Sound.

### **Q: Are there still jobs for loggers?**

There are still jobs for loggers, on a very much reduced harvest volume and it is highly regulated by forest management rules. They're using specialized harvest methods, helicopter hauling of logs, selection cutting of trees are used. This is under close oversight by government. There's small patches, selection type logging where you leave standing trees – it's definitely improvement for the forest management. It's done with special contractors on specific sites as the contracts get approval. Once in a while people scratch their heads when they see slash piles of wood being burnt because they thought all that was far behind us.

### **Q: What happens when there are no more trees to cut down for loggers?**

The simple answer is that if there were no more trees,

there would be no more logging. Nobody wants it to get to a state of “no more trees.” Trees, especially growing ones, make the oxygen we live on. There are long cycles for these things, and companies need to respect the length of that cycle of regrowth.

A lot of trees, especially on places like Vancouver Island, are in zones where you can't get at them unless you use helicopters, lots of money, specialized crews, lots of gas. On Sutton Pass, between Port Alberni and Ucluelet, B.C., there are still lots of areas of what we know as “old growth.”

Maybe another question is what if there were no forest products? You want to live in a plastic house? We can make it out of bamboo, but where does the bamboo come from and how do we get that, and what do we cut down to make room for the bamboo?

Silviculture should be huge. There should always be silviculture, and an effort to make sure there's always trees.

Sure, there will be new building inventions and better use of available fiber. Replanting forests will maintain the fiber in its cycles.

**Q: Today, we see many realtors who cut down trees of beautiful lots just to make them more visible to poten-**

## **tial buyers. Why are they not being shamed the way you were?**

There's the old dilemma Joni Mitchell sang about—they pave paradise and put up a parking lot, right? I think it's the scale of the situation. A developer wants to cut down some trees, it doesn't go any further than that. It's in the hands of those who manage public lands as well – nobody's putting condos up in Cathedral Grove, for example. Usually this is protested on a local scale by small groups and local media. Attitude could be “tis what it is,” land and homes are needed. Usually there is then a court resolution. Ultimately down in the States, they've paved paradise to a horrible scale—the entire Eastern Seaboard is massively overdeveloped. It's a population issue, to a great extent. Then you look at regions of the world where forest destruction is nearly unabated, with far fewer regulations. Getting everyone in the world to respect these issues is complicated.

**Q: Tell us about your experience as a logger and why you first became a logger.**

I was initially quite mercenary about it—I wanted to find security in living my life in a job, and I wanted to buy a car, which is a personal thing. I hoped to go to university,

so I needed much money, my family paying for that wasn't really an option. I became enamoured with the money and I stayed logging. I loved working outside, working alone, making my own way doing the job. I loved the community—once you get married you settle in and proceed at a job you've decided to do as a career. Forestry careers are looking different these days, with degrees available in silviculture for example.

### **Q: Why was logging such a huge industry at one time?**

There was a country to be built. People were pouring into North America. What would homes be made of—plastic? aluminum? There was a hugely expanded industry for the Second World War, for plywood for the Rosie the Riveters to make gliders of in places like Port Alberni, BC. Then after World War 2, as new construction for homes and cities and generally wood products were needed around the world, there was huge growth, aided by new technology like new kinds of chain saws. After the 80s you had special equipment come in—just like every industry where machines were reducing the number of workers. There were helicopters, skylines, balloons, super snorkels, long-lined loaders, hydraulic machines that were much more flexible and movable. For fallers, there were smaller and more high

speed machines. All of those things reduced the number of guys and machine operators working out there.

**Q: How would you describe logging to someone unfamiliar with the term?**

First there's assessing the forest, engineering, mapping, roadwork. Then there's the falling, which is a faller with a chain saw, cutting into the tree in the safest way possible, to get it to fall in the best position possible, in order to save the fibre rather than smashing it. The limbs have to be removed—safely, again. As to getting the wood out of the forest, you can get into lots of different descriptions, from timberjacks to hydraulic loading machines that go walking into the forest like Star Wars vehicles, with wide tracks able to go into flatlands and some mountainsides, and they physically throw the logs to the road, or you have a very long loading reach for the loader to cast the grapples way out there and move it to the road.

Certainly the wages skyrocketed up for the falling groups, especially in the 1980s. My argument was doing a professional job, not just exploding them down the hill to get them off the stump and on the ground faster. As I mentioned in *Loggerheads*, that wasn't always how it was done. The companies and contractors had their own reasons for

wanting to “get ‘er done” for maximum profit.

Primarily the harvesting processes of trees which are moved from the forests to the mills, to the consumer. This requires mapping, road construction, harvesting, movement of logs and replanting. Huge machinery and many workers, though fewer now.

**Q: What are some of the issues you discuss in your book, *Loggerheads*?**

The proper and sustainable use of the forest fiber, bucking and producing logs, consideration of Protection of fish creeks or minimize the effects of harvesting, and safety for all the crews. All industries have their own conflicts that are a part of life and working.

No matter what you do, right off the top, if a man does any kind of work he's going to make mistakes—that's what they teach you straight off in first aid training. You try and avoid those mistakes from past experiences and investigations, and you still have to apply that. You play the percentages—yes I can outrun that, yes I can clear the escape trail. Close calls? We can all talk about that. You might talk to the guys for a learning exercise, but you don't want to get your wife or family scared, or to burden them. They might

notice something's odd with you after work – maybe you're grumpier or edgy. Some would consume alcohol, or book off work. Me, I smoked a little too much for a couple of hours after a rough day.

**Q: Were there any pros to logging that those on the opposite would have approved of?**

Had they looked into it, the environmental lobby would have seen that there were those concerned with silviculture and protection of the forest and the fish. We had children and grandchildren too, and we lived right there, so we had reason to get it right. The bigger problem was probably that company policy and strategy and management and training needed to change as well, for the betterment of the environment, but the underlying profit motive was a hindrance to that. They were, in effect, dinosaurs that had their day.

It became forlorn hope as all we heard was “save the trees” and “eradicate the loggers of Clayoquot Sound.”

I hope people can see from this memoir that we endured the wrath and we were eradicated, as least our jobs were.

Clayoquot Sound, I think we could have logged it in a manner that would be agreed upon—at the start of the

War in the Woods, I thought that's where we were headed, an agreement towards more flexibility, doing a better job, learning from past mistakes. A place to test better methods, and I thought we would have been retained as workers. The challenge was that the companies found ways to reduce manpower and increase productivity, and didn't take the important things into consideration. As loggers, you have to do what you can do to meet company expectations. We wanted to protect jobs and workplace safety, but also to protect the forest's future for everyone.

**Q: What would you like readers to learn from your memoir?**

I want readers to understand fallers and loggers are real people—we were then, we are now. Not tree killers, but people with professionalism and feelings and families, whose jobs were vacuumed out from underneath us. There were some conflicts within the industry, which there always will be between bosses and crew no matter what your line of work is, for everybody that goes working. A lot of this pushback shocked me at the time, as I was in a dangerous job and I was responsible for myself. I wondered why someone would pushing me for volume and to “get ‘er done.”

And while I'm at it, I'd like to eradicate something of my own—I'd like to eradicate the myths—the notion that we were heartless tree killers. We wanted to respect First Nations traditional trees, respect the fiber and respect the fish creek, and respect nature.

A lot of the media coverage or the advertising the environmental lobby put out at the time was just wrong, or not the full story. The concept of clear cutting, made out to be so shocking, was for safety reasons. Underbrush and flying debris kill fallers; that doesn't get publicized. My brother married a woman whose first husband was a faller who was killed in a falling accident.

I wanted to eradicate the shorting of safety rules over expediency, the push to get 'er done for productivity and profit regardless. We developed falling techniques and technology to protect fish creeks.

This is ongoing, with wonderful efforts to rebuild fish habitat, towards silviculture.

If people are really worried about devastation, look in Russia, South America at vast swathes of unchecked logging and rainforest destruction.

**Q: If logging was a career that could last forever, would**

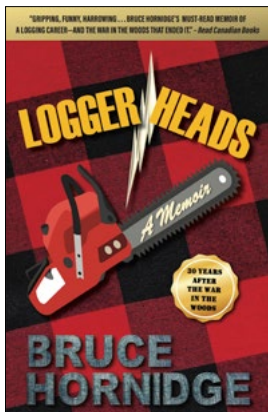
## **you still be a logger?**

God willing, I'd have loved that. It was dangerous work, and the longer you were in it, the worse your odds were against being injured. MY plan was to fall trees until I was 55 years old, then do some other powersaw job until retirement at 65. I would have probably then gone to log cutting in a sorting area, if I'd had my druthers. Sooner or later, though, your reflexes and strength and speed aren't what they were. However, my logging story ended too abruptly at age 50. That was not my choice, and I felt very disoriented, and I go into detail about that in *Loggerheads*. I actually enjoyed logging, working productively in the outdoors, contributing to society and community. A couple of close calls, but overall, it was good work, and I did it as well as I could.

### **Q: What inspired you to share your story as a logger?**

Over the past three decades, I've been trying to fix the things I could see, somehow address what I thought was wrong, unfair, or inequitable with the industry as it was then, as best as I could explain it, and to tell the more specific story about my experience in falling trees in one of the most beautiful places in the world. And I wanted to give a true picture of the experience of the loggers' side of the

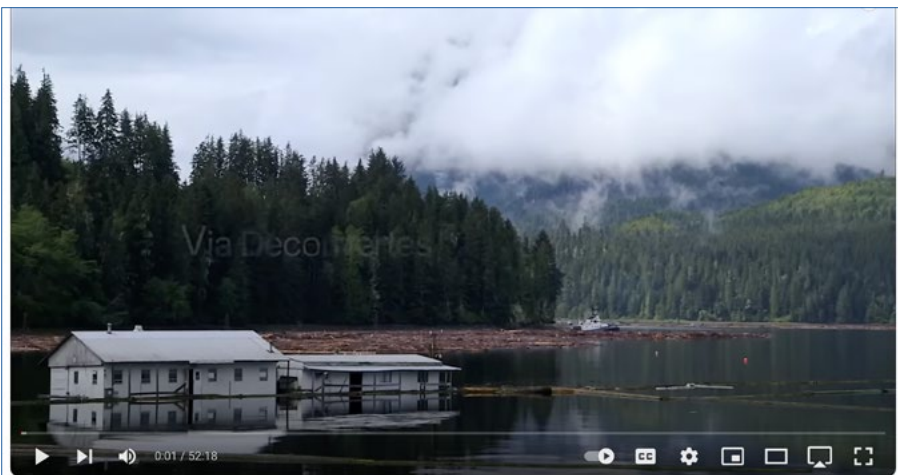
## Clayoquot Sound “War in the Woods.”



**Q: Where can readers find you and your memoir online?**

My memoir *Loggerheads* is widely available through my publisher, Endless Sky Books, and places like Barnes & Noble, Chapters Indigo, Amazon.

Buy on Amazon [HERE](#)



**The Real Lives of Loggers in Canada: From Forest to Factory | Canadian Lumberjack Documentary**

To watch click: [https://youtu.be/juH1IWNcM\\_U?](https://youtu.be/juH1IWNcM_U?)

# VIDEO CORNER

We receive many manuscripts poorly formatted. While we are somewhat forgiving, let's be honest. If you want to be professional, learn the proper way to format your work. This video can help you.



To watch click: <https://youtu.be/aZSR0iS9tNQ>

We receive many manuscripts with poorly formatted punctuation. Things like commas outside of quotation marks, poor placement of question marks, to name a few. This video can help.



To watch click: <https://youtu.be/qhwZXRdJZR8>

WWW.BNPMAG.COM

# BOOKS & PIECES MAGAZINE



**The End:** Be sure to check follow us on FB, X, IG and our website.

Please note, all issues will be released mid-month for 2025. Thanks for reading.