

A close-up photograph of a monkey's face, wearing black-rimmed glasses and holding an open book. The monkey has light brown fur and is looking down at the pages. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

B&P

BOOKS & PIECES MAGAZINE
OCTOBER 2024

**FREE
TO READ**

IN THIS ISSUE:

Michael Barrington

David Gershan

Ebony Haywood

Lee Conrad

Bill Tope

Brian Mosher

Allen Seward

Dan Heck

William Ogden Haynes

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Fiona Sinclair

Jill Hedgecock

Featured:

Meg Hafdahl &

Kelly Florence

Emil Rem

Stories / **Book Reviews** / **Videos**
Poetry **Artwork** and more....

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(note: Everything is Hyperlinked)

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Florence** • **Emil Rem**

CONTRIBUTORS: • **Michael Barrington**

• **David Gershan** • **Ebony Haywood**

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VIDEO | PHOTOGRAPHY | FACTS | TIPS

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INKDROPS: October 2024

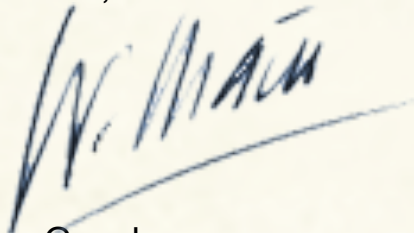
We added a new domain name www.BNPMag.com, with a faster host so our site runs quickly and efficiently. Of course, we are still www.BooksNPieces.com, but the new one is shorter.

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All the best,



William Gensburger

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Facts

LONGEST NOVEL EVER WRITTEN

A la recherche du temps perdu by Marcel Proust contains an estimated 9,609,000 characters (each letter counts as one character. Spaces are also counted, as one character each).

The title translates to "Remembrance of Things Past."



Summer 1987

A short story by Ebony Haywood

When I reflect on the summers of my youth, I remember swimming lessons and ice cream, bicycles, roller skates, plump strawberries, and Vacation Bible School, the sun's warmth, and death's chill.

The former filled most of my days. Summer was the season of freedom—freedom from homework and early curfews. My brother and I could play outdoors and stay up past bedtime a little longer. Our faces basked in the television's glow. Our fingers, slick with butter, plunged into popcorn. Our heavy eyelids promised us pleasant dreams. Life began on the last day of school.

But the last day of second-grade school marked the end of life.

It was after school, and we were home. My brother and I played in the breakfast room while my mother watched television in the living room. The phone rang. She answered. Her voice and tears suddenly flooded the house. "What do mean Junior's been shot! Mama, what do you mean?" She jumped up from the sofa. "I'm on my way." As she ran around the house, gathering her purse, coat, and kids, she repeated, "Please, God, not my brother! Please, God, don't take my brother!"

She rushed us out the front door, around the corner, to my fraternal grandmother's house. Through sobs, my mother tried to explain what happened: her brother--Junior--had been shot by his best friend. And she was going to the hospital.

Granny asked, "Do you want me to drive you?"

"No, no, I have to go," my mother raced to her car, leaving my brother and me bewildered and terrified on Granny's doorstep.

Her brother, thirty-five years old, died that evening. I did not know him because he hardly spoke. He lived with my grandparents. I don't know what he did for work, but I remember him tending the garden and pruning the lemon and orange trees.

My mother says he was rebellious in his younger years. He drank heavily, did drugs, argued with his parents, and smoked weed in his room while blasting John Coltrane on the record player. Junior had known his best friend--Chipper--since they were kids. But shortly before his death, Junior had been sleeping with Chipper's girlfriend, who lived on the block. When Chipper learned of their rendezvous, he became enraged, paid a visit to my grandparent's house, and shot Junior in the neck through his bedroom window. He then proceeded to walk around the house, shooting through doors and windows, intent to kill any witnesses. Miraculously, my grandparents walked away unharmed. And Skipper had escaped, eluding law enforcement for years.

I was too young to understand love, betrayal, and scandal. The details and gravity of Junior's death didn't blossom for me until my thirties, the summer of my life, the period after twenty years of youthful spring. In my thirties, I began to feel the heat—the anger, passion, and disbelief of this tragedy--because life had revealed to me its underbelly. Up until then, I knew terrible things happened. But I didn't comprehend the depth of bad things, the mechanics, the how and why. As far as I was concerned, certain people were bad seeds. Unbeknownst to me, each bad seed has a history, an invisible apparatus of memories, feelings, and stories extending through lifetimes. How long had my family's story been a soap opera in which I played a minor character, an extra whose job was to add a touch of innocence to a scene? If coming of age is defined as the loss of innocence, then I didn't come of age until the summer season of life, decades after Summer vacation in 1987 boiled away, leaving a scorched pot of evaporated tears.

My brother and I didn't attend the funeral, but we did attend the viewing of the body a few days prior in a small funeral home on Vermont Avenue in South LA. When I saw Junior's body lying in the casket, I felt a profound curiosity. I observed his closed eyelids and his three-piece suit. I had only ever seen him in tank tops and trousers when he was alive. I hadn't been so close to a corpse, and I wanted to know what it felt like to touch one. I reached out and

touched his fingers. They felt like ice, and I quickly withdrew my hand.

Ten years after Junior's death and seven years after we had moved in with our grandparents, Chipper was still on the run, nowhere to be found, until an FBI agent knocked on our front door. My mother answered. The agent said he believed Chipper was in the area. It turns out Chipper and his girlfriend, the same lady who still lived on the block, had a child together, and the FBI suspected he had been visiting his family. My mother hadn't seen Chipper and was surprised that after all these years, he might have reappeared. As she talked, the FBI agent looked down the street and said, "I think that's him." He called for backup and jumped into his car. Within minutes, Chipper was arrested for murder while taking his child to school.

Summer is the season of opportunity. If problems are opportunities, summer is also the season of discovery and excitement. It is the season when energy reaches its peak before cooling in the dusk of autumn. In summer, the seeds you planted in spring will either blossom or wither. It is the season of gold and blue beaches with frothy waves, of bird songs that warble through the blazing days and balmy nights. Summer is chocolate, vanilla, cherry, and strawberry ice cream dripping from waffle cones. It is the season when I have time to stop, observe, and reflect. Since I was a

kid, my summers have meant freedom and vacation. And while many people toss and turn during hot, humid nights, my bed is a swimming pool on which I float. Cool, calm, renewed.//

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ebony Haywood is a writer who lives in Southern California, where she enjoys cheese pizza, anything with avocado, and classic films.

You can find her at ZayZoh.com.

“ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE
ABSOLUTELY UNIQUE. JUST LIKE EVERYONE
ELSE.” ~ MARGARET MEAD

The Quicksilver Line

A short story by Lee Conrad

The wood-frame house, a century old but in decent shape, dominated the hilltop. Near it, a barn, in disuse for years, struggled to keep from collapsing. A large white peace sign on the back side had faded, but Belinda knew it was there. She helped paint it. Belinda wondered if she should have it painted over now that the symbol of peace had been outlawed in April, along with other symbols of dissent. A dark shroud had descended upon the land. Meanness and intolerance are the order of the day. The beast was on the loose.

Across the dirt road, a field radiated golden as the rays of the sun dipped behind the huge maple trees at its edge. Belinda sat on the porch and waited for the first of the stars to become visible, a mug of herbal tea on the table next to her and a cat in her lap. She looked towards the woods at the edge of the field to the path, now overgrown with brush. She tried to remember the people she and

James, her late husband, had helped along the path on their way across the border into Canada.

Like the peace sign on the barn, Belinda knew her life was fading. Bad enough that her body failed her occasionally, she thought, but once my mind is gone, well, that's it, isn't it? She had to remind herself that the year was 2025. It amazed her that yesterday's goings-on were quickly forgotten, but something that took place in the 60s or early 70s seemed to be as vivid as if it had just happened.

She could see James walking towards the farmhouse with a young man, long hair blowing in the wind, a couple holding hands, or even someone with a military haircut trudging next to him. Rucksacks with a few possessions, maybe a sleeping bag, were all many had with them. They were on the run. The ones with the short hair were AWOL soldiers, soon to be labeled deserters, drafted into a war they hated. Others were political radicals, one step ahead of the FBI. She remembered the long discussions about the war and the state of the country as she, James, and the new arrivals would sit at the kitchen table talking until the time came to move them across the border.

“Time for you to go hunting and time for me to call it a night,” she said to the cat as she put him down. Belinda looked out at her view of the field, said goodnight to James and went into the house.

The morning broke sunny, and Belinda, listening to a Canadian radio station while she cooked her eggs, jumped at the knock on the door.

“Come on in, can’t let the eggs overcook.”

A tall stranger opened the screen door. His long white hair was swept back, and his goatee cut short. His clothes were fashionable for his age, which Belinda figured to be the mid to late '70s, like herself.

“Oh, I expected my neighbor from down the road. He should be here soon.”

He wasn’t, but Belinda wanted the stranger to think that.

“I’m sorry to surprise you like this, Belinda.”

“Do I know you?”

“We had some mighty conversations around this table. I’m Jackson Pierce. You and James helped me escape across the border 55 years ago.”

A vision of a younger man worked its way into Belinda’s memory. She placed it with the older man in front of her now. The brown hair, now white. The skinny kid now a fit older man. The smile and the eyes, though, were the same.

“Oh yes, I remember now. Well, come in and sit Jackson. I’ll cook up some more eggs.”

Jackson sat at the table, the same one from years ago. Old oak and sturdy. Meant to last generations. He moved his hands across the smooth surface, willing the table to talk, to reveal long-lost conversations.

Belinda put out another plate and fork.

“Coffee, Jackson?”

“Absolutely. I still have my vices.”

Belinda poured two cups from a percolator on the stove.

“I have a feeling we have a lot to talk about,” she said, eyeing Jackson.

“Sorry to hear about James.”

“Thank you. Covid took him in early 2020. He probably wouldn’t have wanted to be around to see the mess the country is in. But why are you here?”

Jackson moved the cup of coffee around in his hands, searching for a way to begin.

“Do you remember when I came through here?”

“Vaguely. Refresh this old brain.” Belinda remembered but wanted to see if their version of events were the same.

“I was the editor of an alternative paper. We had been doing stories on everything from the war to local corruption. Of course, we certainly didn't make many friends in the establishment or law enforcement. So, they set me up on a drug charge. Someone

planted heroin inside my desk. You know how it was... long hair, radical, drugs equals guilt. I knew the bastards would hang me if they could. After getting bail, I ran. James helped me across the border.”

“That’s pretty much how I remember it,” said Belinda. “But you came back. I remember reading something in the paper years ago that said you were cleared.”

Jackson’s eyes turned hard. “A junkie on his death bed admitted he set me up. Got paid well by the cops to do it. But that’s ancient history, Belinda. You still fighting the good fight?”

“I didn’t go to the dark side if that is what you mean, but I am not that young person you met years ago. Time and the world have taken their toll. Do I pay attention to what is going on? Yes, I’m paying attention and I don’t like what I see. I figure this past election will be the last we see. People get swept up in so many conspiracy theories they don’t know the truth when it hits them right in the face. Got to learn all over again it seems. We thought Nixon was bad. This president makes him look like a novice. They wanted a strong leader. Well, they got one. And the Democrats? Well, they paid the price for inaction and tepidness, didn’t they? Let the right-wing expose the weaknesses of the system, stack the courts with their people, and demolish all the safeguards. They took the ball and

ran with it. But you didn't come all this way just for a visit, so I am asking, why are you here?"

"We need the path again."

Belinda could feel a stirring in her.

She leaned forward across the old oak table.

"Explain, Jackson."

"We know there is a crackdown coming. We need to get people out of the country before they are rounded up or worse. The official border crossings are becoming iffy. Your path into Canada is an old one that most people don't know about, thanks to you and James keeping it a secret all these years. Plus, your farm is isolated, not many neighbors or prying eyes."

"James isn't here to lead them to the Promised Land, and I can't do it anymore."

"I know Belinda. It will have to be me."

"You're no youngster anymore either, Jackson."

"I jog every day, and I'm still in good shape. Maybe we can train someone younger."

Belinda was skeptical.

"Where are you staying, Jackson?"

"The Colonial outside of town."

"Check out and bring your things here. We need to get some planning done."

“Sounds ok to me.”

After breakfast, Belinda and Jackson walked out onto the porch.

"This view is still beautiful." He smiled and held his hand over his eyes. "I can see the path. A bit overgrown. Hasn't been used for a long time. We should keep the opening overgrown so no one suspects."

“On your way, Jackson. See you this afternoon.”

Jackson walked to his car, turned around and flashed the peace sign to Belinda.

She chuckled. “Kind of cute for an old guy.”

That afternoon, Jackson returned. He had changed into jeans, cotton shirt, and hiking boots. He got out of his car, slung a jacket over his arms and carried his suitcase to Belinda’s porch, where she sat waiting. She, too, had changed clothes and tied her long white hair into a ponytail. A little makeup to hide the age lines. A girl must look presentable, she had said to herself.

"Well, at least you got out of your fancy city clothes, Jackson."

Jackson noticed the change in her, too. "If I could have found my old bell bottoms, and if they would still fit, I would have worn them. These will have to do," he joked.

“Come on in, let’s get you settled down.”

“You mean I don’t have to sleep in the barn this time?”

Belinda laughed. “You get your own room. You aren’t on the run, Jackson.”

“Not yet,” he said with hesitation.

Belinda looked back at him, then looked away as they passed through the kitchen and into the main room of the old farmhouse.

Jackson saw a flat-screen TV on a stand and a laptop on a small desk. Gone were the anti-war and psychedelic concert posters. In their place were expressionist prints. Bookcases lined the room. History, politics, Women's studies, and fiction were everywhere, and she had them categorized. He went to the fiction section and pulled out a copy of ‘Fahrenheit 451’ by Ray Bradbury.

Belinda went over to him.

“That’s my banned book section. It has been getting larger,” she said coldly.

"The hound and the firemen will get you, Belinda," referencing the books’ characters, whose job was to burn books, not put out fires.

“Let them try.”

He put the book back in its space, which was flanked by ‘The Iron Heel’ by Jack London and ‘It Can’t Happen Here’ by Sinclair Lewis.

They walked up the creaking wooden stairs to the room Jackson would be staying in.

“It’s not much, but it’s clean and comfortable,” Belinda said.

“This will be fine.” Sunlight shone through a small window. A dresser against the wall and in the corner near the bed, a plush chair. A small closet held some of James’ clothes.

“Meet me in the kitchen when you are settled in, Jackson.”

A bowl of unpeeled potatoes and carrots were on the table. A small roast sat in a pan while the stove heated up.

“You know the drill here, Jackson,” Belinda said. “You peel the potatoes and carrots. Everyone chips in.” She suddenly felt melancholy. “Except there are only two of us. Used to be a lot more.” Memories of a table full of people, tie-dye shirts and jeans, and animated discussions flooded her mind.

“How about some music?” she said, recovering and brightening her voice.

“Whatever you want, Belinda.”

“There is a nice bottle of Spanish Rioja in the rack over there, and the corkscrew is on the counter. You open it, and I’ll pick the music.”

Belinda went into the living room, powered her laptop, turned on the satellite speakers, and picked some music. The strains of Déjà Vu and the sweet harmony of Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young weaved through the house. She came back into the kitchen humming.

"You have done well here, Belinda. The farmhouse is in good shape." Jackson poured the ruby-colored Rioja.

“James’s work as a union carpenter and mine as a nurse kept us going. Our pensions and social security helped, too.”

After the roast and vegetables were put in the oven they sat down at the table.

Belinda held up her glass of wine, leaned forward and clinked Jackson’s glass.

“To the revolution.”

“I remember saying that as we all sat around this table. Do you remember the people that came through here, Belinda”?

"I remember faces, especially the ones that had to stay a while like you and that AWOL soldier. Do you remember his name?"

“David. I don’t remember his last name. We talked a lot in the hayloft at night and then on the path as James led us to the border. I doubt he would have survived in Vietnam, and if he did, he would have been a much darker person.”

“A sweet kid, if I remember right,” said Belinda. “The Army and the war would have destroyed his soul. He talked a lot in this kitchen, too. He got drafted and off he went to boot camp. He knew he wasn’t cut out for it. As soon as he got leave, he jumped at the chance to get out. Someone in the movement passed him on to us. James was a Quaker, so his pitch was to stay out of all wars. Mine was more political. Screw the establishment. Don’t participate in their war machine.”

“What else do you remember, Belinda?” Jackson settled back, the warmth of the Rioja easing him into his memories.

“I remember people sitting around the table reading the latest Rolling Stone when it was a decent counter-culture paper and then talking about the articles for hours.” Belinda laughed. “Of course, the joints being passed around kept the conversation interesting. I remember the political ones all fired up, ready to burn everything down. At the time, I thought they were right. Age mellows one out. I would rather find common ground than bury someone in the ground. Well, most people, anyway. But enough of the past, Jackson. Tell me about yourself. You came back, then what?”

“Well, I ended up doing what I did best: journalism. When the newspapers went bust, and all the layoffs took place, I had to find something else to do. I went with an online news organization, and that worked well until this new president came into power. I got married along the way. Our daughter went to France and never came back. We visited her often. My wife Karen died from breast cancer ten years ago.”

Belinda reached over and grabbed his hand. “I am so sorry, Jackson. I know how you feel.”

The warmth of Belinda’s hand stirred something in them. Of times past, of loves lost.

They finished supper, cleaned up the dishes and went out onto the porch. Belinda with her tea and Jackson with a glass of the Irish whiskey he had brought with him. They settled into the chairs to watch the sunset. The barn cat circled them, unsure of the newcomer. Then, without warning, he leaped onto Jackson's lap.

"You have a new friend, Jackson."

Jackson leaned over towards Belinda, one hand balancing the cat and one on his glass.

"A little flavor for your tea?"

"Plying me with liquor, are you?" She smiled. "No, I'll pass. It would put me to sleep."

Jackson stroked the cat and took a sip of his whiskey. "If it is all right with you, I will tell people in this sector we have a way out."

"You can do that. The first batch might have a tough time going down the path. Make sure they leave their city shoes at home and wear hiking boots. It is only two miles, but it is overgrown, and most city people are used to sidewalks."

"I'm going to leave tomorrow and start organizing the escapes. I'll come back to lay out the plan when it is finalized. I don't trust phones, even that old landline you have."

"Jackson, don't tell me about other sectors or escape routes. I don't need that information, you know, just in case."

They sat out on the porch for hours talking about the old days, Belinda drinking her tea and Jackson getting a little tipsy from his whiskey. Music played in the background. Moths gravitated towards the oil lantern hung in the porch post, burned their wings, and dropped. Crickets chirped, adding a symphony of sound.

A pensive Jackson looked over to Belinda. "I miss the old days."

"Don't forget they were dangerous days too, Jackson. Busting people for having one joint and giving them 20 years in prison. Getting harassed for being a hippie, the murders of Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Hampton, and others. And don't get me started on the FBI and Nixon's war on us. And here we are doing it all over again. Never underestimate the stupidity or the plain meanness of the American voter. It's funny. We were the ones calling for freedom and the liberty to do what we want and were called unrealistic dreamers. Maybe we were."

"And speaking of dreaming, Belinda, time for me to turn in. I have a long drive tomorrow. But before I go in the morning, I want to check out the path."

Jackson could hear Belinda humming in the kitchen as he came down the stairs in the morning. She had tied her white hair back again and had jeans and a sweater on. Her well-worn boots completed her outfit.

“Coffee is ready and French toast with real maple syrup. When we’re done, we’ll go to the path.”

They walked through the field to the path, steadying each other all the way.

“I enjoyed sitting on the porch with you last night, Belinda. I felt at peace. Haven’t felt like that for a very long time.” He took a risk and held her hand.

She didn’t pull away. Belinda leaned in towards him. “I liked it too.”

Then as if they realized what they had done, laughed, and separated.

“Let’s look at the path, Jackson. Been a few years for me. I tend to see ghosts when I come down here.”

They pushed their way through some blackberry brambles that blocked part of the path and walked in.

The path took some turns and went up some knolls. Parts of it were strewn with rocks by flooding from a nearby creek. They held onto each other, old bones and muscles stretched to the limit.

“It looks manageable,” Jackson said.

“Do you have someone on the other side to take them on?”

“That’s being worked on.”

After a mile, they turned around and walked back to the farmhouse, Jackson hunched over a bit. “I am getting too old for this,” he moaned.

Belinda laughed and rested her hand on his back. “I told you.”

Jackson loaded his things, drove off and waved to Belinda as she stood on the porch. She wished him a safe trip and, more importantly, a speedy return.

During the time Jackson had been gone things had gotten worse in the country. The Supreme Court gave the new president powers that the Founding Fathers would have rebelled against. In cities around the country, protests were met with brute force. Thousands were killed. White nationalist groups brazenly marched down city streets as the cops stood by, and a subservient congress did nothing. Many of these groups gained experience during the insurrection of January 6, 2020, and had continued to organize and recruit. American cities were in chaos as the militarized police and security forces tried to keep order in neighborhoods that fought back against curfews and stop and search. Most ominous of all were the incidents of activists and journalists being gunned down in the street. Like a scene from a South American dictatorship, two people on a motorcycle, the one on the back, pistol in hand, finding his target and shooting. It was open season on the left as the new

president gave tacit support to “his fine people” on the right. They said it couldn't happen here. Well, it did. It made Belinda nervous, knowing Jackson was in the middle of all that.

A month later Jackson came back. He drove up towards the farmhouse, the dust from the dirt road chasing him. Belinda walked to him and hugged him. She noticed a different car.

“You look exhausted. Did you get a new car?”

“It hasn't been a good month. Let me get my things inside and we can talk. I need to put the car in your barn too.”

“Sure, go ahead.” Belinda walked back to the house. Worry accompanied her.

Jackson came into the kitchen. The smell of coffee brewing restored him somewhat.

Belinda set a cup in front of Jackson and sat down.

“What happened? I expected you to have others with you.”

“The crackdown came sooner than we thought, and we were unprepared. We had people ready to go, but Homeland Security found out what we were up to and who we were going to smuggle out. In this sector, I had five people. Every one of them got lifted by Homeland Security. They almost had me, too, except I ran out for a few minutes to the drug store down the block. As I walked back, I saw their SUVs and men around my house. They had my car blocked, too. I had left my cell phone in my house, which kept them from

tracking me. I went to a friend's place a few streets over, not knowing what to do. He is sympathetic but not involved in our work. He had a second car and let me take it. I left with just the clothes on my back and a few things from the drugstore. I didn't even stop on the road."

"Does anyone in your group know of me and the path?"

"No, I kept all that information in my head. I didn't share it with anyone. By the way, your path will be called the Quicksilver Route."

"Are you Quicksilver, Jackson?"

He looked into Belinda's eyes and saw a hint of worry. "Yes, I am."

"I don't think we will sit out on the porch tonight, Jackson, just in case."

"Sorry, Belinda."

"Nothing to be sorry about. I signed up for this. It's not like we haven't done this before. It will be all right. And I still have some of James's clothes. You are about the same size."

They watched the news, but nothing on it about any crackdown or roundup as if it didn't happen. But the families of those detained knew. They were told to keep quiet, or they would be joining them.

At the end of the news, it was announced that the American/Canadian border would be closed until further notice due to suspected terrorist activity.

"Hell," said Jackson. "It's got nothing to do with their made-up terrorist threat. It is all about our people, not only here but in other parts of the country, trying to escape.

When they went upstairs to the bedrooms, Belinda stopped by hers.

"Come stay in mine, Jackson. I feel the world getting darker and colder. Hold me tonight."

Jackson followed her into the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Belinda had already been up for a few hours and sat at the table, waiting for Jackson to come down.

"Good morning, Belinda." His face looked troubled.

She smiled at him over her cup of coffee. "I didn't think you were going to get up. You tossed and turned all night."

"I kept having nightmares of them knocking down the door and grabbing us." Jackson paced around the kitchen. "I made a decision. I have to go across the border. I can't do my work here, too much of a risk of getting caught. Somebody is bound to notice you have a guest, no matter how remote this place is. I don't want you getting arrested, too." Jackson put his hands on her shoulders. "Do you want to come with me?"

The scenario played out in her mind. The long, arduous trek to the border, leaving her home behind, and then... what?

“As much as I would like Jackson, I can’t. I’m too old to leave my home and start all over in Canada. Besides, when you get across, you will have your work and you need me here.”

That night, they took a chance and sat out on the porch. Belinda turned the music up and opened a bottle of Pinot Gris. They slow-danced on the porch to the strains of the music they loved from the past and put the present out of their minds. When they went upstairs, Belinda left her door open. Jackson went in.

They were both subdued in the morning, not wanting to part and say goodbye. Jackson had dressed for his hike in some of James’s old clothes. Belinda filled a backpack with some food and water just in case. The meowing of the cat near the door, wanting to be fed, broke the silence in the kitchen

“OK you, wait your turn,” Belinda said to the cat as she poured some food into a bowl on the porch.

Jackson stepped out onto the porch, ready to go.

“Do you want me to walk you to the path, Jackson?”

“No. You should stay here.”

Jackson embraced Belinda. “I don’t know how to say this...”

Belinda put her finger to his lips. “Then don’t. We will see each other again.”

She watched Jackson walk through the field and reach the mouth of the path. She could swear she saw James standing by him. Too

many ghosts, she thought. Jackson waved, turned, and slipped through the brambles.

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The maple trees were a bright hue of color, heralding the fall and preparing for winter. Belinda sat on the porch and thought of Jackson, gone now for three months. Out on the road, a car pulled into the drive and approached the farmhouse. She could see three people in it. The driver, a woman in a postal worker uniform, got out and walked towards the porch.

“Are you Belinda?”

“I am,” she said cautiously.

She smiled. “Quicksilver sent me. I have some friends that could use your help.”

In the car sat a young Asian man and a middle-aged black woman. They looked frightened and wary.

“I have to get back; they are yours now.”

“But how will they get across the border? I can’t take them.”

“That’s been taken care of. Someone is coming later.” Duty done, she hugged her passengers, got in her car, and drove away.

Belinda looked at her two guests. “Well, come on into the kitchen,” she said, shaking their hands. “Go ahead, sit down and get comfortable. This big old oak table has plenty of room, always has. You must be hungry. But around here, we all chip in. When we are

done eating, I will tell you the plan and show you the path.

Everything will be all right. You're safe here."

The young man grabbed a bowl of potatoes, eager to help and to relieve his anxiety.

The woman, distressed when she came in, rested her hands on the worn surface of the old oak table and visibly relaxed as if it, too told her she was safe now.

Belinda looked out the kitchen window at the edge of the field and smiled. Jackson pushed through the brambles at the mouth of the path and walked towards the farmhouse.

Belinda went out and stood to wait on the porch.

As they met, they embraced, lost in each other's arms, the months of anguish disappearing from Belinda, tension and fear evaporating from Jackson.

Belinda held his face in her hands.

"Are you hurt? There is blood on your face...and scratches."

"Just from the brambles at the mouth of the path. I'm all right."

He gave her a weary smile. "I hear you have some travelers at the house."

They walked into the kitchen and Jackson greeted the new arrivals sitting around the old oak table.

"Some things never change." He smiled thinking back over 50 years ago.

He introduced himself with his codename Quicksilver.

"The less you know of me, the better. I am your guide across the border. So far, this is a safe route, but you never know. Since the border was closed there is more surveillance. That is why you were told to ditch your cell phones. We don't need any tracking devices. As for this farm and your host...it, and she, doesn't exist, so remember that. No betrayals. But even though you don't know me, I know all about you and why you were chosen and need to be moved over the border." Jackson's face softened. "But enough of that right now. We will eat, get a little rest, and leave at midnight. There is a full moon, so we can travel like it is daytime. People who grew up and live in big cities don't realize what a full moon in the country is like. There is a brilliance to it."

Jackson turned to Belinda after tea and coffee were placed on the table.

"I am going to let our guests tell you why they are here."

"I'm Jimmy Chan. I am..." He hesitated as the reality of his situation finally sunk in. "I was the director of the immigrant rights center in Syracuse. You know how bad it has been. The firebombing of our center was devastating. And it wasn't even hidden. The guys who did it stood by laughing. The next day, when I went to the center to see what I could salvage, another group was there. One of them took a shot at me but luckily missed."

Jackson broke in. "Jimmy is on a hit list. We found out and tracked him down with some help from friends of the network. We put him in a safe house until we could pick him up and move him along to here."

The middle-aged black woman told her story next.

"My name is Althea. I administered a health clinic for women in Cortland. We started getting harassed a few years ago by a group called The Army of God, even before this new guy and his thugs became the government. Bunch of so-called 'Christian warriors' determined to keep women barefoot, silent and pregnant. My clinic did outreach and recommended Doctors who would still perform abortions, especially in the rural areas where this 'Army' was recruiting and terrorizing people who didn't support their agenda. Being black didn't help me, either. Well, anyhow, it went from spray-painted graffiti to smashed windows. And when the National Party took over the government, it just became open season on my center and me. I guess we didn't realize the extent of the propaganda against us. A lot of people drank the Kool-Aid, and we became the enemy."

She put her head down and became silent. She couldn't believe she was an 'enemy of the people' and had to leave the country that brought her ancestors here, enslaved and in chains.



Jackson interjected. “We found out that the government is augmenting the border guards with not only National Party supporters but with members of The Army of God. So, there is no way Althea can cross the border officially. She is on their list, too.”

“Where are you getting this information?” asked Belinda.

“The Dark Web, especially since the news networks ran afoul of the new censorship laws. Anyhow, we rest up for a few hours and then at midnight, we will be on our way.”

The autumn air was chilly, but they were prepared with warm jackets, knit hats, and hiking boots. All in black to help hide them.

They stood on the porch, ready to take off.

“Come back to me soon... Quicksilver.”

Belinda winked at the use of his code name, but the lines around her eyes bespoke worry.

“I will when I can.”

They embraced, said goodbye and the trio headed through the field to the path. They vanished into the brambles and onto the path towards the border.

The walk was uneventful except for being startled by deer crashing through the brush and other sounds of the night that were common in the woods.

Talk was at a minimum, just a few swear words from stumbling over a tree branch or a rock.

Before long, they had reached the border. Jackson took out a small flashlight and signaled three times, then two. The correct flash came back, and they crossed over to a young man waiting for them.

“Any problems?”

“No. We made good time. Not sure how easy it will be when the snow hits, if it hits. Global warming has certainly screwed up winters here.”

The young man turned to the two travelers. "Welcome to Canada. We have a little way more to go to get to my car, then we will go to a house where you can sleep. Then, after breakfast, we move on to Montreal."

The Canadian turned to Jackson. “How long are you staying?”

“Not sure. Need to check in. I hope I get a little rest.”

At Montreal, Jackson, his travelers, and the Canadian guide went to the office of the American Resistance Movement (ARM).

Jackson's travelers were each handed over to a caseworker who set them up with places to live and assignments at the office. They weren't in Canada just to escape but to work and help the resistance.

Jackson went to the office that handled crossovers in this part of the country.

Amanda Ferguson was on the phone when Jackson walked in. She motioned for him to sit.

“I know the situation where you are, but you need to understand we are short-staffed and overwhelmed. Yes, four lines are open, but Copper got arrested, and the line shut down.” As she listened, she pointed to the coffee machine for Jackson to help himself. “OK, I will. Keep me updated.”

“What a mess. A whole line of safe houses in jeopardy.” She rubbed her thin face and brushed her salt and pepper hair back off her forehead. In her mid-40s, the job was wearing on her, and it showed.

“Jackson, it is good to see you. Brought two more. Good. How are you holding up?”

There was a concern that the work might be too much for him.

“I’m fine.” Jackson’s voice was confident, but his body felt otherwise.

“Jackson, we need you to go back in a few days and bring someone over. He will go to your safe house by way of Vermont. Your corner between Vermont and New York still seems to be secure.”

Jackson smiled at the thought of going back to Belinda.

“Who am I getting out?”

“One of the leaders in our Massachusetts network. Homeland Security raided the executive committee and arrested everyone but him. He was lucky and escaped from the raid. But he is being hunted and we need to get him over here.”

“Give me two days, Amanda.”

“No problem. Come back tomorrow, and we will finalize this extraction.”

Two days later, Jackson walked the path towards the farm and Belinda.

Her pickup truck wasn't there, so he waited just inside the brambles. After about 20 minutes, he saw her pull up the drive. He strode up to her as she got out.

“What a surprise! I wasn't expecting you back so soon. Good thing I just got some groceries. Here, you can help me take this stuff in.”

“With pleasure, Belinda.”

“What brought you back so soon,” she said as they unpacked the groceries.

“An important traveler, so they say. One of the leaders of the Massachusetts group. Homeland Security is hunting him. By the way, I brought some new encryption software for your laptop.”

Later that evening, Jackson installed the encryption software and, using an anonymous browser and VPN, contacted someone on the Quicksilver line for the latest news and a status report on his new

traveler. It took about an hour through various secure proxy servers, but a reply came back that he was at the safe-house Echo and would be at his location later tomorrow.

“My traveler won’t be here until tomorrow. But the news just keeps getting worse. There was a roundup in Binghamton of all the progressive groups, union leaders and political leaders on the outs with the new government. Hell, they even shut down the libraries, burned some books and arrested the staff. Herded them all into the baseball stadium downtown. People said buses came to pick them up, but no one knows where they are being taken. There were some casualties. People aren’t going quietly.”

They sat around the table, Belinda drinking her tea, and Jackson some of the Irish whiskey he now kept in one of Belinda’s cupboards. The barn cat, inside now as the nights got colder, rubbed herself along Jackson’s legs. The mood was somber.

“I’m tired, Belinda. I’m not going to be able to do this much longer. I still want you to come over with me.”

Belinda sighed. “We’ve discussed this before. I am not ready and probably never will be.” She looked out the window to the darkened field but saw daylight and memories. “It would take an earthquake to move me.” She laughed, “And we don’t get many of those here. Although I admit the talk in town about roundups creeping closer to us has me and others worried.”

“Just keep it in mind, please.”

“I will, Jackson. Now it’s late, let’s turn in.”

They went upstairs to the room they now shared. Jackson hung his clothes in the closet and noticed the rifle leaning in a back corner.

“Wow, I didn’t expect you to have one of these.”

"James was the pacifist, not me. I didn't get it until after he passed. He wouldn't have allowed it. But out here alone, well it just gave me some security. Believe it or not, I’m a good shot, a natural."

The next day they sat out on the porch drinking coffee, waiting for the new traveler. Jackson’s contact had sent an encrypted message giving an approximate time for his arrival.

At 4 pm, a mail truck drove up the drive and backed in towards the porch. The woman postal worker who had delivered Jimmy and Althea got out.

"Hi, folks. Special delivery."

She moved some large boxes around, and a disheveled man in his early 40’s stuck his head up. His hair was sandy colored, his eyes brown but cold. He had a face that looked like he had been in a few fights and built like he could handle himself in a street brawl.

“Name’s Alex,” he said, looking around at his surroundings intently.

“Well, let’s get you inside,” said Belinda.

Alex headed towards the porch stairs, stumbled, grabbed his knee and cried out in pain. “Not now!”

Jackson stepped over quickly to help him up the stairs as he hobbled into the kitchen.

“Sorry about that. I was always a little clumsy.”

“You sit here. I will be right back.”

Jackson went out to the postal truck where Belinda and the driver were talking.

“Is he ok?” Belinda asked.

“I hope so, but we might have to take the path tomorrow instead of tonight.”

“Is that wise?”

“We might not have a choice.”

Jackson turned to the driver. “I’ll contact people and give them the situation. You take care.”

“I will, and you two as well.” With that, the driver got in her truck and drove away.

When they went into the kitchen the young man was hobbling away from the door.

“I guess I am a bit of a burden right now.”

“We won't move tonight. Tomorrow will be best. Let you heal a bit overnight. I'll get you an ice pack to take to your room.”

Belinda, off to the side, thought she noticed a slight smile on Alex when Jackson told him he wouldn't leave tonight.

Jackson got the ice pack and took him to the spare room, telling him to come down in a few hours to eat and talk.

"Well, that messes things up tonight."

"More time for us, Jackson."

Later the three of them sat around the table drinking coffee after their meal.

Alex told them his story.

"We had been meeting at a professor's house outside Boston. There were eight of us from the executive committee and a couple of people who helped in outreach to other groups we wanted to pull into the resistance. It was dark, and I was in the kitchen when I noticed activity around the house. I yelled out to people, but it was too late. Homeland Security rushed in and started rounding up people. In the confusion, I slipped out the back and got away. I ran until I couldn't run anymore. I went to a friend's house and contacted some people who put me in touch with people on this Quicksilver line. I have been going from one safe house to another for over a week."

Belinda looked at him with concern. "You're lucky. How's your knee?"

"The ice helped. I should be ok to travel tomorrow."



Alex got up from the table and limped into the other room to Belinda's bookcase.

"Quite a collection you have here."

He wanted to reach out and grab one, but something held him back.

Alex moved to Belinda's desk and the laptop. "How do you get the internet way out here?"

"Satellite. Too expensive to run cable out here. Nothing but junk on cable TV, anyhow. Use an antenna for local stations. I can pick up Burlington."

"Must be nice to be so far out, and nobody will bother you. Peaceful like."

"Well, boys, you have a busy day tomorrow. I think it is time we all turned in."

Jackson went to Belinda's room and Alex to the spare room.

As they climbed into bed, Belinda whispered, "I don't know if I trust him, Jackson."

Jackson looked at her. "What brought that on?"

"Just a feeling."

"You're just nervous, Belinda. He will be gone tomorrow." He smiled and wrapped his arms around her.

The next morning, Jackson came down the stairs thinking he was the first up until he smelled the coffee. He saw Alex sitting at the oak table.

“Good morning. Coffee?” He poured Jackson a cup.

“Thanks, Alex. How’s the knee?”

“I can make it today. Just say the word.” Alex’s smile was infectious and calming.

“I need to check in, and then we will see what the schedule is.” Jackson walked over to the desk, turned on the laptop and logged into the secure link with his contacts. Immediately, an email popped up.

Warning! Your traveler is NOT who he says he is. Not with us. Works with Homeland Security. The Quicksilver line is compromised. Safe houses have been raided. Suspect the traveler has a tracking device. Take drastic measures and leave your safe house immediately. Reply receipt of this message.

Jackson let out a gasp.

Behind him, Alex had been looking over his shoulder.

His infectious smile was now a malicious grin.

He grabbed Jackson and threw him to the floor.

“Surprised, Quicksilver? Or should I call you Jackson? The walls in this old house are thin, and it's easy to pick up bits of conversation. And no, I am not with you scum. Homeland Security recruited me

from the Aryan Brotherhood. Your side is easy to fit into, so predictable. Just spout the right slogans and you're in. So trusting and gullible." He laughed. "You need people so bad you will take anyone into your organizations."

Jackson began to stand.

Alex kicked him. "Down, old man." He circled Jackson and kicked him again, hard in the ribs. "You boomer hippies make me sick."

He kept circling Jackson. "Your so-called Quicksilver Line has had it. Crushed like the Copper Line. Did you think you could oppose us? You and your old hippie girlfriend Belinda are history. No joint cell for you two at the Albany Detention Center."

He raised his foot to bring it down on Jackson's face. The boot was inches away when Jackson heard a shot ring out, the sound deafening in the farmhouse.

Alex staggered back, clutched his chest; blood oozed between his fingers, surprise on his face. The last thing he saw before he crumpled to the floor was Belinda at the top of the stairs, pointing the rifle at him.

She came down the stairs, cradling the rifle, shaking uncontrollably.

"My God, I killed him!"

Jackson stood, pain radiated from his ribs from the kicks, making it hard to breathe.

Belinda stood over Alex's body in shock. His blood seeped into the wood floor.

Jackson went to her, wrapped his arms around her to soothe her.

"Belinda, you saved our lives. Did you hear what he said?"

"Most of it. I thought he was going to kill you."

"Your earthquake is here, Belinda. We must leave quickly, or we will be dead. Somehow, he is sending out a tracking signal.

Everywhere he has been is now compromised. We don't know how close the hounds are. I'll put the body in your truck and ditch him a few miles away. I need to send an email to my contact in Canada, letting her know what happened. You need to start getting some things together.

"And my cat."

Jackson grinned. "Yes, and your cat. Hurry now."

Jackson backed the pickup to the porch, put Alex's body on a rug so he wouldn't smear blood on the floor when he dragged him out of the house and put him into the back of the truck. An old tarp covered the body. He drove a couple of miles to an old logging road, stopped, pulled the body out, and dragged it into the woods. If Alex had a tracking device implanted, this would be where they find him, not Belinda's house. Just might give them some precious moments to flee across the border.

Back at the farmhouse, Belinda waited. She had put another rug over the blood-stained floor and filled a backpack with personal belongings, documents and a picture of James. Next to her, the cat in a carry case and the laptop.

Jackson put the pickup into the barn next to the car he borrowed from his friend when he was first on the run.

He walked to the porch and held Belinda's hand.

"Ready?" He searched her eyes for confirmation and found sorrow.

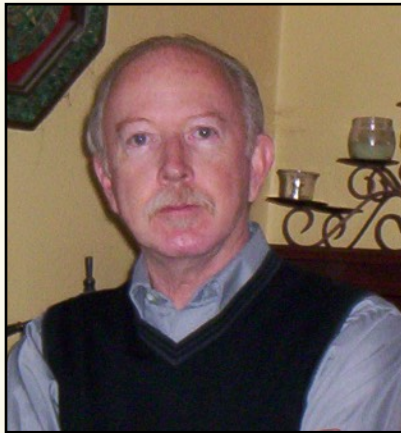
"I'm as ready as I can be, Jackson."

She locked the door of the farmhouse and they walked across the field towards the mouth of the path. Jackson stepped through the brambles.

Belinda hesitated and turned around. Decades of memories flooded her mind. James leading political fugitives and resisters to the farmhouse, gatherings in the kitchen around the table, preparing people for the trek along the path to freedom, animated political discussion, and people out to save the world. The memories faded as she wiped away tears. One last look and James was standing by the farmhouse waving goodbye. As the image dissipated, Belinda blew a kiss across the field. It was her turn to travel the path now. She whispered to the wind, "We will be back."

She stepped through the brambles onto the path following Jackson to Canada. There was work to do.//

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lee Conrad lives in upstate New York. He is a Vietnam-era veteran who was anti-war while serving. He worked at IBM and was a rabble-rousing union organizer. All in all, just a bit of a troublemaker.

His stories and novelettes, from historical to crime/mystery and near future, have appeared in Fiction on the Web, Literally Stories, Weatherbeaten, Ariel Chart International Literary Magazine, Longshot Island, CommuterLit, Story Star, The Magazine of History and Fiction, Sundial Magazine, The London Reader, Books 'N Pieces, Written Tales, Blood and Bourbon, and Blue Lake Review.

# Submission Guidelines

*A short story by Bill Tope*

## Crud Magazine Website

*W*elcome to the Crud Magazine website. Please feel free to sample our on- line archives of past issues, available for viewing for just \$.99/minute. Take your time and get to know the real Crud and, if you feel inspired, please read the following submission guidelines, in their entirety and submit your own original, unpublished work.

### **Submission Guidelines**

We accept submissions through our electronic submissions portal only and although Crud Magazine is not a paying market, we are for-profit, and so we charge \$15 for each submission. Multiple Submissions: you may submit up to six documents in each genre per reading period, but you must make a separate submission for each document and consequently pay a separate fee each time. NOTE: for incarcerated persons only, we accept submissions via the United

States Postal Service. An old man named Diego will ride his burro to your postal outlet and carry your submission cross country. The fee for this service is \$45 (May be paid in universal prison currency: cigarettes).

Submissions may be made in the following categories: General Submissions, Weekly Crud, Crud of the Week, 7-Day Crud, and Crud of the Month. An anthology will be published at year's end, titled The Cruddiest Crud Yearbook, and will be on sale in December for only \$175.

File forms: Manuscript must be typed, in one of the following file forms: .doc, .docx, .pdf, Egyptian hieroglyphics, cuneiform or runes.

Reading Fees: while Crud Magazine does not charge for the periodical (it is so rife with skanky advertisements that we can scarcely give the rag away) we do charge a reading fee of \$15 per submission. Please Note: The reading fee and the submission fee are separate, individual liabilities. These fees go toward supporting our lavish lifestyle, casual drug use and purchase of high-end beverages. Rest assured, your money is not being wasted. Crud Magazine needs this money; otherwise, we'd all have to get jobs.

Formatting Your Manuscript: All manuscripts must be in 1-point Times New Roman font, with at least three-inch margins and randomly numbered pages. Fiction and non-fiction should be triple-spaced. Poetry should be typed in invisible ink. The author's name,



address, phone number, email address, Social Security Number, passwords and bank transaction codes should be typed at the top of each page. Contributors are asked to include the private telephone number and photo of each buxom, well-traveled female of their acquaintance.

Simultaneous submissions and response times: Simultaneous submissions are NOT allowed. In fact, we probably won't publish your story/poem anyway, even if it is a singular, unique and exclusive submission. Response times vary from 18—26 months. DO NOT contact before, during or after that time, no matter what! We mean it!

Reading Period: Crud Magazine's reading period is 1am to 3am CST, Saturday, September 30, 2024. Submissions received outside this reading period will be smeared with dogshit and set afire. This means you!

### Word Count Guidelines

#### Prose:

Short Short Story (Microfiction)—Manuscripts must be no more than 1 word. Please check your work with our archives, as we do not accept duplicate publications or reprints.

Short Story—At least 2 and no more than 10,000 words.

Crud Drabble (Cruddle)—Must be precisely 100 1/2 words.

#### Poetry:

Crud Poetry submissions may be either Awdl Gywydd or Byr a Thoddaid Poems and should be written in the traditional Welsh. Your submissions should give a strong sense of style and range; remember: Crud is the word.

One-Act Plays, Screenplays, Podcasts, etc.:

We don't screw around with any of this shit, so don't send it or it will be returned unread, and with a letter bomb attached.

CLICK HERE TO SUBMIT

C'mon, get out your credit/debit card! //

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Tope lives in the American Midwest with his mean little cat, Baby.

“GET YOUR FACTS FIRST; THEN, YOU CAN  
DISTORT THEM AS YOU PLEASE.”

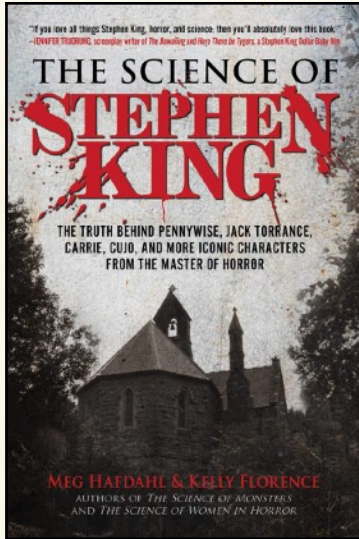
~MARK TWAIN

# Q&A with Meg Hafdahl & Kelly Florence

Kelly Florence is an American author, screenwriter, and podcaster. Kelly Florence is an American author, screenwriter, and podcaster. They are best known for their books *The Science of Monsters*, *The Science of Women in Horror*, *The Science of Stephen King*, *The Science of Serial Killers*, and *The Science of Witchcraft*.

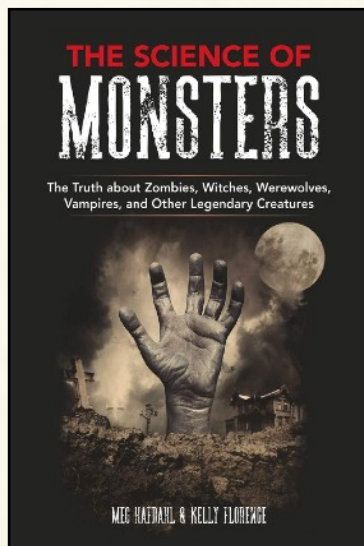


Q: What is *The Science of Stephen King* and what topics are explored in this amazing read?



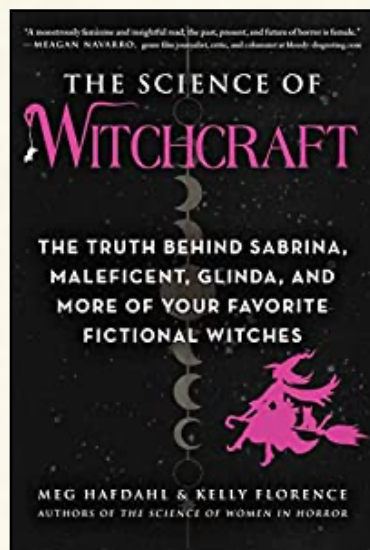
A: The Science of Stephen King is part biography and part a deep dive into the science found in the master of horror's books. It was fascinating to discover what was happening in King's life at the time he came up with ideas for his stories. Whether it was his life altering accident or something he discovered when working as a custodian, he incorporated his experiences into the books we know and love.

Q: The Science of Monsters sounds like an interesting read for this Halloween. What inspired the idea behind this book?



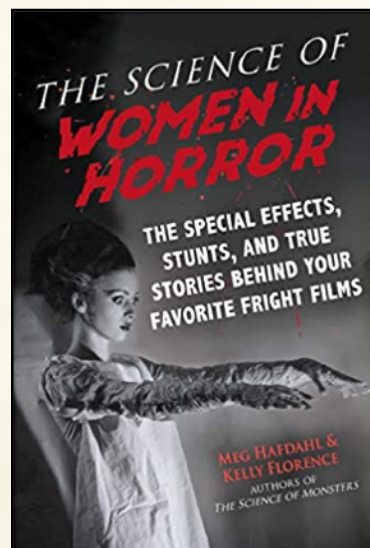
A: Ever since we were young we both loved scary things. Being horror fans, we found ourselves researching the real science, history, culture, and lore behind our favorite movies, television shows, and books. The Science of Monsters explores the different movie monsters that we've loved since childhood, including zombies, vampires, and ghosts. We discovered that truth can be scarier than fiction!

Q: In *The Science of Witchcraft*, what type of research went into the making of this book and what topics in witchcraft does it explore?



A: Besides the reading, research, and film analysis we take on for every book, we were able to interview some amazing people for *The Science of Witchcraft*, including an Indigenous ethnobotanist, a funeral home director, writers, and directors. These insightful and inspiring talks led us down paths we didn't even know we would explore!

Q: In *The Science of Women in Horror*, what other topics did you



consider discussing in the book but did not get a chance to explore?

A: We could write volumes of sequels to *The Science of Women in Horror* and have numerous topics we'd love to write more about, including gothic literature, modern female-identifying filmmakers, and the subgenre of female revenge in horror.

Q: Will readers of your famous The Science of ...series find the same topics explored in both the books and on your podcast or something different?

A: Our podcast, Horror Rewind, focuses more on our thoughts on horror movies, television shows, and books that we're currently consuming in the genre. When it began, we focused on films from our childhood to see if they lived up to our memories of them through the lens of today. Now, it's evolved to modern media, and we feel spoiled to have so many things to cover!

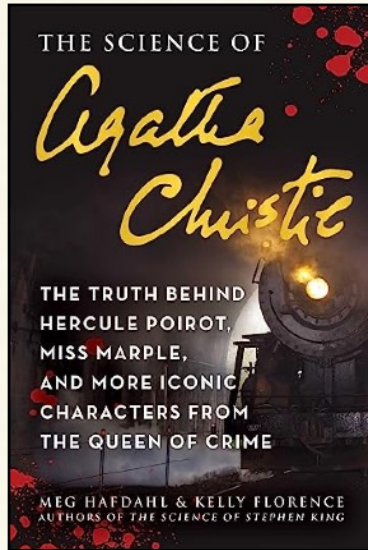
Q: Is it easier to be a co-author than to be a lone lead?

A: Many times it feels better having a co-author because there is someone else to bounce ideas off of, share discoveries with, and split the work. Because we live so far apart, we often write alone but check in with each other daily via text, FaceTime, or Zoom.

Q: How did you both get together to be co-authors?

A: We met over twenty years ago and have been best friends ever since! Writing together came naturally as we both have a love of all things horror, romance, and theatre. We also discovered that we love doing research so writing non-fiction together feels more like fun than work.

Q: With your latest upcoming release, *The Science of Agatha*



Christie, have you both ever thought of teaching mini-courses to discuss the literature/films that are discussed in your new book?

A: We have been thrilled to teach many sessions at workshops, libraries, colleges, and conventions on topics contained in our books. Some talks have been geared specifically to a topic of the group's choosing, while others are more general about the process of writing. Reach out if you'd like to have us come to your organization or community!

Q: What will be your next brilliant title to the perfect collection in *The Science of....?*

A: Next up in 2025 is *The Science of Alfred Hitchcock*, in which we explore nineteen works of the master filmmakers. It will include a biographical component as well as interviews with a variety of experts at the top of their fields.

Find them at <https://x.com/meghafdahl> and <https://x.com/kellyflorence> and their books [HERE](#) on Amazon.

# It's Later Than You Think

*A short story by Brian Mosher*

**O**n Sunday, April 12, 1970, Sophie received a call from her cousin Mabel in Texas. Mabel told Sophie that the day before, just after 1:00 p.m. Central Time (noon Eastern), and at the same moment that the Apollo 13 rocket was launched from Cape Kennedy in Florida, Mabel's father had shot her mother (Sophie's aunt Molly) before turning his shotgun on himself.

Since Sophie's father, Patrick, had died a few years earlier, and her Uncle Thomas was in the hospital with a bad gall bladder, she had no family members to travel to the funeral with her. And since she was too distraught to travel alone, she asked me to accompany her. Ordinarily, a CPA can't even consider taking time off in the middle of April, with the income tax deadline looming. But there isn't much I wouldn't do for Sophie. We boarded a plane to Houston at 8:00 p.m. ET on Monday, April 13, at about the same time Apollo 13's oxygen tank failed as the spacecraft made its approach to the moon. Sophie and I were soon to encounter a few problems of our own.



At the airport, we rented a car and drove two hours north to Union Hill, where Molly had settled in the late 1920s after she'd left town to get away from some bad memories. There, she'd met and fell in love with a farmer named John Tolliver Gilmore, ten years her senior. The Gilmore family had a reputation for producing eccentrics, and John T. had been the latest of these. If he'd been a wealthy New York businessman instead of an East Texas dirt farmer, he no doubt would have spent an hour each week on a psychiatrist's couch talking about his paranoid conspiracy theories. Instead, he'd written them down, in incredibly intricate detail, in thousands of notebooks, which he stored in cardboard boxes in a shack behind his ancestral home.

A variety of illnesses and accidents had taken the lives of Mabel's four older brothers before she was born, leaving her an only child. She'd inherited her mother's gift for song and appetite for fried chicken, and at least some of her father's unique view of the world. And now that her parents were dead, she would inherit the house and the fifteen acres it sat on.

At just after 11:00 p.m. CT, Sophie and I checked into a pair of rooms at the Come On Inn, a roadside motel in downtown Union Hill. In the darkness, we could see a low building across the street, shaped like a diner. Its partially burned-out neon sign in the parking lot appeared to read GIN AND LACE. I joked that it was an unlikely-

looking strip club, then we said good night and each settled down in our separate rooms for some much-needed sleep.

The next morning, I knocked on Sophie's door and said, "Check out the place across the street." In the daylight, the entire sign was visible, including the burnt-out letters that didn't show at night: GINGER AND JOE'S PLACE.

Sophie said, "By night, strippers and whiskey. By day, chili and beer."

We laughed and went to the local donut shop to get some coffee. Returning to the motel, we sat in Sophie's room and watched the morning news, where we heard about the difficulties the Apollo 13 astronauts had encountered the night before.

Sophie tried to call Mabel from the phone in the room, but there was no answer. I suggested going for a walk, but Sophie was still tired from the flight, so I wandered out on my own and left her to take a nap. I walked around downtown in the hot Texas sun for a couple of hours, then returned to the motel and knocked on Sophie's door. She opened it, looking like the nap had done her good.

"Ready for some lunch?" I asked, pointing across the street at Ginger and Joe's Place. "I think I could go for some chili."

"Perfect," she said, and we headed over.

There was an ancient sun dial in front of the diner, showing quite accurately that it was almost two o'clock. Around the edge of the dial were carved the words: SERIUS EST QUAM COGITAS.

Sophie translated: "It's later than you think."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Uncle Thomas taught me some Latin when I was a kid so I could follow Mass. I never attend, but I guess some of it stuck with me."

"I'm not familiar with your Mass, but 'it's later than you think' doesn't sound like part of it."

"No, it's not. But you know Uncle Thomas. He may be a priest, but he's a man of many interests beyond the church."

"That's true enough." I held the door for her and in we went.

"Sit anywhere you like, darlings," said the woman behind the counter. "Coffee, water or a cold beer?" Her hair, the same color as Lucille Ball's, was piled high on the top of her head. She wore a light blue dress that was a size too small for her. Her name, Ginger, was embroidered in pink just below the dress's lapel, which was the same shade of pink. She wore a gold necklace with a golden G pendant. Her face wore a bright, open smile below a turned-up nose and a pair of clear blue eyes. Sophie and I both instantly liked her.

"Coffee, please," Sophie said as we took seats at the counter where we could see through into the kitchen.

"Make it two," I said.

Ginger filled two mugs with the best-smelling coffee I've ever had, and placed a pair of menus before us. "Take your time, lovers. Let me know if you need anything."

She took the coffee pot to a booth in the corner where a pair of older men sat hunched over their bowls of chili. When she returned, she asked, "Have you folks decided what you'd like to eat? I recommend the chili. It's the best in the county, and the cornbread cannot be beat."

"That sounds perfect," said Sophie, and I agreed.

Ginger turned around and called through the window into the kitchen, "Two bowls of chili, Joe!"

Joe appeared from around a corner and placed two steaming bowls on the window ledge. He was tall, blond, and blue-eyed.

"Thank you, darling," Ginger said, and brought the chili over to us along with a plate piled with more cornbread than it seemed we could eat. As the two older gentlemen headed for the door, Ginger called to them, "Have a great day, boys! Charlie, tell Phyllis I'll be over later with that yarn I was telling her about." Then, to us, "Ok, lovers, anything else you think you need? Freshen your coffee?"

Before we could respond, there was the sound of an explosion in the parking lot.

Ginger screamed and ran outside, with Joe right on her heels. Sophie and I dove under our stools. By the time we dared to come

back up, we found a car fully engulfed in flames. The two elderly men inside were burning corpses already.

Firefighters arrived almost immediately from the station across the street, right next to our motel. Ginger and Joe, after making a vain attempt to get close enough to the car to pull out the dead men, stood now in the doorway of the diner, crying into each other's arms. I was unsure what to do, but Sophie wasn't. She went to the crying couple and gently rubbed their backs, encouraging them to come back inside. She guided them to a booth and told them to sit. Then she went behind the counter and came back with two mugs of coffee. "You just sit here and drink this," she said.

Ginger was still sobbing, but Joe said, "Thank you, miss."

"You're very welcome. I'm Sophie, by the way, and this is Kenny. Those men were friends of yours?"

"Charlie...that's Charlie Sugarman. He's married to Ginger's sister. Al's his brother."

"I'm so sorry", Sophie put a hand on Ginger's shoulder. "I'm so very sorry."

Two cops came in and took our statements, such as they were. After they were finished with us, Sophie and I headed back across the street to the motel without even tasting the chili.

Sophie said, “I wonder how many Sugarmans there are around here. Mabel wrote me a few weeks ago to say her boyfriend Otis had finally proposed to her. His name’s Otis Sugarman.”

We were both still hungry, so after we each visited our rooms to clean up a little, we drove to the next town and found the County Street Steak House. As luck would have it, we also found Mabel sitting at the bar, working on what must have been her third or fourth martini, judging by the degree of her inebriation. She looked a lot like pictures I’d seen of her mother Molly, the singer - minus about a hundred pounds.

Sophie stepped up behind her and said, “Hey, Mabel. I didn’t expect to find you here.”

Mabel jumped a bit in her seat as if startled, before turning to face us. “Well, Sophie! I didn’t expect to see you here, either!”

They hugged, and Sophie said, “Mabel, I’m so sorry about your parents. How are you doing?”

We took the next two seats at the bar, Sophie between me and Mabel.

“Sophie, this is so kind of you to come all the way down here,” Mabel said. “You really didn’t need to.”

“Well, that’s what family is for. Now, tell me how you’re doing.”

“I don’t know, Sophie. I guess I’m still in a bit of shock.”

“That’s understandable—oh, wait. I’m sorry. Mabel, this is my old friend Kenny. Kenny, my cousin Mabel.”

“Pleased to meet you, Kenny. You two fly down together?”

“We did,” I replied. “Just arrived last night, staying at the Come On Inn.”

Mabel’s cheeks got decidedly pinker, and she hesitated a bit before replying, “Oh, across the street from Ginger and Joe’s.”

“That’s right”, said Sophie. “Quite a tragedy, what happened there this afternoon.”

Mabe hesitated again, “You heard about that, did you?”

“We were there, Mabel,” said Sophie. “It was awful. Two men blown to kingdom come. Ginger said they were both Sugarmans. Are they related to your Otis?”

Mabel’s eyes filled with tears, but something about her reaction felt false to me as if it took about two heartbeats longer than it should have. Everybody’s different, of course, and what do I know? I had no reason to think she wasn’t sincere. Something just didn’t feel right. She sobbed for a few moments, with Sophie holding her hand and trying to comfort her. Then Mabel drained her martini glass and said, “Charlie and Al are Otis’s uncles. Or, were, I guess. Otis’s daddy’s brothers.”

“Oh, Mabel, I’m so sorry,” replied Sophie. “Where is Otis now?”

“I left him with his mama and his aunt Ginger. You know, Ginger from the diner. Maybe I should have stayed with them, but I couldn’t stand being there.”

“What do you mean, Mabel? What’s going on?”

Again, Mabel seemed to hesitate just a bit longer than natural. “I just can’t stand them Sugarmans, other than Otis, and they ain’t got no use for me, either. Hey, bartender, can I get another one of these?”

The bartender tossed Sophie and me a couple of menus before collecting Mabel’s empty glass. “You folks need something to drink?”

“I’ll have a glass of the house red wine, please,” Sophie requested.

“Gin and tonic, please,” I added.

“Coming right up,” the bartender said.

Sophie put her hand on Mabel’s shoulder. “Mabel, talk to me. What’s going on?”

Mabel pulled a marble composition book out of her gigantic purse and laid it in front of Sophie on the bar. “That’s one of Daddy’s books. There’s thousands of ‘em, you know. All stashed in the shed behind the house. I’ve been going through them and just found that one two days ago.”

Written on the cover in the space labeled SUBJECT, printed neatly in red ink, was one word: SUGARMAN.



“It’s all in there. How the Sugarman family has been trying to get the Gilmore’s land away from us for a hundred years.” Mabel was becoming increasingly agitated and loud. “I always knew my daddy and Al Sugarman hated each other, but I didn’t realize how much or all the history of it.” She pointed to the notebook and continued, “Says in there, Daddy believed the Sugarmans killed my Uncle Bobby. That’s why I did it!” Mabel was shouting at this point, and several people in the restaurant were looking our way.

The bartender delivered our drinks and gave Mabel a wary glance. “You folks want to order some food or just the drinks?” he asked.

“I think we need a few more minutes here, sorry,” I told him.

“Sure thing, you let me know when you’re ready.”

Once the bartender walked away, Sophie looked at Mabel and said quietly, “Calm down now, Mabel. What do you mean? What did you do?”

“I showed that notebook to my cousin Bobby,” Mabel said, still quite loudly.

(Mabel’s cousin Bobby, I would learn later, was the son of John T. Gilmore’s late brother Bobby. The Gilmores were not terribly creative with names.)

“Mabel, are you saying Bobby killed those men outside the diner today?” asked Sophie.

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t bet against it. He’s never been able to control his temper.”

Sophie seemed to not know what to say, and I wasn’t about to jump in. I motioned to the bartender and let him know we’d like to order some food.

“Sure, what’ll it be?” he asked.

“I would like a very rare steak with a baked potato and whatever the vegetable of the day might be,” I said.

Sophie asked for a cheeseburger and fries.

“And you?” the bartender asked, turning to Mabel.

But Mabel was asleep, head on the bar, snoring. I began to think I might not be eating anything that day.

“Is she OK?” the bartender asked us.

Sophie gently shook Mabel’s shoulder. “Mabel, honey, wake up. We’ll take you home.”

And there was the confirmation of my fear. Kenny’s hunger was not as important as Mabel’s need to be taken care of. Sophie drove our rented car, with Mabel sleeping in the backseat, and I followed in Mabel’s car, my stomach grumbling louder than the poorly tuned engine.

It took Sophie a while to find Gilmore’s place on the opposite edge of town. The house was well off the unlit road, with a long, winding dirt driveway. It was a small place, with just four rooms and

sparsely furnished. Sophie and I guided Mabel inside and deposited her in her bed.

On the way out, Sophie pointed to a little shed not far from the back door, painted the same shade of red as the house. “That must be where John T. kept his notebooks,” she told me. She tried to pull open the door, but it was locked.

“Let’s go, Sophie, I’ve got to get something to eat.”

“OK, Kenny.”

We stopped for a fast-food burger and fries on the way back to the motel. I probably would have been better off just going to sleep hungry.

I woke early the next day and switched on the local TV news while I waited for Sophie. The lead story was the plight of the Apollo 13 astronauts, who seemed to be safe now, although their mission would be shorter than planned. This was followed by a “man in the street” interview with someone who’d witnessed a bank robbery in a Dallas suburb. Then the anchor said, “Disturbing news this morning out of the small town of Union Hill, where the population of just under fifteen thousand has been reduced by three. First, an explosion just after two p.m. yesterday outside a diner took the lives of two brothers, Charles and Alvin Sugarman. Then, late last night, a young woman perished in a fire at her home in what the

local sheriff has called a ‘clear case of arson’. We’ve learned that the young woman, Mabel Gilmore, was engaged to the nephew of the gentlemen killed in the diner explosion, with the wedding planned for later this year. We go now live to reporter Shelby Ireland at the scene of yesterday’s explosion. Shelby, what can you tell us?”

I was more than a little shocked to learn that Mabel, who I’d just met the night before, had apparently died only hours after Sophie and I took her home and helped her to bed. The TV news cut to their reporter, standing outside the diner’s front door, right next to the sundial. I looked out my motel room window—and there she was, along with her cameraman, their van parked in the same spot the Sugarman’s car had been parked in when it had blown up. From the TV, I could hear her saying, “Chuck, residents of this small town are naturally shaken. I spoke a few moments ago with the owners of this diner, Joseph and Virginia Bollinger, who were working inside when the Sugarman brothers’ car exploded here yesterday. I’m told the brothers ate lunch here at Ginger and Joe’s Place almost every day. As you can see, the diner is closed this morning. Mr. and Mrs. Bollinger tell me they don’t know when they’ll reopen, as they are understandably traumatized by this event. Mrs. Bollinger’s sister was married to one of the men in the car, Mr. Charles Sugarman. Both Mr. and Mrs. Bollinger told me they have little doubt that the family of Mabel Gilmore—if not Miss Gilmore herself—are responsible for

the explosion and that it's quite likely some member of the Sugarman family is in turn responsible for the fire that took Miss Gilmore's life last night. I spoke earlier with Sheriff Abraham Beaufort, who told me he believes it's too soon to determine if there's a connection between the two tragedies. But most residents of this tight-knit community have already made up their minds. Back to you, Chuck." The camera zoomed in on the sundial: SERIUS EST QUAM COGITAS.

I switched off the TV and ran outside to knock on Sophie's door. She was already outside, on her way to knock on mine. I could tell from her face that she'd seen the news. We both watched as the television van pulled out of the diner parking lot and drove away.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"This is crazy, Kenny. She can't really be dead, can she? What the hell is going on down here?"

"I don't know, kid. What do you want to do?"

"Well, I need coffee before anything else. Then maybe we should check with the Sheriff's Department to see if they can tell us anything."

"Coffee it is." We headed for the donut shop.

As we sipped our coffee and ate our blueberry muffins, we watched the television behind the counter. It was a replay of the Shelby Ireland report we'd seen earlier.

“It still doesn’t make sense to me, Kenny,” Sophie said.

“You got me, Sophie,” I replied. “Something doesn’t add up.”

Finishing our muffins, we each took another coffee to go. The Sheriff’s office was just across the street, on the ground floor of the county courthouse. As we crossed the street, two men wearing Sheriff’s Department uniforms were escorting a handcuffed young man in overalls from the back of a cruiser.

We hustled our way inside behind the officers. They led their prisoner past the front desk, through some swinging doors and out of sight. We stopped at the desk. Sophie explained to the officer on duty who she was and asked if there was anyone we could talk to.

“I’ll see if the sheriff is available,” the officer responded.

It was only a couple of minutes before we were greeted by a tall, toothy, smooth-talking man who extended a beefy hand for us each to shake in turn. “Sherriff Abraham Beaufort. How can I help you folks?”

“Sheriff, I’m Sophie O’Malley, this is my friend Kenny Auerbach. Mabel Gilmore is—or was—my cousin. We’re just in town for her parents’ funeral, and now the awful news we saw on the TV this morning. I hoped you could help us make sense of it.”

“I see.” He seemed genuinely pleased that we were there. “Why don’t you come on back to my office, where we can talk?”

As we followed him, he half turned back to look at me and asked, “Auerbach, did you say? Any relation to that fella who runs the Boston Celtics?”

“Ah, no, Sheriff. I wish,” I laughed.

“That’s a man that knows how to put a team together. Though they didn’t do too well this year, did they? Well, here’s my little corner office. Have a seat there. I’d offer you some coffee, but I see you’ve already got some. We pretty much live on the stuff here.” He lifted a pot from a hot plate on the corner of his desk and poured some into a mug with a big silver star painted on it. Above the star was printed: I’M THE. And below the star, OF THIS OUTFIT.

He settled himself into a leather chair behind his enormous desk and said, “Now, Miss, uh....”

“O’Malley. Sophie O’Malley.”

“Yes, Miss O’Malley. You say you’re Mabel Gilmore’s cousin, is that right?”

“Yes, sir. On her mother’s side.”

“I see, yes, I do recall that Miss Molly’s name was O’Malley before she got herself attached to ol’ John T. You say you’ve just arrived in town?”

“That’s right, Sheriff. We arrived yesterday,” I put in.

“If I recall rightly, now that I think of it, you folks were at Ginger and Joe’s place when them Sugarman boys were killed yesterday afternoon. Is that right?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered.

“Did you try Joe’s chili? It’s the best in the county, in my estimation.”

“Well, we were about to,” Sophie said, “but didn’t quite get the chance. The explosion interrupted things.”

“Yes, I imagine it would have done that. I think one of my detectives also found that the two of you were seen driving away from the County Street Steak House with Mabel last night. Green four-door sedan you’re driving, is that right?”

“Yes, that’s right, Sheriff. We rented it at the airport in Houston,” I answered.

“Now, the bartender at the Steak House said the three of you left just after eight o’clock. He was under the impression you were taking Mabel back to her place, as she was in no fit state to drive.”

“Yes, Sheriff,” Sophie said. “She’d had a few drinks before we got there, and then it was clear that bed was where she needed to be, so we took her home and tucked her in.”

“That was very kindly of you. Now, I don’t mean to imply anything, but there you were at the scene of both these tragic events. Personally, I figure that’s just coincidence, but my



detectives are suspicious by nature. They don't care much for coincidences. I wonder if you could just tell me where you headed after you dropped your cousin off, and how you spent the rest of your evening."

I told him, "We stopped at a drive-through burger place on our way back to the Come On Inn, where we're staying. We were back there in our rooms by around nine or nine-thirty, I think."

"I see. I'm sure that's right. The thing is, you see, the fire department boys got the call about the fire out there at about eight thirty, and they say it'd been burning for some time at that point. So, it seems you didn't miss the arsonist by much if you were there at, what, seven thirty or eight?"

"About that, I'd say, Sheriff," Sophie answered. "But you can't think we had anything to do with this?" She was trying not to sound as upset at being interrogated as I knew she was. "Mabel was my cousin. Family. And I've never even met any of the Sugarmans. I haven't been here since Mabel's high school graduation, seven or eight years ago."

"Oh, now, as I say, I'm sure it's just coincidence. But the boys on my team, they like to make sure, you understand. They were curious if maybe you'd seen anything—either at the diner or out at Mabel's place—that might shed some light. Maybe something that didn't seem significant at the time."

“I don’t think so, Sheriff,” I told him. “At the diner, we were too shocked by the explosion to notice much. And last night at Mabel’s there was no one around, as far as we could tell. We got Mabel safely into her bed, then we headed back, as Miss O’Malley told you. We’d missed out on two meals, and it had been a long, traumatic day.”

“Now, I’m sure that’s right. I’ll let my detectives know I believe you’re in the clear. I would like to ask that you let us know if anything comes back to you.”

“Certainly, Sheriff,” Sophie said.

“Now, I hope you’ll understand,” the sheriff continued, “there’s not a lot I can tell you folks about the investigation. Certainly, a crime was committed there at the diner and another one over at the Gilmore place last night. You being family, and witnesses, I understand you’re interested and all. Still, I’m afraid I can’t share much information with you while the investigation is ongoing.”

“I understand, Sheriff,” Sophie responded, and there was the hint of a sob in her voice and a tear in her eye. “But I hate to leave without having a better understanding of what’s happened. We’ve heard there’d been some animosity between the Gilmore and Sugarman families before this. I just don’t understand why Mabel would have ever become engaged to Otis, if that’s the case.”

“A lot of folks around here have been wondering the same thing, Miss O’Malley, I don’t mind telling you. But, you know, love can be a strange thing sometimes. Most of the time, I suppose. You never really know why two people might fall for each other. Take you two, for example. If I’d seen you at opposite ends of a barn at the start of the dance, I don’t think I’d imagine you’d be pairing off. But here you are—”

“Sheriff, we’re not a couple.” I interrupted. “Sophie and I are friends, that’s all. In fact, I’m more like an uncle or an older brother.”

“Ah, I see. My apologies. I shouldn’t be jumping to conclusions like that, without gathering all the evidence. You see, I’m not much of a detective. Fortunately, my job has more to do with administration than investigation.” He laughed. “Same way the Celtics don’t rely on Red Auerbach to make the jump shots. That’s what they’ve got John Havlicek for, right? I’ll tell you this, though, folks. I think the idea that the feud between the Gilmores and the Sugarmans is behind all this might be a bit off the mark. My chief detective—my John Havlicek, if you will—is following some very different lines of inquiry, which we believe may end up surprising most of the people around here. Now, I do have some work to do, so I’m going to have to ask you both to excuse me. I believe we should have some information we can share with you by this time tomorrow, though.

So, you may want to stick around town for another night if you can.”

“That won’t be a problem, Sheriff,” Sophie said. “We’d planned to stay through tomorrow at least, anyway.”

“Oh, that’s fine, then. Why don’t you plan on letting me buy you a cup of coffee here tomorrow morning, and we’ll see if we don’t have this whole situation sorted out by then.” He escorted us out the door. On the sidewalk in front his office, I noticed a sign stuck in the dirt. It read, “Re-Elect ‘Honest Abe’ Beaufort for Sherriff. A Name You Can Trust.”

Sophie and I spent the rest of that day in a bit of a fog. We saw a movie at the theater in nearby Marstonville, had dinner at the County Street Steak House (best steak I’ve ever had), and were asleep in our beds before 9:00.

The next morning—Thursday, April 16—Sheriff Beaufort called Sophie at just after eight-thirty and asked us to meet him at his office at ten. That left us time for pancakes and coffee at a breakfast place I’d spotted on my walk around town a couple of days ago.

We arrived at the police station right on time and were shown into Sheriff Beaufort’s office by one of his deputies.

“Come right in, folks. Have a seat.” The sheriff poured us each a cup of coffee. “Cream and sugar?”

“Yes, please, Sheriff,” said Sophie, “in mine. Kenny takes his black.”

He placed the steaming mugs on our side of his desk and then sat down on his side with his own I’M THE STAR OF THIS OUTFIT mug. “Folks, as I told you yesterday, we’ve been following a line of inquiry that’s somewhat contrary to how most of the local citizens have been looking at this situation. You may have noticed that we brought young Otis in yesterday. I believe you arrived at about the same time my deputies were leading him in. He’s been most cooperative and confirmed most of our suspicions. In fact, to come straight to the point, young Otis has confessed.”

“He killed Mabel?” Sophie gasped.

“Oh, no, Miss O’Malley, you misunderstand. Otis didn’t kill Mabel—at least not intentionally. He’s confessed to killing his uncles and then to setting fire to Mabel’s shed. He says—and I believe him, as he seems quite sincerely grieved at her death—that his intention was simply to destroy John T.’s notebooks and to create a bit of a smokescreen if you’ll allow me the pun. It was his understanding that Mabel had planned to spend the night with her friend Dorothea McHenry, which Miss McHenry corroborates.”

“But, why . . . I don’t understand, Sheriff. Why did he do it?”

Sophie asked the question before I could.

“Well, it seems the current generation of Gilmores and Sugarmans—that is to say, Mabel and Otis—felt that the feud between the two families had gone on long enough. Of course, the older generation disagreed. So, Mabel and Otis cooked up a plan to eliminate the older generation. The first step in that plan was when Otis and Mabel killed Mabel’s parents, John T. and your aunt Molly. Now, initially, my detectives jumped to the conclusion that Otis’s uncles had killed John T. and Molly. But the older Sugarman brothers had what you could call an airtight alibi for the night of that killing. You see, they were playing poker with me and several other members of the local Masonic lodge. So, I knew they hadn’t done it.”

“I’m sorry, Sheriff,” Sophie interrupted, “but I thought John had shot Molly and then himself. Murder-suicide, that’s what Mabel told me.”

“I’m sure she did. That’s how she initially reported it to us, as well. But the evidence—that is to say, the angles the shots had been fired from and the lack of fingerprints on the gun—made it plain to us that Mabel’s explanation was not quite accurate. We eventually came to suspect Otis had been responsible, but we couldn’t prove it, and we had no idea that Mabel had been his accomplice. Well, two days and a fair number of investigative hours

later, we began to feel that we had enough evidence to charge Otis with the Gilmore murders. But then he and Mabel caught us off guard by killing Otis' uncles—an event you were unlucky enough to have witnessed.

“When you met Mabel later that evening and assumed that she was drinking out of sorrow or anger, she was, in fact, celebrating, as she and Otis felt they were on the brink of bringing their plan to a successful conclusion. Unfortunately for her, she rather overindulged and left herself incapacitated. You, very kindly, brought her home. Of course, you had no idea that Otis was about to light the place on fire, just as Otis had no idea you'd brought Mabel home.”

“Oh, my,” Sophie, nearly in tears.

“‘Oh, my’, indeed, Miss O’Malley. I hope you won’t harbor any feelings of guilt. You are in no way responsible. Mabel’s blood is very much on her own hands. Hers and Otis’.”

“But Sheriff,” I asked, “why did they want to destroy the notebooks?”

“That’s a good question and one we may never fully know the answer to. Otis tells us he believed there was proof in some of them that would have pointed to his and Mabel’s guilt in her parents’ deaths. But my own belief is that they simply wanted to create a diversion and to point a finger at Mabel’s cousin, Bobby Gilmore. I believe that’s why Mabel was so vocal about mentioning to you—at

a volume that all the other patrons of the Steak House could not help but overhear—that she'd shown Bobby that notebook she also showed to you. With Bobby in jail, that would have left Mabel the last of the Gilmores and Otis the last of the Sugarmans—other than his poor mama, whose dementia would make her easy enough for him to manipulate.”

“But why, Sheriff?” Sophie asked. “What did they stand to gain from all this killing?”

“Well, you see, the two families’ properties—which abut each other and amount to some thirty-five acres all told—happen to sit right along the county road, as you know. The county is preparing to widen the road and looking to develop much of the land along it. Shopping malls, hotels, that sort of thing. Some developers have been buying up property, but both the Gilmores and the Sugarmans have been holding out. Well, Mabel and Otis smelled money, and money often means greed and murder.”

“This all seems so crazy to me, Sheriff,” Sophie said, a slight tremble in her voice. She normally has tremendous self-control, but I could see she was struggling not to show how upset she was by all these revelations.

“Well, I can understand that, miss. Folks do crazy things for money sometimes, and once they start, they often find it hard to stop. Now, what I recommend the two of you do is to head back



over to Ginger and Joe's Place. I understand they're opening back up today, and I know you missed out on trying Joe's chili the first time around. You go have some lunch, check out of your motel, and head back home. There won't be any funeral, I'm afraid, at least until after our coroner has completed his work on all the bodies."

"That doesn't sound like a bad idea, Sheriff. Thank you," I said as I shook his hand and led Sophie out by the elbow.

We got to Ginger and Joe's Place at noon, just as Joe was unlocking the front door. He was friendly but clearly still distraught. Ginger was also much more subdued than the first time we'd sat at the counter of her restaurant. But, as predicted, the chili was fantastic and Sophie and I finished off the whole plate of cornbread.

The next morning—Friday the 17th of April—our plane touched down in Boston. As we drove past the Boston Garden, where the Celtics play, the radio was tuned to the news. The Apollo 13 astronauts had splashed down somewhere in the Pacific Ocean just moments earlier.

"Imagine that", I said. "A couple of days ago, those guys seemed as good as dead. Now they're on their way home, safe and sound. Doesn't seem real."

"I guess you never know, Kenny," a note of sadness still in her voice, though she was surely relieved to put our own recent surreal ordeal behind her.

Sophie and I made our own way home as well, never to return to Texas again.//

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brian Mosher was born in Foxboro, MA, and currently resides in nearby Mansfield. He does not write for a living, but lives to write.

He has self-published 3 books: “One Bad Day Deserves Another” (short stories) and “Moon Shine and Lemon Twists” (poetry), both in 2016; and “The Broken Mosaic” (poetry and prose), in 2021.

His poetry chapbook, “Dreams and Other Magic” (2023) is published by Alien Buddha Press.

His work has appeared in Rituals (from Anomaly Poetry), Coneflower Cafe, Written Tales, Oddball Magazine, eMerge, Alien Buddha Zine, Esoterica Magazine, Half and One Magazine and Verse Wrights.

He also maintains a poetry blog, Phlubbermatic: ([www.phlubbermatic.blogspot.com](http://www.phlubbermatic.blogspot.com)).

“WINE IS CONSTANT PROOF THAT GOD  
LOVES US AND LOVES TO SEE US HAPPY.”

~ BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

# Better Than Silence

*A short story by Allen Seward*

I am reminded of the day my father died. It was a cold, wet mid-morning, and we had all been gnawing our fingertips, awaiting a call from the doctor. My father was waiting to hear the disposition of a certain mass, for a timeline to be established, a terrible evangelizing of prognosis. Like all worried families, we assumed the worst but said nothing. He knew, though. He could see it in our eyes and hear it in our voices, and he knew better than to try curbing our worry. We were awaiting the worst, but the worst was yet to come: my father would say he was going out to get some things, gas for the mower, a newspaper, maybe a six-pack, and my mother would ask him, “What if the doctor calls?” and my father would reply, “then I’ll call him back,” and then with a smile he would kiss my mother goodbye, walk out the door, and then pull out the driveway, and was gone. The phone would ring, yes, but it would not be the doctor calling about my father’s mass; but rather, it was the pronouncement of his death, which I knew to be an absolute fact as my mother put her hand to her mouth and howled as she fell to her knees in the kitchen. He had been struck by another driver and when his truck went into the median it flipped

and rolled, practically shredding it as it was compacted across the grass. It turned out my father's prognosis had been terrible, perhaps even from the day of his birth, at least from whichever day it had been decided that he would die on this date, in this way.

I remember sitting at the table, watching my mother pick up the ringing phone, and watching her collapse to the floor as she made the awful death noise. I felt every part of me rush over to her, reach out to her, but in reality, I sat numb and unable to move or think, or make a sound. The shock had given me phantom limbs that did all but touch—they were, by design, incapable of accomplishing anything at all. I sat there, stricken dumb, staring out the windows of my skull. The tank had run empty. My license had been revoked. God had pressed a red button.

My mother, on the other hand, grew older and died much slower. “Don't think about it,” she said. “I'm going to be around for a long, long time.” And that she was: fifteen years after my father had died. She spent close to four of those years withering away, though. She lost her hair and her skin became pale, thin, her body mass shrunk, she became weak. “Don't think about it,” she said, and all I could do was lie to her. She knew I was lying, she had to. It was impossible not to notice it, not to think about it—the way she looked, smelled, sounded—she was like some icon of death. I began to feel guilty for being alive, for being young—at least younger than

she was—for not wasting away in place of her. I began to think of the last word I had said to my father, when he was going out to his truck to take that last trip. He asked if I wanted anything while he was out. I just said “no,” and I began to think I would probably have the same last word with my mother. “Am I dying?” she might ask, and I would be forced to say “no.” And then she would die. It seemed oddly poetic.

People say we contain multitudes, but I don't believe any of that. As I watched my mother's casket lower down into the hole they had dug next to my father I knew that we, all of us, were—are—singular beings. Nothing had come up in place of my mother or father, they died and were gone. They were them, and then they weren't. There was no multitude: just as I am me and nothing else, so it was for my mother and father whose existence I may call perfect, but it still ended. And perfection is meaningless. There was a small reception after my mother's funeral service and I heard the same thing I had heard at the small reception we had after my father's funeral: “it was a lovely service.” An old woman said it over her forkful of potato salad, and though I don't know whether or not it was the same woman in both instances, I know that each time the words were spoken just before a bite of potato salad. It's always potato salad.

I grabbed my coat and left. I went to a bar.

I slumped over the bar, resting my head on my hand, and when the bartender came by and asked if I wanted another, I nodded, saying nothing. “You look a little rough,” she said as she set the glass down. I picked up the drink and threw it back, nodding to her again as I set it down. “Jeez.”

“What’s wrong, buddy?” the man two seats down from me asked. “You’re drinking with a vengeance.” People have ways of making business their own, no matter how far removed they are from it. This man could have been on another planet for all I cared.

“Just dropped in for a drink or three,” I told him.

“You look like you’re dressed for a funeral.”

“Just came from one. My mother’s.”

The man’s eyes went wide and his mouth hung open. The bartender paused what she was doing. “I’m sorry,” the guy, my drinking buddy, managed to say.

I had a sour taste in my mouth all of a sudden. I figured it was due to actualizing my mother’s death by putting her funeral into words. I finished my drink, stood, tossed some bills on the bar, and left.

I had gone to the park because I could think of nothing else to do. The sun was warm, the breeze cool, and a small family fed ducks at

the pond. I walked along the pond and then took a small path that branched out into the trees. It was a thin, rough walking path, hardly pedicured like the rest of the park, but it was still quite clearly a human-made gadget. You could not become lost so long as you followed the path in either direction. It gave the illusion of nature, whereas it was really a place where nature had been tamed, and tampered with, if one could really call the surrounding woods “nature” at all.

I walked.

I went up the hill and out the far side of the little forest expedition and I came upon the pavilions and benches that were set up for picnics and cookouts and whathaveyou. The smell of charcoal and grilled meat was on the smoke that filled the air. I walked.

I was up the trail and almost past the last table in front of the last pavilion when I was stopped by a woman’s voice—a familiar voice. “Hey, Rob, is that you?” I stopped and saw that the face matched what I imagined the voice to look like. I wanted to keep on walking, but it was too late: I had stopped, it was me, I was Rob. “How are you doing?”

An awful, stupid question, but one that gets asked of those in or after certain situations. I don’t think we as a species can help it. Perhaps words and sounds, no matter how meaningless or absurd or disconnected, are by definition much better than silence. Non

sequiturs are better than silence. Pig Latin is better than silence. I think I am guilty myself of having said these meaningless insensitive words, or some variation at least. I had grown somewhat, I must admit, for I did not clench my teeth as I did when I was first asked, “how are you?” after my father’s passing.

“I’m fine,” I told her. “How are you?”

“I don’t know if you saw me the other day, but I was there. I wanted to say something, but, I don’t know, it didn’t feel right.”

“Look,” I said, “I’m fine. Really. I’ve been through this before, more or less. No need to worry.”

“My husband, Eric, is grilling. You could join us if you want.”

I shook my head and smiled. “No thanks.”

“It’s no trouble—” she began but was cut off by a small child running and squealing to her. “Mommy!” She took the child up in her arms. “Do you want to say hi to mommy’s friend, Rob?” the child’s face disappeared into her armpit. The child would not say hi to mommy’s friend, Rob.

“I should let you get back to it,” I said as I looked over and saw the husband, Eric, has noticed me and waved. “It was good seeing you, Lisa.”

“Really? It’s no trouble...”

“Really,” I said. “Have a good one.” I waved to Eric as I walked away. Lisa told the child to say goodbye but the child did not say



goodbye. I began to think how strange it might have been to see that child with a face composited with my features instead of Eric's. It was a scary thought. I had denied my parents that goodness, and that was a terrible thought. I don't think I can articulate this quite right, and maybe we're not meant to articulate it. It's still better than silence though, maybe, this tussle of half-thoughts, brain juice, oozing ideas.

I wondered who the next person was I would bump into or be stopped by. "How are you doing?" I'm sure they would ask. Fine. Just fine. I've done it all before, more or less. Let's see if I can use my mother's funeral to get out of a speeding ticket or armed robbery. No? I didn't think so.

I woke up in the middle of the night feeling clammy, feeling watched. I looked around the room and my eyes settled on a dark corner just outside the small trace of moonlight that came in through the blinds. It took a moment for me to see it, and I wish I hadn't seen it, but there was my father's face on the wall, his mouth hanging open, a black void. His sockets were mostly black, too, but I could make out the whites of his eyes, and though he faced me, it seemed that he was not looking at me. I had trouble breathing. I did not want to make a sound. I did not want to look at him and I did not want to look away, close my eyes, or even blink. I was afraid of

moving. I was afraid of him noticing me, of him being there. I was afraid of him leaving.

I don't know how long I laid there like that but I eventually woke in the morning, having fallen asleep at some point. I looked at the corner of the room, at that spot on the wall, and sure enough, my father's face was not there. He was gone. He could not exist in the daylight.

The next night I had trouble even going near the bedroom. I wanted nothing to do with it once the sun went down. I knew it was ridiculous, but I could not help it. I was much more than terrified of going into my room. I left the lights on and sat on the couch. I watched TV. I drank. Again, I woke up in the middle of the night feeling clammy, feeling dread, and I noticed a lightbulb had blown in the other room. The doorway was dark. I knew if I looked long enough, I would see the face of my father again or the face of my mother, so I made sure not to look. I turned over on the couch, put a pillow over my head, and laid there.

“You look like hell,” Frank told me. “You been sleeping?”

I shook my head. “Not much.”

“It's hard, man. It's fuckin hard...”

Yes it is, but we were not on the same page exactly. Losing my father was hard, and losing my mother was hard. The type of hard

you cannot grasp until it hits you. But I could not tell Frank why I had not been sleeping—it was crazy, and I knew it. Seeing my dead father’s face at night. Hearing my dead mother scurry around the rooms, careful not to let me catch a glimpse of her. Frank would think I was mad, or simply not believe me, and regardless of any of that I don’t think it would have addressed the problem.

“Let’s talk about something else,” I said.

“You sure?”

“Oh yeah.”

I had become an oddity as of late—something incredibly interesting. People wanted to check on me, and when they checked on me they wanted to talk about my dead parents, about how I was coping with having been orphaned. It was becoming my identity, and I had no clue how long I would be able to stand it.

“I’ve got an interview on Tuesday,” Frank told me. “Fingers crossed.”

“Good luck.”

“I’m gonna need it.”

We shot the shit for a while longer and decided to call it a night on the early side. Frank’s a good guy, don’t get me wrong, but he had wanted to check up on me and I had disappointed him by not wanting to play ball.

I could not blame Frank, though—for succumbing to human nature or for not believing me should I divulge the truth of the matter. It's an understandable response, the small talk, the “how are you?” and I was not sure how much of “the truth of the matter” I believed myself anyway. Whatever the problem was—really was—my lack of sleep would only exacerbate it. I could not help but think about it, no matter how much I wanted to push it away and forget about it. I was trapped. And, to make matters worse, when I thought about seeing my father's face on the wall, even in broad daylight, I felt a shadow fall over me, and it began to feel as though things around me were being watched—not me but rather the world and people nearby—and when I thought about my mother's sounds, the breathing and whispering and scurrying and scratching, I began to hear—or thought I heard—it all around me.

How do you explain this to a reasonable person?

I got in my car and sat behind the wheel for a few minutes without even putting the key in the ignition. I looked ahead and saw a man walking with his son, holding hands, the boy was maybe six years old, and when the boy turned my way and looked at me, or only toward me, for a moment, I saw my own face on the head of his neck, and it froze me. I was not safe. The father and son kept walking and crossed the street. I started the car and pulled away.

“Hey, Rob, it’s William. Give me a call when you get this.”

William. My supervisor. Not my boss, mind you. Only my supervisor. He was calling to see when I would be coming back to work. I had put him in a rock, in a hard place, in a pickle. I used my bereavement time and then I started using my PTO. Nobody wanted to be the one who brought down the hammer on a guy who had just lost his mother. At least, I don’t think so. At least, I don’t think William did.

I should call him, I thought. I did not call him.

No.

I started to hear more sounds, more frequently. During the day as well as at night. The air sounded like worms talking. I was attuned to finding faces as well. I picked apart the walls, shapes, shadows, textures, all of it. The human brain works that way, but this particular pattern recognition was in overdrive. My father’s face would be there while it was out of focus or on the periphery, or only glanced at. I could feel it in my bones. My veins shivered. I fought hard not to look but I inevitably looked and the thing that was once a face was no longer a face, yet I hardly felt relief.

The face was gone. It was no longer a face. It was never a face. It was William. It was not William. I should give William a call.

I smoked a cigarette on the bridge and looked down at the green water far below me. It moved slowly, ripples showing on the otherwise smooth surface. Cars whooshed behind me, crossing the bridge and heading toward the State Line. No one noticed me, at least I don't think anyone did. I was just a boring aspect of the scenery. The sun was yellow and seemed to look directly into the river.

I tossed my cigarette down into the water, put my hands in my pockets, and started walking. At the other end of the bridge was a small diner smack on the side of the road. I went inside. I sat down. I ordered a coffee.

"Anything else, Hun?" the waitress asked.

I shook my head. "No," I said, but the word tasted like wax. The last word I had said to my father. It was more like the rotted meat of some sacred and terrible beast than a word. "Not right now," I corrected. She smiled and came back a moment later with a cream-colored mug and the coffee pot. It was too late, though, I had already tasted the word. I could not even taste the coffee now. No is all there was, all there ever would be; no longer was there such a thing as blueberries, or vanilla, or sea salt.

What had I said to my mother? The thought stopped me dead in my tracks. I could not remember the last thing I said to my mother. Was it good? Bad? Had I said that I loved her? I

remembered the thought that I had of No being my last word to her as well. The poetic thought, I remembered. “Am I dying?” she would ask. “No,” I would say, I would lie. But that did not happen. Did I just sit at her side, staring at her or around her? Did I just sit there with my mouth gaping open like my father’s? No. No. No. No. No... “No,” was better than silence. It had to be.

The phone rang. I let it go. It rang again, again, again. Whoever was on the other end was being very persistent. I answered. It was not William.

“I can help you,” the voice told me. “I can fix this.”

“Fix what?” I asked.

“Look at the TV.”

I looked at the black TV and in the room’s reflection, on the wall above my own reflection, was my father’s face. I gasped.

“See it?”

“Yea.”

“I can fix it.”

“How?”

But there was no “how.” The line went dead and I sat there with my phone to my ear. I did not want to look behind me; the reflection was bad enough. I wanted to run out of the room, out of the house, but I was scared of moving. I managed to look away from

the TV screen for a moment and upon looking back I noticed that my father's face was no longer there. He was gone. I had no idea where he went but I was glad.

There was a knock at the door. I got up to answer it. The man was dressed all in white: shirt, vest, tie, pants, shoes, socks, belt. His pure white clothes shined in the sun. "May I come in?" he asked.

"Who are you?"

"I'm here to help."

I stood there ready to close the door.

"I can fix it," he said.

Ah. Him. Him. I let him come inside. I wondered how I could not immediately recognize his voice. He was going to save me, help me, all that. He sat down on the couch, made himself at home and asked for a cup of coffee. "Splash of cream, scoop of sugar," he told me. "Please."

I grabbed a beer from the fridge while I got his coffee. I brought it out and handed him the cup as I sat down. "Thank you," he said. He blew on the hot liquid and took a sip. "Nothing like a hot cup of coffee to get everything in gear. Isn't that right? Give me a pot of coffee, a good book, and a patio in the early morning any day, now. You read much, Rob? You should. It flexes your brain, makes you wise. I've read so much—studied and memorized, too—I



don't know if I'm capable of an original thought nowadays. I'll have to ask myself, 'who told you to say that?' before I open my mouth."

The man continued to talk and drink his coffee. I wondered if he would do anything else.

"What are you doing here?" I finally asked.

"Oh?" he said. "Oh! That's right!" he bolted forward and set his cup on the coffee table. "I'm so sorry! I got carried away...that happens sometimes...I just go on and on, I forget myself; I forget where I am and what I'm doing. You see, I heard you're in quite the rough spot, and I think I've got just the—"

"Did William send you? Is this his way of getting me back to work?"

"William?" the man scratched his head. "I don't think I know this William. I honestly just came of my own volition."

"Well how did you find out about me?"

"Oh, through the grapevine," he waved the question away. "Let's just say that who I am is not important, and how I came about you is not important either. What I can do for you, on the other hand, that may be the most important thing of all!"

I wanted to press the matter, but I also wanted to see what he had to say. If he could really do something—fix it or me—then he was right: who cared who he was, or who sent him, how he found out, or where he came from? It also felt nice to know that someone

understood, or at least had an idea of, what was going on. I did not have to hide it or bite my tongue. We were part of the same world. And this man—whoever he was—could drone on all day for all I cared, because his rambling, the light slurp as he sipped his coffee, even his tapping foot, was better than silence. Silence announced that something was nearby.

“The first thing I need you to do,” he went on, “is tell me why I’m here.”

“What?”

“Why am I here? What am I doing? Go on, say it! I need to hear it from you. Fess up!”

“You said you could help me,” I told him. “You said you could fix it.”

“But what am I fixing? What is it?”

I sat for a moment trying to piece together what answer he wanted. He just looked at me. I opened my mouth to say something but stopped. I sat there. I closed my mouth.

“You’ve got to say it, Rob.” He told me after some long moment passed. “You have to learn how to say it. You have to get it out of you. It’s not good to have nowhere to go.”

“My mother passed away recently,” I said. He cocked his eyebrow at this. “I guess I haven’t been handling it all that well.”

“I wouldn’t be here if that were it.”

“My father passed away a long time ago, and I guess I’ve never moved on.”

“Not it.”

He stared into my eyes and I tried not to look too deeply into his, for fear of seeing my father’s face in those black orbs. But that was it, and he did not just want me to state the obvious, he wanted me to be honest. I felt a weight lift off of me.

“I can’t sleep,” I told him. “I don’t know if it’s my parents haunting me, or something else, but I’ve been seeing my father’s ghostly face at night, and I’ve been hearing my mother, too. She’s careful not to let me see her, but I’m sure it’s her. I don’t know what they want, or what I should do. Once everything gets real quiet, I know they’re here or soon will be. I can’t take it. I can’t stand it. I don’t know why this is happening...”

“There, there...” he put his hand on my shoulder. I noticed my eyes were wet—I had started crying. “I can take care of things,” he said, “I can fix it.”

How? How could he fix it? What on earth was even going on? Death was just another part of things, but it was supposed to be the end of the story or chapter. My father’s eerie death mask and my mother’s disembodied noises seemed commonplace compared to the absurdity of what this stranger offered. That was absurd. He

was absurd. I wanted to crawl into a hole, or move to the North Pole, or set up shop on the moon—whatever it took, I was willing.

“Here,” he said as he stood and motioned for me to lie down on the couch. I laid down. “Close your eyes,” he said, and I closed my eyes, though it was the last thing I wanted to do. “I want you to breathe slowly. Take deep breaths.” I breathed slow, deep breaths. This went on for several moments. “Now tell me what you see.”

What I see? What did I see? I saw nothing. My eyes were closed. I was looking at my own head. “I don’t think I understand,” I told him.

“Why?”

“My eyes are closed. I can’t see with my eyes closed.”

“Well, then just pretend.”

Still nothing. I started to wonder if this were just some joke. I shook my head and opened my eyes. I looked at the man. “It’s not working.”

“It will.”

I closed my eyes with a sigh. “What am I looking for, exactly?”

“That depends on you,” he said, “where do you want to be?”

The air grew warm and began to smell of salt and fish. I began to hear the plopping sound of water running into objects. I was in the sun—it was a hot day—and I stood at the stony bank of a river. I looked out at the green water and knew it would only be a moment

before my father opened the cooler, took out a beer, and sat down on the rocks, which he did.

“Not biting much today, are they?” my father said. “Used to take them home by the bucketful. Back when I was a kid. You’d eat nothing but fish after a catch like that.”

“What happened?”

“I know some people will say it’s the climate changing, and it just might be. I’m no scientist, so what do I know? A lot’s changed over the years, though. More people, more industrialization—hell, any factory upriver could probably spoil it all. Or maybe the fish learned,” he laughed, “they figured us out and want to starve us. Can you imagine that?”

“Mom would say to cast the net to the other side.”

“Too bad I didn’t bring the net.”

I began to think I was here—or back here—for a reason, but I could not place it. My father sipped his beer, set it down and began to bait a hook. I looked back out over the water—it was almost brown now. “Where’s mom?” I asked, realizing she was not nearby. My father just hummed. I turned around and looked back up the way; everything was quiet, a light breeze blew but it did not make any noise. I looked back to my father. He sat still, watching the water, his fishing pole in his hands.

“I bet mom’s at church,” I said, not knowing why. “She’ll be coming this way shortly.”

My father hummed.

“She’ll bring lunch, too: sandwiches, chips, potato salad. You’ll make a joke about us eating like kings.”

My father hummed some more.

“And then—” I began to say but was cut off by the sound of my mother’s voice.

“There’s my boys!” she called out. She had some plastic shopping bag in her hands. “Who’s hungry?”

“Absolutely starved!” my father bounced to his feet.

We sat down and scooped potato salad onto paper plates, had a helping of chips. I had a turkey sandwich and my father had ham, my mother had turkey, too. We ate for a moment in silence and then my father leaned back. “A meal fit for kings!” he said as he smiled at Mother, neither of them realized that I mouthed the words along with him. I looked back out toward the river—the water was turning red now.

The fish were not biting. The sky was sinking. The water was red and would soon turn black. Night would come and we would not move—we would sit on the rocks and eat our sandwiches. There was the low grumble of some distant boat motor but there was no boat.

“Ah! Almost!” my father laughed. He was skipping stones now.  
“Watch this, Honey!”

My mother giggled at his side as he threw another rock. I don’t know how many times it skipped—it could have gone on forever. My father seemed happy with it.

This would go on, caught in a loop for all eternity. The clouds would roll in, thunder would snap and lightning strike, and then it would all clear away, drops of rain would turn to crystal in the sun. The moon would rise and fall. The sun would rise and fall. The water was black now, black like dirty oil. Something was not right. My mother and father continued to talk, but their voices were gone—no sounds came from anywhere. I tapped them on the shoulder but they did not respond. I circled around to face them but they turned away from me. Something was not right. Something was terribly wrong. Their bodies began to steam and evaporate.

I opened my eyes and sat up. “Stop it! Stop it now!” I cried.

“Now, now,” the man in white said. “I’m not finished yet. Just try to relax—it’ll be over in a jiff.”

“No. I said stop.”

The man in white regarded me. His eyes were now little black pearls and his teeth were sharpened points. “I suggest you listen to me,” he said, “I’m here for a reason, after all.”

I had the feeling that his reason had nothing to do with me. He had stuck his fingers in my head, rubbed a wet cloth all around the walls of my brain. I wondered if it would really be so bad...of course it wouldn't.. Once the last trace of smoke went up there would be nothing to recover, it would all be perfectly excised—this man, whoever he was, took pride in his work. I would be left alone on that quiet shore, locked forever there, locked in silence.

“Get out,” I said again.

“Fine, fine,” he groaned. “Have it your way. And don't say I didn't warn you.” He stood and stomped over to the door. “You know,” he paused and turned to me with his finger in the air, “no, never mind. Piss off.” and he left.

The air in the room was thick. I had to swallow in order to breathe. It tasted stale.

I was not curious about my visitor. I could not really tell if he had been real or if I had just imagined the events—maybe I had fallen asleep and dreamed it all, him, up. I had made the right choice, though, whatever that choice was. The air remained still and awful for a bit longer, but soon enough, I heard the telltale sound of my mother on the other side of the wall. My skin no longer crawled. It was better than silence. It sounded as if she were drumming her fingers on the wall, tapping her nails on the shell of paint. It was just noise, but after listening to it a moment, the noise became



organized into the tune of a lullaby she had sung to me when I was young. My cheeks became wet and I smiled. I laid back on the couch.

My father's face was the entire ceiling now. His sockets and eyes and mouth still looked the same, only much larger. I listened to my mother tap her lullaby on the wall, and it was better than silence. I looked into my father's face and eyes on the ceiling, and it was better than darkness. He watched the room, watched me, watched over me. I put my hands behind my head and closed my eyes.

I drifted off to sleep.

My mother began to hum.//

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allen Seward is a writer from the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia. His work has appeared in Scapegoat Review, miniMAG, Jersey Devil Press, and Moth Eaten Mag, among others. He currently resides in WV with his partner and four cats. @AllenSeward1 on Twitter, @allenseward0 on Instagram

# The Art of Passing an Interview

An article by Emil Rem

Calgary was booming. Collins Barrow, Accountants were desperately short of team leaders. Being of British heritage, the firm decided to recruit from England. They handed the task over to Pat Cashion, their youngest partner. He was in his late twenties when the average age of a partner was in the forties. How did Pat get there? He came from a high pedigree. His mother was the first woman to graduate from university in Alberta. Pat spoke five languages, earned the top prize in all he attempted at university and after. He was the spitting image of Alfred E. Neuman out of Mad Magazine. A spindly-boned, high intellectual at a mere 5'4", weighing no more than a hundred pounds, with large, round, piercing blue eyes and was all business.

Like any top executive, Pat hired the best firm of headhunters in London. As a result of their ad, 137 applied—of which I was one—for three openings.

I had recently qualified as a Chartered Accountant at the age of 22. The normal age to qualify was late twenties. I had failed my high school exams but managed to enter the profession under its old rules, which were radically updated a month after I signed my

training papers. The new rules—needing a university degree—would have barred me.

My introduction to accountancy was through a family friend. It precluded a resume or even a job interview.

Having the urge to leave the UK at a time of trouble and strife—country-wide union strikes and recurrent blackouts in mid-winter—the boundless opportunity of Calgary lifted my soul.

In applying for any job, a resume is a must. Never having done one, I blithely wrote a hand-written letter to compete with any doctor's scribble. Conjuring up the letter in my mind's eye, I remember two details. Firstly, my sentences rose like the slope of a hill. Not one was a straight line. Secondly, I ended it with "mighty oaks from little acorns grow". To this day, I cannot fathom why I wrote that.

The interview was short and interspersed with rapid questions from Pat whose intense eyes pierced into me like a living nightmare.

"Have you been to Calgary?"

"Yes. I have an aunt there." So far, so good. 15-love.

"We were looking for experienced team leaders with several years under their belt."

"I just qualified." Oops. 15-all.

"What do you think of accounting as a career?"

“I don’t. All you have to do is study the curriculum and regurgitate the answers you’ve learned off pat.” I choked, realizing what I had just said.

Knowing it was all over, I returned his piercing gaze and continued, “Take my mum. She emigrated to England from Africa, didn’t speak English, had no education and was a single mum. She made a fortune in real estate from money she earned working seven days a week.” Pat was still listening.

“No one gave my mother a manual to learn and follow. Through hard knocks, she worked things out.” Again, our eyes were fixed on each other, waiting for the other to blink.

I expected Pat to stand up and show me the door.

“You’ve got the job.”

“What!” as though I had been cheated.

“Our clients are all mid-level, young entrepreneurs. They all think like you.”

He helped me out of my chair, as I had lost all movement in my legs.

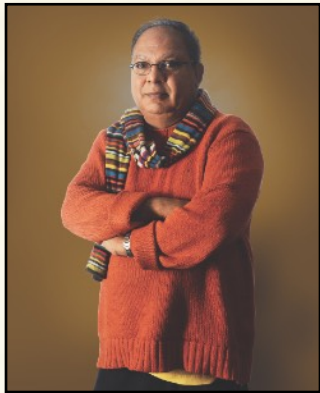
“Congratulations.”

I often wonder how our destinies hinge on a wisp of perchance. How could someone, having won every academic laurel, even consider a high school dropout? If Pat had been a run-of-the-mill

40+ partner, would he have chosen someone conventional like the other two candidates recruited? Why take such a chance on me?

His choice proved a disaster.//

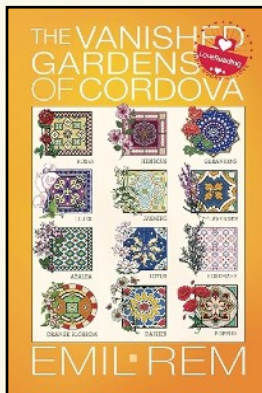
### ABOUT EMIL REM



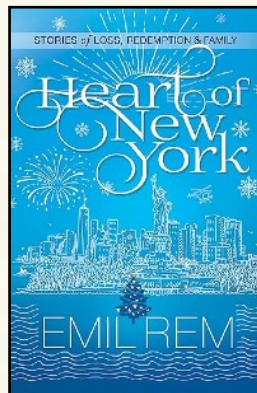
An eccentric accountant becomes a writer of eccentric characters in exotic locales, with each chapter taking us on a trip into the fascinating, twisted world of Emil Rem. Born to a close-knit middle-class Muslim East Indian family in Dar-es-Salam in the 50's, he then moved to Maidenhead,

England, at the age of five. The next twenty years are spent

shuttling between England and East Africa, wearing a St. Christopher's cross one minute and attending church, to wearing a green armband and attending Muslim religious classes in Africa the next minute.



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# Just Breathe

A short story by Dan Heck

**T**en after midnight a Japanese torpedo exploded the starboard bow of a heavy cruiser, puncturing the bulkhead of a berthing area, and killing fifteen men instantly. The ones that didn't die from the explosion died when they were sucked out into the Philippine Sea; their lungs filled with water before they cried out.

The ship's cries afterward reverberated throughout her hulls. Her shakes reached a port aft berthing area where Marc and Kevin slept: Kevin on the top bunk with his right hand draped over the side and Marc with his hand on bended knee. Every night, they were The Creation of Adam. Fingertips a breath away from kissing. The torpedo knocked Kevin and Marc from their racks, along with all the other sleeping sailors. The alarms for battle stations sounded and people scrambled to dress. Kevin checked Marc, making sure he was OK before dressing.

Another torpedo slammed into the amidships hull and exploded the ship's oil tanks. Alarms switched, and everyone readied to abandon ship. Thirty seconds later Kevin, and Marc were dressed but

without life jackets, all were taken by quicker men. In the main passageway, the current of men fleeing was like a stream of salmon and as loud as a waterfall. Over a thousand men flooded the way to leave while the ship shrieked with little explosions everywhere. Three minutes after the first torpedo she listed hard to starboard from water filling in compartments. Kevin and Marc still had three decks to climb to reach topside.

The increasing list made balanced walking impossible, slowing their escape. The cold-water bit their ankles. Pounding came from closed hatches. Hatches Marc didn't try to reach and pry open, focusing instead on keeping himself alive. Kevin didn't seem to notice it at all. He was busy helping every sailor near him that fell. Trudging like the titan Atlas, he tried to carry each burdened soul on his shoulders, but more realistically he had as much success as Sisyphus when each sailor pulled up to his feet was negated by a shove from the frantic horde.

The water rose to their knees.

Marc grabbed Kevin and left the main passageway for a portside hatch just after the mess deck. It was an uphill climb, but the water shallowed. There, on a table by the hatch, was a lone life jacket: abandoned, wrapped around a table's leg from when it slipped from a sailor's hand. Kevin ripped it from the table as they ran. Once topside and on the starboard railing, Marc and Kevin looked into the

black ocean. Erratic men flailed furiously. Thirty feet to their right, a sailor dropped his life jacket into the water, then prepared to jump as he'd trained, but the life jacket was snatched up by ten desperate men—piranhas fighting over a scrap of food. Kevin took the prized life jacket and put it around Marc. Marc was relieved. He'd always been afraid of the open water. The only reason he joined the Navy was to get far away from home. The plan was to be on top of the water, not in it. Kevin put his right hand on Marc's shoulder and the two jumped into the abyss.

The life jacket buoyed up first, shooting them up like a slingshot. Both men were covered in inky oil bled from the ship. It burned their eyes as they fought to scrape it off. Fifteen minutes after the first explosion, Kevin and Marc, along with the other 900 survivors, watched 300 of their fellow sailors drown as the USS Indianapolis sank to the bottom of the Philippine Sea.

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There was no sign of the command. The people in sight were low-ranking and enlisted like themselves. Even if there were an officer or chief around, no one would be able to tell. In the darkness of night, coated in the blackness of oil, they all looked the same. Scared. Marc was relieved to be alive and with Kevin, but the fear of the water and what might lurk in it outweighed any relief. His eyes scanned for

signs of shore or ships. There was nothing but debris, men, oil, and water.

The Indianapolis sank so fast that only a couple of lifeboats dropped. They were quickly over-flowed by people. All were trained to not swim after abandoning ship, conserve energy, and just float, so most survivors formed clusters of about twenty. Black rings moving with the current. When the adrenaline of escaping death dropped, the cold penetrated. The night was bitter, the wind coming off the water chilled their eyes, and made tears drip as their bones soaked.

“I don’t know if I can tread all night, boys,” Kevin said through chattering teeth.

“Don’t worry. Just lean on me,” Marc said.

“Glad to see you two made it,” a voice called out.

“That sounds like Dennis, the best cook in the Navy,” Kevin said.

“You know it. Good thing I was up late baking peanut butter cookies for you all. I was one of the first topside. Didn’t know if I’d see any of my friends alive again,” Dennis said.

The men chatted for a bit as a defense mechanism and to buoy spirits. They guessed who’d be in charge and how long they’d be adrift until rescue. Optimists said a day. The anxious, like Marc, said

nothing, not able to talk in a time like this. The chatter died down after an hour when some of the men closed their eyes.

Marc wasn't sure how he'd fall asleep. Even if he wasn't lost at sea, it would be hard. For months, the last thing he saw before bed was Kevin's calloused hand. He stared at it with false closed eyes and imagined interlocking fingers with him. Holding him. Now he actually was holding him and he felt alone. Vulnerable.

"What are you going to do when you get home?" Kevin whispered to Marc. "It'll be soon, I'm telling you."

Kevin asked Marc this every other day, but Marc never tired of hearing it. Looked forward to it even. It calmed him. Kevin's way of getting through the war was to picture its end. Usually, Marc answered with some sort of quiet life scenario. On this night though, after surviving death, it felt like the time to be honest. It felt like the time to finally come clean with his best friend. That there was no plan after the war. That he knew the military wasn't for him, but he had no home to go to. That his mother had kicked him out. She thought her son was disgusting when she learned who he really was, so he escaped to the Navy. The Navy that wouldn't have taken him if they knew who he was, who he loved. And if Kevin knew everything, he might not see his friend the same way.

Marc rubbed his right cheek where a scar lived. A tight cluster of four tiny divots leading to little scratches a centimeter long.

“Oh, you know, go back home and get a job. Maybe work in the same factory my dad did before his heart attack,” Marc said.

There’ll be other chances to speak the truth, he hoped.

“Me, I can’t wait to get back home on the beach. I’ll continue school and become a teacher. But for a couple months, I just wanna stay at home with my mom and paint,” Kevin said then gave Marc a light punch to the side. “You know you’re always welcome to come visit us. If you’re in Virginia.”

Marc turned to look at Kevin and was disappointed in what he couldn’t see. With him covered in oil in the cover of night, Marc couldn’t see Kevin’s open-field green eyes, his tanned face with freckles splotched on his pointed cheeks, or his square jaw with a cleft chin. The only thing he could make out was his thick mustache that resembled a wet otter.

“You two lovebirds mind keeping it down? Some of us need to get some sleep tonight,” a sailor Marc didn’t recognize said.

The two hushed. Kevin put his weight on Marc and relaxed. Without turning, Kevin pictured Marc’s small frame, his deep brown eyes, stubbled round cheeks with a small scar on the right side that resembled four close, tiny cat scratches.

Once Kevin slept, the rise and fall of his breathing resembled a wave crashing and receding. Marc drifted to sleep soon after.

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Three hundred yards away, machinist second class Hart had no life jacket. The men around him didn't either. His fear of drowning made him kick harder and faster than needed. A couple of hours later, his legs locked from cramps and his body stopped from exhaustion. He closed his eyes for a short spell and let his body sink down into the sea for a bit, only for a bit, then he'd return for air. That never happened. Men around him assumed he had drowned.

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When Marc woke, the number of survivors reduced from 900 to 870. Most didn't notice. Those who counted a sailor missing chalked it up to drowning. As the sun surfaced, Marc smiled again. It was freezing in the dark of night, and they needed warmth. Two hours after the sun rose, Marc and the survivors cursed the damn thing. The black, sticky oil on and around them trapped in the heat. No matter where they swam there was heat. Ducking into the water just applied more oil. As the heat grew so did the dehydration.

With the sun at its meridian, Marc desperately needed to drink. His lips chapped by the second and his throat was sand-dry. Just a handful of water to swish around to cool off and quench his thirst would do him good, he thought. Marc cupped a tiny bit of the sea and oil water and brought it to his mouth.

Kevin slapped it away.

“Don’t. You’ll just make yourself sick. We’ll get fresh water when we’re rescued soon, so don’t worry,” Kevin said with a hoarse voice.

“I’d kill for a cold shower and an ice cube to suck on,” Marc said.

“Give me a hot bath,” Dennis said.

The nineteen men around him shook their heads and booed. A great debate started on how one could want a hot bath when they were in a bath of hell water.

“I’ll end with this, I never had hot water growing up. I’ve earned it now,” Dennis said.

“And all I’m sayin’ is you’ll never find ol’ Gene here swimming in the ocean again. This war will be ending any day now. I know that for sure. Then Imma be land-locked for life.”

Marc recognized his rude voice from the night before. The man’s face was as ugly as his voice. Weathered and scarred by heat and steam from years of engineering. His face held jagged yellow teeth that smiled often.

“Yeah, Gene, how do you know that?” Marc asked.

The men hushed, surprised that someone stood up to Gene’s big talk. Kevin was surprised more since Marc never stood up to anyone.

Gene looked around then shrugged, “Ahh fuck it, ain’t no officers around anyhow, and ain’t like they gonna Court-martial me now. Remember that package we delivered a couple of days back?”

Men nodded.

“Well, I thought it was suspicious how it had special guards and all that. So, during cards with my chief, I pressed him. I pressed him and he told me what it was.”

“What was it?” Kevin said.

Marc never heard Kevin so interested. His brows were fixed tight, his body leaned in.

“Alright, I’ll tell ya. They said they were parts for a bomb. Uranium I think he said. For a really big fuckin bomb. And that they’ll be dropping it on the Japs any day now. And once that thing falls, a whole city will be gone. The Japs will have no choice but to surrender.”

“My God, that’ll kill thousands,” Dennis said.

Gene laughed, “Good, better them than me, ay boys?”

Most men nodded, but not Kevin, he was still. Contemplative. Fearful.

“So, you’re saying this was actually a secret mission we were on, Gene,” Kevin said.

“The most top-secret kind,” Gene said.

“The kind of secret mission that wouldn’t give out our location, meaning people wouldn’t know when and where to look for us if something were to happen,” Kevin said.

Marc’s world plummeted as the hope he kept afloat sank. There would be no quick rescue. The only people privy to their stranding were the Japanese that sank their ship. Marc no longer wished to see a ship appear from the horizon. Didn’t want to find out what being a POW to a losing country was like. All he could do was look down into the blinding oil water. The other men did the same. Even Dennis and Kevin, the epitome of looking on the bright side, were blinded by the truth of their situation.

The rest of the day went on in scorching silence for the twenty men. Other rings of floating men seemed in good spirits, laughing and joking in between cursing the boiling heat. Their good training kept them mostly intact. Marc and the other men didn’t spread the word of their impossible rescue. They let the men enjoy their ignorance.

As the light dimmed to dawn, a man a hundred yards away screamed. A long, frightened scream that lasted as long as his dried throat would allow. Marc and the others looked in his direction. All sure the enemy had returned.

“Shark!” the man yelled out.

Marc's heart stopped. He'd never seen a shark in person. Just the wide bone jaw of one hanging on a shop wall. It scared young Marc to the point of paralysis. Not even his mother could get him to move. Little Marc stood frozen as he pictured what could fill out the jaw, what could carry those sharp teeth, and what would it feel like to be eaten by it.

“No way. In this sea? Don't sharks stick to the open ocean?” Kevin said.

The men shrugged. There was a great commotion from the rings of men as they tried to see what the yelling man saw. Men splashed at the water to look past the oil and see past their feet. No one saw anything but the dark ocean that got darker with the emerging night. While most men tried to sleep, cooled from the lack of sun, Marc floated, eyes alert. An hour later he started to sleep, felt a phantom tug at his feet, and jerked awake. His breathing hyperventilated. Eventually, he focused on Kevin's quiet, rhythmic breath. White noise that soothed his anxiety. Marc pictured the low sound waves taking shape, forming fingers, and interlocking them with his own. And drifted off to sleep.

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When Marc awoke to daylight, the number of survivors had dropped down to 800. There was chatter in the air about the dwindling number of men.

“All I’m saying is sharks or no sharks we can’t do nothing but survive anyway. Nothing’s changed,” Dennis said.

“Our odds of survival changed,” Kevin said.

“I’ve been swimming from sharks my whole life, they’re just real this time,” Dennis said. “We’ll get through this, if we give up or let fear win then we won’t.”

“Are we sure they’re really sharks around?” Marc said.

A sailor a hundred yards away unleashed a sharp yell that lasted so long one could hear the bloody scratches form in the man’s dry throat. It penetrated everyone around as they watched him lift up the shredded, bloody life jacket that had once been on the man next to him. Without thinking about it, Marc kicked his feet harder and faster, trying to get out of the water he was stuck in. His breathing turned into a struggling wheeze. Kevin put a hand on his chest.

“Stop!” Kevin yelled.

Marc’s feet froze, but his wheezing increased. He wasn’t used to Kevin distressed.

Kevin took a deep breath before continuing. “I mean, slow down. You’ll tire yourself out and might attract sharks here. I don’t want to die here. I don’t want you to die either. So, focus on your breathing and you’ll be fine.”

Kevin didn't say it, but there was fear behind his eyes. He was holding it together for Marc, but he wouldn't be able to forever. For Kevin's sake, Marc slowed his breathing while counting backward from 100. Concentrating on something else helped.

"I'd like to see some shark bite ol' Gene. I'll punch him right in the nose. You all do the same. Don't die without a fight."

The oil that previously covered the surface of the water thinned and gave way to clear patches. With the sunlight shining again, Marc looked down and for the first time could see his feet and past them into the void of the sea. And it looked back at him. Black as the oil surrounding them, black as the cold night. Two soulless eyes of a tiger shark.

The shark swam away, deeper, camouflaged by the dark water. Marc wanted to scream but froze, wanted to shout his fears but wouldn't speak them. He was resolute in not breaking down on Kevin. He wouldn't make him angry or drown him with his despair.

Kevin saw it too and spoke for him. "Don't panic, everyone. Let's stay afloat and not drop down. They're waiting for us to sink down."

"Use your knives if you've got 'em," Dennis said.

On all the life jackets were small survival knives. There hadn't been a use for them until now. Marc forgot it was even there. He

pulled it from the left shoulder, examined the blade, his hand trembled as hard as his breath, then tried to hand it to Kevin.

Kevin shook his head and spoke just loud enough for Marc to hear, “Don’t be afraid, you’ll use it when the time comes.”

Marc pictured those dark eyes of the shark and how he’d plunge the knife in them if it came near Kevin. Five other guys along with Gene and Dennis examined their knives. Marc was starting to like their odds of twenty men, eight with knives, against one shark.

The sunlight intensified, as did delirium. Men who succumbed to their thirst became delusional from the toxic oil and salt water. Some tripped out and saw mythical creatures, others danced with movie stars, while a few got violent trying to attack sea beasts. One man stabbed at the water trying to cut a leviathan. While he swung and stabbed around with his knife, men had no choice but to isolate him. Screams of fighting his imagination curdled as he was eaten from the toes up. Men tried to rescue him, but when they got close, he slashed. The man hallucinated the whole of his death, which lasted a long twenty minutes thanks to a timid shark afraid of live humans. The man cried out for his wife in the end. Called her name, and finally died of blood loss before his torso was dragged under by sharks more comfortable with dead bodies.

Blood was thoroughly in the water.

Hearing people die became common as 150 more men died before nightfall, dropping the survivors down to 650. The number of sharks swimming around grew to the hundreds. Some attacks were beaten off with stabs and punches by men with the same idea as Gene. Marc counted five new sharks under their circle of twenty men as the sun dipped past the horizon, turning the sky a brilliant scarlet.

“Lady luck is on our side, boys, we got a sailor’s sky tonight,” Kevin said.

The night brought back the chill along with the blanket of darkness. Marc wasn’t sure what was worse, the blistering heat or the bitter cold. Seeing the demons below or not knowing if they were there at all. As long as his knees would allow it, Marc brought his legs up and formed a ball. Every time he stretched his legs down, he was sure that was it, they would get eaten off.

Very few men slept. Throughout the night someone would scream, and every man was on alert. Some were false alarms, others weren’t. Marc waited to hear Kevin’s soft breathing of sleep, but it never came, he stayed up all night. So did Marc.

As a child, Marc loved wind-up toys. The little metal kind found in stockings on Christmas day. By and large, his favorite of them all was the chattering teeth. The first time he saw the suspended teeth outside of a mouth, just walking and chattering away, he lost it with laughter. His mom watched with delight as he wound it up and

giggled as it wobbled around the room. Marc will never again like the sound of chattering teeth after hearing the incessant echoes of shivering teeth clinking together in the night. The loudest teeth being his own, like Rosie's rivet that never stopped. Marc cursed the sun eight hours ago, but he prayed for it to rise again.

Before it did, hungry sharks ate the first sailor in Marc's circle. It happened so fast. A yelp. Gurgle. Silence.

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At some point Marc nodded off, against his will, but was shaken awake by Kevin surrounded by an orchestra of screams.

"They're coming back!" Dennis said.

"Sons of a bitches saw us," Kevin croaked.

"Didn't I tell ya they sounded American?" Gene said.

In the sky were a PV-1 Ventura and a PBY-2 Catalina. Two American planes. Marc wanted to cry from relief, but no tears came, his body preserved what little moisture was left. Kevin nodded at him and squeezed Marc's hand as he did. Marc didn't mind the wrinkly ridges of Kevin's waterlogged fingers. They were firm when they interlocked with his own. Finally.

For a moment, the heat from the sun didn't bother the men. It was temporary. They would be saved soon. They would all be getting their wishes, even the weird request for a hot bath.

Dennis was hooked to Gene and another engineer when a shark swam right up to the surface of the water and chomped with vacant eyes. While men screamed and froze, Gene stabbed the shark with a quick left jab of his knife. The shark dove off, and the men breathed again. Then Dennis's right leg was pulled down with a strong and sudden force that unlinked him from the engineer to his right. Gene held on tight as the circle of men broke to try and keep their friend alive. Marc held his knife, but his legs locked up. He wanted to swim over and fight, but his body wouldn't budge. Fear and exhaustion immobilized him. The sharks nearby rushed to the taste of blood. Minutes later, Dennis was gone.

Two hundred more men died in the next hour in a frenzy. The survivors dropped down to 450.

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The planes returned with backup to drop rafts while two ships were en route. To ensure no man would be trapped under the rafts, the two pilots dropped their payloads three football fields away. It didn't seem far to the pilots.

All of the men that could still swim started for the rafts. Every circle broke up to swim to safety. Marc and Kevin unlocked their hands and swam. Sensing their food leaving, the sharks got bolder still, jumping up and latching onto anyone they could drag down. The distance to the rafts tripled in Marc's head. The muscles in his arms

ached, he could hardly slap at the water. Lack of hydration and sodium caused his legs to cramp. Marc tried to push through the pain for freedom and safety, but asthma stunted his breathing. His chest ached.

Kevin was several feet ahead when he turned back to see Marc stopping and relentless shark fins continuing. He swam back, grabbed Marc's arm, and whipped him to his side.

Kevin could barely talk from dehydration, all he managed was, "Just breathe."

Kevin interlocked his hand with Marc's and swam with one arm, while kicking ferociously. Marc did the same. With his strength renewed, he focused on the yellow rafts, the floating lemon drops of protection. He felt Kevin's firm hand and heard his breathing, his rhythmic inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth. Marc focused on the in and out and matched his breathing the best he could. Soon, he was listening to his own in and out as he felt the continued strength of Kevin's hand. The screams of the people around him and behind him slipped away. The yells from the people in rafts muted. He heard nothing. Felt nothing. There was only forward. Even when it felt like he wasn't moving at all, he still only focused on what was ahead. He didn't hear Gene yelling about a shark right behind Kevin, and Kevin had no voice left to scream. All there was, for Marc, was the raft, and then an extended arm. Gene

was halfway out the raft shouting to Marc, encouraging him to keep going. Marc continued to feel Kevin's hand and knew he was safe.

When Marc finally grabbed Gene's hand and turned around to help Kevin, he saw nothing but sharks. Gene lifted Marc up a second before the sharks could take a bite. Marc felt Kevin's hand. His strength. Marc looked down. In his lap, still intertwined with him, was Kevin's hand that extended down to an arm, to an elbow, and shortly after that it stopped with torn bloody strings of flesh and broken bone. Marc turned to cry out and saw the concealed survival knife, unused. Clean. His face crumpled like a balled-up piece of paper. A man thought he was helping Marc by trying to throw the arm off the raft, but Marc refused to let go. Gene came over and held him up and let him rest on his shoulder. Marc scrunched into a ball.

The men in the raft looked around at everything but the crying sailor and the severed arm. All on the raft knew what it was like to lose a friend. Knew the pain. Gene knew the pain more than others; his brother died in Italy a year earlier. One man in the raft knew the exact pain Marc was in but remained silent.

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Marc knocked and focused on his breathing. Wanted it steady when he saw her. Hoped his throat wouldn't close up. The door opened and there she was, with the same open-field green eyes and



cleft chin. Kevin's mom looked at the man in uniform before her, studied the bag he carried and the sorrow in his eyes.

"Why don't you come in?" Grace said.

While sitting down in a quaint kitchen by the ocean, the two drank tea. It took ten minutes before someone spoke.

"I was close to your son, ma'am," Marc said.

Grace raised a hand to stop him. "I know who you are. Kevin wrote about you often."

A tear dripped down Marc's cheek and he tried to cover it.

Grace patted his left hand, "It's alright, son, no point in hiding your feelings. You'll make yourself sick that way."

She handed him a fresh handkerchief and the two talked. Not about Kevin's death, but about everything lovable about him. Marc opened up and told Grace everything he never told Kevin. His mother's rejection. His scar on his cheek from a diamond ring and backhanded slap. His escape to the military. Even his asthma. The two talked until dusk.

"I should get out of here and find a place to stay. Can you recommend a hotel and cab service?"

"I'll do no such thing. There's a free bedroom upstairs. You'll stay there and we can talk about your future in the morning."

Grace shooed Marc away from the front door and up into a bedroom on the second floor. Marc knew about the spare bedroom

that they sometimes rented out. Heard about its vacancy often. When he turned on the lamp in the room, he saw it wasn't the vacant room, but Kevin's. All around the walls, the shelves, the desk, the bed, were pieces of him. A painting of the beach with his signature. Books by H.G. Wells and Edgar Allen Poe with worn spines folded by an engrossed teenager got lost in. A stack of pristine Action Comics on the desk. A quilt on the bed passed down from mother to child. Kevin was an open book, but there were still chapters left to read.

Nightmares plagued Marc since his rescue a month before. Sometimes he heard the screams of people being eaten, the chattering of freezing teeth, or the heat from the sun. But always, he sensed a shadow behind him, lurking. Biting.

Marc awoke in a sweat. Felt a heavy life jacket around him. An albatross that swooped down every night. It shouldn't have been him that wore the jacket. Kevin would have used the knife. Maybe both would be alive.

The bedroom was still dark. Marc wiped his brow with the bed sheet then got up to open a window and let in the summer breeze. He went to the desk and took a black glove from it. When he laid back down, he interlocked the glove's fingers with his own, heard the rhythm of the waves crashing and receding, and felt Kevin again.//

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dan Heck (he/him) is a writer and Lecturer in Creative Writing at ODU. He graduated from the MFA Creative Writing program at ODU with a concentration in Fiction. His work has been published in *As You Were: Military Review*. Dan won the 2020 Jerri F. Dickeski Fiction Prize and in 2022 he won the Excellence in GTA

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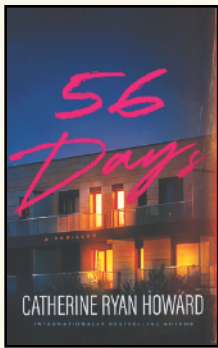
“THE CHIEF FUNCTION OF THE BODY IS TO  
CARRY THE BRAIN AROUND.”

~THOMAS A. EDISON

# Book Review

## 56 Days

Reviewed by Jill Hedgecock



“56 Days” (Blackstone Publishing, paperback, 320 pages, \$10.39) by Catherine Ryan Howard is a suspenseful psychological thriller set in Dublin, Ireland during the early days of the pandemic.

Throughout the novel, Howard does an excellent job of planting questions in reader’s minds. Is main character, Ciara, a naïve romantic? Is debonair Oliver who he presents himself to be, or does the secret he harbors hold the key to his true colors? The narrative jumps between the point of view of these two characters starting on the day they met in a supermarket and moving around in various time sequences. Scenes in current time are also depicted by Detective Leah Riordan as she tries to sort out the identity of a decomposing body in a bathtub.

Thirty-five days after Ciara and Oliver meet and begin dating, Ireland goes into lockdown. Ciara takes a leap of faith and moves in with Oliver. The stakes are high because Ciara may have made a

critical error by not letting her family know her whereabouts. When a journalist warns Ciara to be careful of Oliver, and as readers ponder why Oliver fled London, the tension skyrockets. As clues unfold and Oliver and Ciara's relationship deepens, readers are left wondering what happened on day 56.

I highly recommend picking up this novel, even if you cringe at the thought of being reminded of those days we all spent in lockdown. The tight tension and twisty plot of this page turner will make you forget that you were a part of these dark days of the global pandemic. The story is told in various time periods, so readers who are not fond of this storytelling approach may not appreciate the intricacies of this tale. However, if you love a good who-dun-it that will leave you guessing about the character's motivations, then this is the book for you.

"56 Days" was a #1 bestseller in Ireland, a New York Times Best Thriller of 2021, a Washington Post Best Thriller for 2021, a New York Public Library Best Book of the Year and an Amazon Editors' Pick. It was short-listed for the Edgar Award for Best Novel and is currently being developed for screen by Amazon Studios and Atomic Monster.

Catherine Ryan Howard is an internationally bestselling author of seven crime novels. Her debut novel "Distress Signals" won, or was shortlisted, for many prestigious awards, such as the WA John

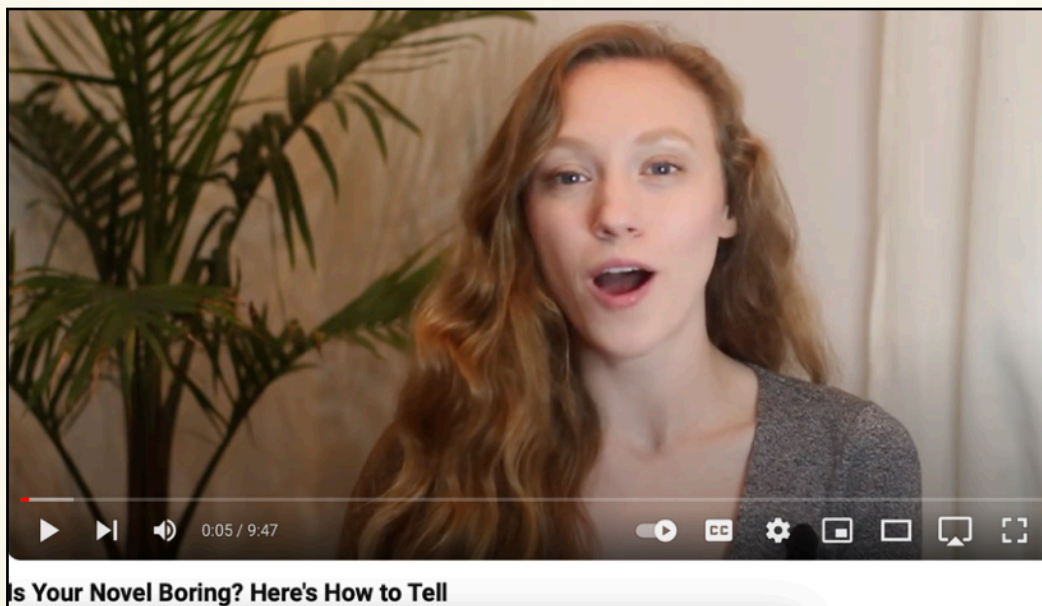
Creasey New Blood Dagger, and the Independent Press Awards Best Mystery of 2017. Her fourth novel, “The Nothing Man” was a #1 Irish Times bestseller and a #1 Kindle bestseller in the UK and was shortlisted for Irish Crime Novel of the Year. She has also authored two light-hearted travel novels detailing her experiences working in Europe and the United States. She lives in Cork, Ireland. Find out more on [www.catherineryanhoward.com](http://www.catherineryanhoward.com).

### ABOUT JILL HEDGECOCK



Jill Hedgecock is a local author of several novels featuring animals. Her newest release “In Shadow’s Reflection” is the third novel in her Doberman series. [www.JillHedgecock.com](http://www.JillHedgecock.com)

You can find her books on Amazon [HERE](#).



Click to watch: <https://youtu.be/yTUwQgwtmNA?si=mFVmZC-BhB557OMv>

[HOME](#) 

# Advance Directive

A poem by William Ogden Haynes

*Clarence always liked this grassy hillside. The boy used to ride him up here often. There is*

*plenty of grass to eat and the gradual downslope made it an easy trip back to the barn for a twenty-*

*year-old horse with cancer. There is water up here as well. The serene surface of the brimming pond*

*mirrors the green of the trees and the crayola clouds that sketch the sky. The air is orange with butterflies,*

*bees buzz with the subtlety of a vibrating harpstring, and dandelion puffs float randomly at the whim of a*

*gentle breeze. The boy sits on a red blanket on the hillside, because he can't bear to see what is going*

*to happen this morning. A distant gunshot shatters the sunny day. Then, from far away, he watches a tractor*

*slowly make its way from the barn, up the dust-whipped road, toward the south pasture. A brown*

*horse is in the bucket, legs dangling over the sides. From his vantage point, the boy can even see the hole*

*they dug yesterday with a backhoe, ten-feet long, five-feet*

*wide and five-feet deep. That will be his final resting*

*place. He tried to tell them that Clarence would have liked  
this grassy hillside, but no one would listen to a boy.//*

## ABOUT THE POET



William Ogden Haynes is a poet and author of short fiction from Alabama who was born in Michigan. He has published several collections of poetry and many of his poems and short stories have appeared in literary journals and anthologies. <http://www.williamogdenhaynes.com>



Click to watch <https://youtu.be/ZsfMk7KKil4?si=Z6FRjR2MjqsusfME>



# What Can You See?

*A short story by Marlene Dotterer*

“What can you see from where you’re sitting, Mommy?” This is how their game starts.

“I see clouds and ocean. I see the horizon and black space.”

“Is it nighttime?”

“No, it’s day. The clouds are very bright, and the bits of ocean are blue, like a robin’s egg.”

“That’s sounds pretty.”

“It is pretty. What can you see from where you’re sitting?”

“I see Kit-Kat on the desk by the window. She sees clouds, too. And blue sky in between. Hey, it’s like what you see!”

“How about that? We’re sort of looking at the same thing!”

“Except you’re looking from above and I’m looking from below!”

“That’s right!”

“Are you right above me, Mommy?” Her little voice was suddenly breathless. Longing.

Mommy hesitates. Truth or lie?

“Nav says we’ll be over you in a couple of hours.”

“But I’ll be asleep.”

“I will blow you a kiss. Kisses blown from space travel very fast. You’ll feel it on your cheek and smile in your sleep.”

“Okay. Can you blow me a kiss now?”

“Yes, but since I’m not right over you, it will take a few seconds longer. Let me plot its course...  $h = \text{this}$ , cosine of..., okay, ready? I’ll count down.”

A giggle. “Home Base is go!”

“Okay, here it comes. Mmmmmm, pwaw!” (Said with the best smooching sound Mommy could manage). “It’s off! 5.. 4.. 3.. 2.. 1..,”

“I got it! That was a BIG kiss!”

“It’s as big as how much I miss you. Tonight, I’ll blow you a gentle kiss, so you can dream I am with you.”

“I’ll dream that I am with YOU.”

“That would be perfect. I love you, sweet girl.”

“I love you, Mommy.”

“This is the ISS, signing off.”

“This is Home Base, signing off. Over and out.”//

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Read more at <https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/funny-quotes>

Marlene Dotterer has an itchy soul. This means she’s always starting a new project, often before

the previous project is finished. There is just so much to do and not enough time to do it all.

She went from bookkeeping to geology, nuclear waste, personal cheffing, teaching natural childbirth, web maintenance, and community volunteer. Oh, and writer. She's written four novels in three genres, is working on five more novels, and has begun to dabble in short fiction.

Marlene is a member of the California Writers' Club and an active volunteer with the Mt. Diablo branch. Her website/blog is at <https://marlenedotterer.wordpress.com/>.

California Writers' Club Ekphrastic session with Robin Gabbert



Click to watch [https://youtu.be/fSPSaHhyQ-c?si=CvNEDgs7sQkNZh\\_s](https://youtu.be/fSPSaHhyQ-c?si=CvNEDgs7sQkNZh_s)

# A Life Lesson from Jimi

A short story by Fiona Sinclair

Tom first heard about it crouching over an illicit transistor built by an enterprising boy in tech class. It was breaktime, he and his mates were tucked behind the outer wall of the gym; their ‘secret’ hiding place teachers turned a blind eye to.

Each band Radio Caroline announced was met with a choric wail by the boys, because most knew attending the festival was a fantasy.

Except for Tom. ‘I could go’ he thought to himself, tallying in his mind his not inconsiderable savings account, product of multiple money-making schemes including digging up lug worms, 3 paper rounds and washing cars. Keeping the idea to himself, in history the Plantagenets were cold shouldered as he planned not an essay but an expedition. A train to Victoria then one down to Southampton. Radio Caroline had helpfully informed that tickets could be bought on the gate.

Tom was not a reckless boy. He had a healthy balance of curiosity and caution. However, his previous ventures had been small scale and pecuniary. This was more ambitious but, satisfying himself of

the slim chances of jeopardy, for the first time, but not the last, Tom shook hands with opportunity.

His cover story for mum was a last minute ‘I’m staying at Mark’s, Friday to Monday. We’re camping in his garden.’ “Alright dear, have fun” she had called from the kitchen. Content that her son was more worldly wise than other boys his age, sharing the raising of younger siblings whilst she worked in London and Dad skippered the pub. ‘Only a white lie’ he thought to himself. I’ll tell her everything when I get back.

Tom had deftly deployed his knowledge of geometry to make the best use of his backpack. Tent, sleeping bag, Calor gas stove, were stashed or attached. Food Caroline claimed, would be abundant at the site. Nevertheless, he lifted a small frying pan from a cupboard, bought bacon, sausages and chocolate. Heaving on the bulging rucksack he resembled a miniature soldier on manoeuvres.

The trains were positively in cahoots with the boy, delivering him to Southampton without a problem. But at the ferry port, an adamant sign “No unaccompanied minors”. Bugger, he thought. Tom knew that he was handicapped by looking young for his age. Slight of stature, and skinny, his thick dark hair was worn long in an effort to obscure his boyish features. Nevertheless, he had never even managed to blag his way into an X rated film.

Letting his backpack slide to the ground, he leaned against some railings to ponder the problem. 'I need to adopt a family' he decided, and began scanning the groups queuing for tickets like a small time conman looking for a mark. One family with a brood of kids caught his eye, particularly a boy of his own age wearing an England cricket shirt.

At school, Tom was gifted at cricket but awful at art. Each lesson, his art master gave him a free pass out of the rear door of the studio to join an informal cricket practice. Consequently, the boy knew that fellow cricketers could chew on the subject for hours.

"What do you reckon about our chances in the Ashes?" he enquired of the boy who surrounded by younger siblings noisy as starlings, was grateful for the distraction. The parents abstracted by luggage, demands for crisps, and finding cash, did not notice this supernumerary addition to their family.

When his turn came, with a knot in his stomach large as a cricket ball, he informed the girl in the ticket booth "I'm with them" gesturing with his head. The girl was clearly suffering the effects of a heavy night out. She slid the ticket to him with a yawn. Result, he inwardly cheered.

Hordes of festival goers overwhelmed the ferry. Accustomed to 'nice' families off on camping holidays, the staff shook their heads at the girls with flowers in their locks and young men apostle like, with

their long hair and long beards that had some older passengers murmuring about ‘national service.’ But this exotic crowd was blind to disapproval as they chatted and laughed in a lexis foreign to their observers ‘Hey man, dude, right on ’ bounded about the ship as they leant against the railings in pimped jeans and cheesecloth. Tom fizzed inside like a shaken cola. These were properly ‘cool ‘and made the efforts of his 6th formers to join the counterculture seem ridiculous.

At Fishbourne he ditched his new chum with a cheery “Have a good holiday”, leaving the boy open mouthed as he struck off in the direction of the festival.

Ramshackle signs, daubed in white paint, posted the way to the site. Tom hitched up his backpack and joined the cavalcade making for the entrance. Many were on foot also bearing knapsacks or hastily rolled sleeping bags like messy roulades ‘Hope it doesn’t rain’ he chuckled to himself. Others, more fortunate, had borrowed dad’s Bedford van and, of course, the posh kids swanked in their jaunty VWs. But it was the motor bikes he ogled as they growled up the corridor created for them by wary pedestrians. Their sound stirring him like a wild drum groove.

The same tightening in his stomach as he approached the entrance. But the chaotic organisation went in his favour. A group of students were red faced and frowning as they tried to calculate

change in their minds or on their fingers. Hands were rubber stamped without glancing up at their owners. Tom was processed like the others and, high on relief, he jubilantly strolled into the site.

‘Let’s get settled first’ he decided, grinning to himself. ‘I sound like mum’. The pitch he selected was not too close to the toilets but not too far from the stage. His tent was erected ably. The backpack stashed within. Around him grown men struggled with the puzzle of ropes, poles and canvas. Some tents immediately swooned; others leant tipsily. Laughter accompanied their slapstick antics, peppered by the occasional ‘Bastard thing’ ‘Blood hell’.

Tom tried not to appear smug but envious looks were thrown at the boy and his more biddable tent. ‘How did you do that so fast kid?’

‘Scouts’ he explained, grateful now that his mum had cajoled him to join. He began to lend a hand ‘Put the poles here, hammer the pegs there’ his experience passed from pitch to pitch like the wisdom of a tent guru.

Tom had always been self-sufficient. He often sought solitary pursuits such as fishing. If other kids pitched up, he could easily strike up a casual acquaintance. Being good at sport guaranteed he was a popular boy. He did not know it then but this ability to be alone without feeling lonely was a gift. In contrast, his classmates



always went everywhere accompanied by siblings or mates so that compromise often led to inaction. Answerable to no-one, Tom's horizons would always be far less inhibited.

Nevertheless, the group of 4 in the adjacent tent were marking his solo status with nudges and whispers. 'You on your own?' one young man, barely 20 himself, inquired incredulously.

'Yep', he nodded.

A girl parted her curtain of blonde hair to stare at him with green eyes that, despite her youth, showed nascent maternal concern. 'Any trouble and you tell us'.

Thrust into the adult world early, what with his micro businesses and helping dad in the pub, by his teens he had learned to read faces like a palmist read palms. His neighbours seemed genuine. Suspecting that, in fact, he had more life experience at 14 than these students on their first holiday without parents. Names were exchanged and the boys immediately cadged a can opener.

'Look after my tent whilst I go for a wander?'

'Will do'they answered, as the youths set about opening a can of Watney's party seven.

Treading warily over sneaky guy ropes that tried to ambush, he weaved around groups strumming guitars, lads spread out on the ground like rugs with beers cooling in buckets of water. He caught the rank smell of weed. Billy Johnson had once pinched a spliff from

a snoring brother's pocket, presented it to the kabala behind the gym. His mate Brian had been sick, and he had been immune to its active properties.

Clear of the campsite, he examined the stalls selling crystals, flimsy dream catchers and joss sticks that competed with the weed for stench, all of which he dismissed as 'Hippie tat'.

But the aromas from the hot dog and burger vendors did beckon to him. Tom had not eaten for hours. Often, when he was absorbed, he simply forgot to eat until his body suddenly screamed out for fuel. Now he bought a ridiculously large hot dog.

The festival's stage was a no-frills affair. Organisers were clearly gambling on good weather since there was little cover for the acts. Marshall amps clustered like heavies guarding the mics and jumble of cables. Arc lights made the best of their situation.

With his usual uncanny timing, Tom was at the front when the event came to life. The first acts attracted only a threadbare audience. Scribblers of one hit wonders which, like a perfect ace in tennis, would never be repeated. Nevertheless, good musicians who had learned their craft the honest way, scurrying up motorways in Transit vans from venue to venue. Meeting other groups in cafes with bleary eyes and a grunted greeting. Now they belted out their numbers, hardly able to believe their luck at being on the same bill

as Bolan and Dylan. Their sounds bounced around the festival fields between loudspeakers attached to trees like giant bird boxes.

The following morning, his neighbours traded eggs for bacon. One of those spontaneous friendships sprung up between them, a camaraderie born of a common interest. Conversation played easily, especially between the boys, music and sport, mostly.

Beside their tent, a Norton motorbike dozed like a cat in the sun. Tom's dream bike. The objective behind all his money-making schemes. Two years time he would start on a lighter bike until his body caught up with his ambition. The motorcycle's owner, a leather jacketed lad called Pete, had observed the way the boy's looks were magnetically drawn to it.

“Like the Norton?”

“Love it” the boy replied in a tone of pure yearning. “One day... “.

As the conversation side tracked to motorcycles, roll ups were handed around. Pete hesitated at the boy “Want one?”. The girls gasped. But Tom's smirk suggested a seasoned smoker. Another extracurricular activity behind the gym. His mates frequently pooling their pocket money and sending in the biggest lad to buy from local newsagents.

Over the following 2 days a dizzying zoetrope of bands passed before his eyes. But the musician most lads had come to see would close the show. Tom and his new mates had dug in and defended

their position at the front for hours. Hendrix kept them waiting but there was no hard feeling amongst the crowd, who seemed to accept that genius works to its own timetable.

The guitarist strolled on around midnight. A mumbled 'Hi' and a lopsided grin greeted the audience. Tom got the sense he never hurried anywhere. 'Please be brilliant' he repeated to himself like a mantra.

A signature riff shrieked like a harpy around the site. Followers roared, the unwitting were open mouthed. Tears in Tom's eyes as, with heart rate ramped up by the music, he watched the long, elegant fingers rip up and down the guitar's neck.

A familiar melody was the springboard for extravagant freestyling, hints of the song reappearing to reassure that the musician had not abandoned it entirely, dissolving again into more improvisation. Dissonance that somehow made sense. More than virtuoso, there was something preternatural about this playing. Every now and then lyrics were added to the mix. Counterculture words that were parables for the times yet somehow secondary to the music, that was where the real revolution was taking place. Pure showmanship at times plucking with his teeth, complicit with the crowd pleasing in what mums would universally have called 'Showing off'. Occasionally, a look no hands trick as the guitar, worked to a frenzy, seemed to play itself. But, at other moments, Tom noticed the musician

achieved a kind of ecstasy in his playing, a sublimation of sound, as if he played only for himself, and the audience ceased to be present. The last chord came too soon. He bowed like a troubadour, left the stage with an air of finality.

The lads turned and aimed for their tents. Shuffling as the crowd slowly decanted. A little dazed by the dazzling spectacle just witnessed, they were reduced to a few words.

‘Genius’

‘The best’

‘Going to stop trying to play.’

Almost at their camp Tom sighed ‘Oh bugger, I’ve left my jacket ‘. He made his way back to the flotsam of cans, bottles, bags and t-shirts strewn across the grass. Searched the ground with his torch, turning over items with his foot. Not a hope.

“Lost something kid?”

The soft voice issued from the side of the stage. In the dusk left by the subdued super troupers he made out the outline of a figure perched on a small Marshall amp, smoking. Peering at the gold braid on the loosened hussar jacket, Tom recognised the gentle drawl at odds with the raucous voice of the musician’s playing. He suddenly felt very young indeed. “ “My jacket” he managed to mumble.

“Bummer” came the reply.

Previously, Tom would never have considered himself as starstruck but now, all coherent thoughts seemed to have evacuated his brain. Not sure if the exchange was over, he hazarded a “Great set”, hoping he did not sound too sycophantic. But the musician received the compliment with grace. “Thank you, good to hear”, and with that he gestured to another amp that might serve as a perch for the boy. Taking the seat Tom barely breathed.

“Was it a good jacket?” the musician inquired?

“Not as good as yours” the boy replied.

The man grinned. “Got it in the King’s Road” he patted the front frogging. Tom’s curiosity began to override his initial shyness now. Enough for him to inquire why the musician was sitting there alone. The man exhaled a column of smoke but wafted it away from the boy in a courteous fashion. “Gets a bit intense up there. Always need some space afterwards”.

The man certainly looked spent, compared to the vital force of some 30 minutes ago. Crumpled on the makeshift stool, his face was drained of expression. Under cover of the half-light, Tom studied the musician. He seemed younger than his stage persona, humanised somehow by the scattering of acne across his face. His hair was a charcoal smudge. It appeared to Tom that he was, at the same time, just another young man, yet there was also an uncanny air of difference about him.

“You a musician?” the man inquired. Assuming every boy now attempted to strum a guitar with the ambition of becoming a rockstar. However, Tom shook his head adamantly “No”. A pause then “I prefer sport”.

The guitarist’s turn to stare with curiosity at the boy. It was clearly a long while since someone had spoken so honestly to him. “What kind of sports?”

“Cricket mostly” the boy responded. The man looked bewildered. “What’s cricket?” Tom laughed and was at a loss to explain this game that seemed unintelligible to many in his own country.

“It’s a bit like baseball” was the nearest analogy he could come up with.

“Never cared for sports” the musician chuckled. “Too lazy”. They both laughed.

“Here with your folks?” the man inquired. The boy shook his head. “On my own”.

A conspiratorial look crept into the man’s eyes. “A maverick eh?”

Tom went a little red at what was obviously meant as praise. Fortunately, the half-light concealed. The musician appeared to relish the temporary distraction, a chance to turn away from the crucible of his own life.

“What are your dreams for the future kid?”

Tom found himself explaining the dilemma of being the first child in his working-class family to win a place at grammar school. How his mum was ambitious for him, expecting university and a white-collar profession.

The man lit another cigarette from the embers of the previous one, and considered as he did so, “My ma was fierce, specially when I dropped out of school, but” he nodded to the guitar propped up against a makeshift stand. “My mistress over there had other ideas”, he chuckled at the memory “and my ma sort of gets it now“. The young man was clearly thinking back to that time, recalling his own predicament. “It’s tricky though” he admitted. “You don’t want to hurt your folks but on the other hand... “ he paused.

“You don’t want to end up working in a bank” Tom concluded with an emphatic smack of his lips. The pair burst out laughing, sharing the same sentiments concerning a life cooped up in an office.

Suddenly looking at the boy squarely, “But what do you want?”. No one had really asked Tom this but, without missing a beat, he replied “I want to stick a pin in the map of the world and go visit”.

“Like an explorer, eh? Well, strikes me you’ve made the first step”.

The man’s tone was wistful as if he envied the boy’s freedom. The blank sheet of his future. Of course, Tom had read about the tangle of the man’s existence. How, although only in his mid-20s, his



life was already stuffed with experience, good and bad. His genius creating chaos rather than contentment. The guitar had become a demanding mistress who seemed to have the upper hand.

The musician sighed and shook his head “No point in me giving advice” he said, “but right now, your life’s your own, you’re not obligated to anyone”. Tom had never thought of it in those terms. “No point in ordinary” the man added. “I don’t think it would suit you anymore than it’s suited me”.

His cigarette was extinguished, and he ground the butt under his boot heel. This seemed to act as a timer for the man. He rose, picked up his lighter. “That’s my cue” he said “back to reality, and that’s a whole different discussion” he grinned.

The boy rose too and spontaneously extended his hand. They shook. The musician smiled at the formality. He took a few steps, then turned and looked over his shoulder.

“You have a good life you hear?”

“And you too Jimi”. It was the first time he had dared to use the man’s name.

The last Tom heard was a chuckle and “I’m trying to kid” as he disappeared into the darkness beyond the lights.

Tom did not career back to his tent, words spilling from his mouth. Instead, he said nothing of the encounter. “Find your jacket?” Sally asked. He shook his head. “Bad luck “she tutted. This

was the only time he could have shared his story without it being received as a tall tale. He was never sure why he kept quiet. A sense of betrayal, perhaps, blabbing about this man in an off-duty moment, who had given this boy his time. He knew, too, it would take on a life of its own being passed around the site, becoming grubbier with each gossipy retelling. When he returned to school, he knew his mates would listen with sceptical ‘Yea right ‘. And as the years went by, the occurrence began to seem more like a vision than a fact. //

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fiona Sinclair has had several collections of poetry published by small presses. This is her first foray into prose.

“YIELD TO TEMPTATION. IT MAY NOT PASS  
YOUR WAY AGAIN.” ~ ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

# The Breakup

*A short story by Michael Barrington*

**T**he tears came easily. It had been a horrible day. Tag Bridges had pulled her truck into the driveway of a small, red-roofed cottage on the edge of the village and parked in front of a double-wide garage. It was actually the last house or the first, depending on whether a person was entering or leaving Hawkshaw, a hamlet of just nine hundred people, six miles from the center of Manchester, and one of the most beautiful villages in the north of England. It sat back from the main road on almost a half-acre, surrounded by a low privet fence in front and a typical English hawthorn hedge marking the rest of the perimeter. Since it was May, the rose bushes and flowering shrubs which filled the front yard, all the handiwork of her partner, Lucy Holmstrom, were in full bloom. It was pretty, a place she treasured, a property which they had scraped and scrounged every penny to buy, renovate, and make comfortable. It was home.

She wondered how she had managed to get any work done. She'd hardly slept at all the previous night, dozed maybe for a while, but cried for hours. She'd been barely able to function at work. Yet she'd needed to have all of her wits about her, to be at the top of

her game. These last stages of the government sponsored project were extremely detailed, complex, and needed her full attention. It was a relief to have the day behind her.

The project was located not far from their cottage, at the foot of the famous Pendle Hill near the sleepy town of Darwen with its beautiful Gothic minster. Still an untamed place, it was full of mystery and infamous as the home of the Pendle Witches who were tried and executed for witchcraft in 1612. In sharp contrast, the minster had been serving worshipers for over eight hundred years. It was only a twenty-minute drive to work, and so often throughout the day, she had considered just going home, climbing into bed, curling up into a ball, and shutting out the world.

Sitting there, almost afraid to go in, the entire experience of the previous evening replayed itself in slow motion, each painful detail causing more sobs and regrets.

They'd been together nine years, ever since their second year in college. There had been arguments, disagreements and threatened separations, but nothing like last night. That was different. And she was the one who had started it all. It was ironic that they'd landed the biggest and most significant contract of their careers as electrical installation specialists just a few months earlier. The project had made the headlines in the Manchester Evening News, the most important daily newspaper in the area. It even drew a small

article in the business section of the London Times. Both BBC and ITV had interviewed them, describing the couple as “outstanding and creative women entrepreneurs, deserving of such a project.” They had struggled for such recognition. To be responsible for all electrical systems in a unique, huge, and important agricultural development, an international research project sponsored by the British government, was something they couldn’t even have dreamed of five years ago.

The Limousin Project, the brainchild of a local veterinarian, Dr. Connor Mason, involved the importing for the first time a variety of pigs called Black Bottoms, from the department of Auvergne in France, and crossing them with English Landrace. Its goal was to produce leaner meat and the best pork in the country, if not in Europe. The government was intent on penetrating the agricultural markets of the European Common Market, dominated by France and Germany. The Lancashire College of Agriculture, a most prestigious and internationally acclaimed research center, supported the project.

The eleven-month bidding process, included several interviews, a presentation with a carefully prepared project development plan, and an illustrated marketing manual. It had cost them countless late-night hours and most of their weekends. Saturn Electronics, a small but well-established woman owned business, despite stiff competition, was finally awarded the contract. Besides the actual

installation of all electrical systems and futuristic-looking machinery, it included a provision for five years of maintenance. Advertised as the most avant-garde and technologically advanced center of its kind anywhere in the world, it was designed as an indoor project, but with sealed windows. Natural light and animal health were an integral part of the research. Besides a necessary temperature-controlled environment, a very advanced IBM computer program managed a central flow energy-efficient ventilation system, the number of artificial light hours, feeding schedules, slurry removal, automatic cough monitors, and weighing systems. There were three large buildings, one for each stage of development and research—gestating sows, piglets, and finishers and those being prepared for distribution. When at capacity, several hundred animals would be present on any given day. And Saturn Electronics was responsible for the smooth operation of all systems.

Tag had already installed and tested part of a double redundancy system; major failure in any one segment could have catastrophic results. With wiring almost completed, she had not been herself and felt distracted all day as she tested various sections and controls in between bouts of crying. This was the installation phase of the last building, and since it would not be used for almost a year, everything needed to be checked out. When the time came, it had to function perfectly and seamlessly with the rest of the system.

But now this. Had she ruined everything?

It had been love at first sight. They were the same age, studying for the same engineering degree at Manchester University. But in so many ways, they were radically different, a mixture of opposites.

Lucy Holmstrom was Swedish. Her parents owned and managed a vehicle electrical and engine repair shop on the outskirts of Malmo. Her mother was an elementary school teacher and her father a mechanic. Ever since an early age, he'd encouraged her fascination with his work. An only child, and a gifted student, both parents spoiled her. Tall for her age and quite pretty, she maintained an aloofness at school, and other than with one girl while they briefly played together on the basketball team, she never developed any special friendships. Having learned to drive a motorcycle at age twelve and a car at fourteen, she was happiest either riding alone or helping her father repair an engine. Her decision to go to college in Manchester, England, was based purely on the fact it had the reputation of offering the best electrical engineering degree in Europe. She was clear this was what she wanted to do for the rest of her life, although, unlike her father, she knew she didn't want to get her hands dirty. She intended to design and develop electrical systems and machinery. And like all Swedes, she was completely bilingual, having learned English from kindergarten.

College was a revelation for her. Sharing a dorm with twelve other girls from five different countries made her realize what a sheltered and privileged life she'd enjoyed in Sweden. It seemed that she was the only one with wealthy parents and, at times, felt embarrassed hearing them openly discuss their financial struggles. Things came to an unexpected head one day as she was in the dining hall having lunch with another dorm mate, Tag Bridges. They'd only spoken to each other briefly, but Lucy knew they were studying for the same degree, having seen her in various classes. It was purely by chance they were sitting at the same table. While making small talk, Lucy began to vigorously shake a tomato ketchup bottle when the top flew off, and the contents shot out and over Tag's dress. Lucy burst out laughing and apologized. Tag broke down in tears. "This is a new dress," she cried. "You've ruined it, and I simply can't afford another." It was the beginning of a very special friendship.

Tag Bridges came from a family of nine children. Although baptized Agatha, as far back as she could remember, she'd always been called Tag. Her family lived in Marton, close to the famous Blackpool tower. Her father worked for the British Aircraft Corporation in Salmesbury, as an engineer, together with three of her brothers. Talk about aircraft, electrical components, and how computers were improving each year dominated conversation at mealtimes. With four older sisters, everything she wore was a hand-



me-down, and although her father earned good money, it barely met the needs of a large and fast-growing family. As the youngest child, she spent most of her spare time with her twin brother. They were inseparable. A bright young man with gifted hands, he invited Tag to work with him as they built small and simple electronic games for himself and his friends in their garden shed. Extremely intelligent, there was no doubt she would be accepted into a college. The challenge for her was that she already knew what career she wanted to follow and was aiming for the stars by the time she was ready to graduate from high school. Her dream was to attend the most prestigious engineering college in the country, and it was in Manchester, almost forty miles away. And she was aware that only a select group of highly gifted students were accepted each year. Fascinated with electronics, she hoped one day to earn a degree in technology and eventually open some kind of business.

Sometimes, luck, a stranger, or simply someone who cares can create an unforeseen opportunity that can change a life. Tag was busy in her final year applying for entry into Blackpool Technical College, not the school she wanted, but knowing her parents had limited financial resources, there was no point in looking elsewhere. Wherever she was accepted, she would have to live at home and attend as a day student. Behind the scenes, her technology teacher, Mr. Edwards, knowing her home situation and recognizing he was

teaching an extraordinary and gifted student, was looking out for her. It was after class one day when he asked her to stay behind, that it happened.

“Tag,” he began, as he half stood, half sat on the edge of his desk looking straight at her. “I think you should apply to Manchester University. I know you really want to go there.”

“But....” She tried to cut him off, knowing it was pointless to say anything further. She had been over this a thousand times in her own mind and already reconciled herself to attending Blackpool Tech. He held up his hand as if to silence her.

“I know your home situation,” he continued, “so don’t be embarrassed. I’ve just received notification they’re offering two places to our school. They’re full scholarships, and I want you to apply. One requirement is that students write a special paper demonstrating their knowledge of the personal computer which is now entering the market and the ability to assemble electrical components. The final element is a practical demonstration in Manchester in front of a panel of judges.”

Tag gasped in disbelief. It sounded too much like a dream but was afraid to ask Mr. Edwards to repeat himself. Her head was spinning. If what she had heard was correct, she was confident about theory and the physical part didn't intimidate her. She and her brother had

been building electrical gadgets in their backyard for years. There was just no way she would let this golden ticket get away from her.

“I really don’t know what to say, sir,” she said nervously, her excited mind running at a mile a minute. “Thank you for helping me. I’ll not let you down.” She couldn’t wait to share the news with her parents.

But all that had seemed like eons ago and so much had happened since. As she sat reminiscing, memories flooded in. Yes, there was the incident in the dining hall with Lucy which had led her down a quite unusual but exciting path— it had started everything. That evening, a new dress had appeared on her bed with a note from Lucy inviting her out to dinner. She was shocked at the generosity and gesture from somebody she didn't know and was a little unsure of what to expect. She decided to break the ice when they met by saying, "I’m happy to have dinner with you, Lucy, provided you don’t use the ketchup again.” It was a wonderful evening. Lucy shared that secretly she had wanted to be friends with Tag from the first moment she had seen her, felt attracted to her, and really wanted to be her friend.

Always a shy person and somewhat reserved, Tag was very much a loner at school and at home preferred to spend time with her twin brother. Her first days in college had felt strange, although living in a dorm with other girls was easier than she’d imagined. Determined to

succeed academically, and not having much money for socializing, she focused on her studies, where she was already receiving excellent grades and encouraging comments from her teachers. Lucy's openness and frankness surprised and shocked her, but also made her feel special. It opened a door within her which she didn't know existed and began slowly to respond.

They started seeing each other every day until Lucy sensed she had stronger feelings for Tag than those felt as just friends. It happened naturally and simply while they were walking back from a session in the laboratory. They were holding hands. The quad as the main square was called, was practically devoid of students and Lucy stopped, turned towards her and said,

“Tag, I don't think you'll be surprised. I want you to know I love you.”

Quite spontaneously, Tag responded.

“And I love you too, Lucy. I've wanted to talk about us for some time. I'm nineteen years old and you're twenty, yet neither of us has any attraction for boys, and that seems a bit weird since our classmates seem to talk of nothing else.”

“Then I guess we're just a couple of lesbian weirdos,” laughed Lucy, sliding her arm through Tag's, and drawing her close.

They spent vacations together, including two trips to Sweden, where Lucy's parents being liberally minded, welcomed Tag with

open arms. Even though Lucy had tried to prepare her, she was shocked yet delighted and a little embarrassed when, unashamedly, she announced in front of her mother they would be sharing the same bed, even though there was an extra visitor's room. It was difficult for Tag to explain that her family would be less understanding and when they visited it would have to be simply as good friends. Her parents were regular churchgoers and had raised the family in a strict Methodist tradition.

In their final year, they found an apartment, paid for mainly by Lucy's parents, and moved in together. After graduation they were fortunate to find work close by. Their common goal was to gain experience as engineers and save enough money so they could start their own business within five years.

In the period after World War II, Manchester, England was one of the foremost centers of computing expertise in the country. In 1948 Tom Kilburn and Freddie Williams designed, "Baby" or the Small-Scale Experimental Machine. The following year, they built the world's first stored program computer, the Manchester Mark I. It eventually led to the development of Ferranti mark 1, the first commercially available general-purpose computer. The famous code-breaking expert, Alan Turing, who was appointed Deputy Director of the Computing Machine Laboratory in 1949, wrote the software for it.

Ever since the role it played in World War II, the electronics industry was experiencing a huge growth in and around Manchester. Since the explosion of advanced technologies in use for everyday life, the city had become the UK's second largest tech. hub. And one of Europe's most exciting technology ecosystems. Tag and Lucy wanted to be part of it. However, they couldn't meet their goal of starting a business within five years. It took eight before Saturn Electronics was born. Tag was almost thirty years old and Lucy thirty-one.

They were both drawn to the open countryside, causing them to leave the city and rent a small cottage in the village of Hawksham. When the owners later wanted to sell, the couple was eager to buy it since it seemed the next logical step in their relationship. It was below market price, but needed a great deal of work. The problem was cash. Their new business was taking all of what they had, and they couldn't see their way to scraping enough together for the down payment. Frustrated, and at the point of giving up on their dream home, Lucy, always fiercely independent, decided reluctantly to approach her parents. Unsurprisingly, they willingly supported the venture. By this time in the relationship, Tag had become another daughter.

Although slow at first, word spread that the two ladies were becoming experts in electrical design and installation and the

business started to grow. The division of labor had fallen naturally between them. There was hardly any discussion, and certainly no arguments or disagreements. Lucy managed all the administration, sales, and marketing, Tag the system's design and operations. And things had been going so well. They were making some money, had managed to purchase the cottage, were gradually turning it into a comfortable home, and were happy with each other.

Their only serious argument had occurred just over a year ago. After nine years of being together and believing their relationship was permanent, Tag felt it was safe to broach a special topic.

"Lucy," she began, "I have been thinking about something for a long while and wonder how you might feel about it."

They had almost finished dinner, and she had already decided she would wait until Lucy sat back and lit her habitual cigarette

"Well, for goodness's sake, share it," she answered somewhat irritably, taking a lighter from her purse. Her normally soft blue eyes caught in the flame as it suddenly ignited, looked somewhat harsh and tired. Her day had not gone according to plan, and she was frustrated in dealing with some government regulators.

"Maybe this is not the time," she said, immediately sensing Lucy's negative mood. "Perhaps I should keep it for another day."

"No, don't be silly. I'm just a little cranky. I'm sorry. It's just me not handling myself very well. I hate having to deal with paper

shufflers,” she added sarcastically, “who know nothing about actual construction.”

Tag hesitated. Setting her dirty plate aside she began drawing imaginary designs on the tablecloth with her finger, still not sure it was safe to bring up the topic.

“You know I come from a large family and am used to living in a house filled with laughter, noise, and lots of affection,” she began, “and so have been wondering if we might want to consider adopting a child at some time in the future.”

There was a long uncomfortable pause before Lucy replied. She took a strong pull of her cigarette. Her face changed to a scowl as her irritation quickly turned to anger that erupted like a smoking volcano.

“You must be shitting me,” she shouted, her voice rising an octave. “Is this what’s been on your mind? Is this what you have been brooding on like an impotent hen for the past God knows how long? To say I’m pissed is an understatement.”

After stomping out of the dining room, Lucy had withdrawn into herself and didn’t speak for almost two days. Never having had brothers or sisters, she felt completely blindsided by Tag’s suggestion, and interpreted it as Tag not being satisfied with her. Why else would she need a third person in the relationship, and failed to understand her rationale. They never fully resolved the



issue, but after a mutual apology, they slowly resumed their daily rhythm and lifestyle. Both women buried their emotions alive, the issue was never resolved, referred to or raised again.

“It's not as though I've been obsessed with the idea,” Tag said to herself one evening as she lay in bed alone, Lucy had traveled to London to take care of a business matter, “but for some reason, the thought just keeps coming into my head. I need to be totally honest with her and share my deep feelings, and hopefully it will be different this time. We have both changed. We are still very much in love. We are very successful businesswomen. We have been awarded this huge and nationally important contract. We own our home. We have money. We want for nothing. We could enrich our lives by bringing in another person, a child, somebody with whom we could share what we have.”

Tag waited until she thought the moment was right to broach the subject. It was after they both had spent an enjoyable time working in the garden. After a shower they settled down to enjoy a well-earned beer. The result was worse than before. It quickly escalated from an animated discussion to an angry response from Lucy and finally a screaming match.

“Please, can we have a calm, rational discussion on the subject?” Tag asked trying to tone down the conversation, realizing it was

getting of control. “It’s important for me to talk about it. That’s all. I just don’t want an emotional over-reaction.”

“An over-reaction,” Lucy shrieked. “An emotional reaction. You must be out of your fucking mind. What did you really expect? There were fireworks the last time you brought it up, or have you conveniently forgotten. Is this what you fucking want? You just like to see me explode, go up in smoke, or are you just provoking me? Is this how you get your jollies now?”

Tag waited a moment before answering, hoping she would calm down a little.

“No,” she replied in a shocked but restrained and quiet voice, “I don’t want to see you in this state, in fact...”

But before she could finish, Lucy yelled,

“In this state, for fuck’s sake, Tag, have you no feelings for me, or perhaps this is now the real Tag Bridges coming out? You don’t give a shit about me.”

“I think that’s very unfair of you, Lucy,” she retorted, her voice sad and hurt. “After what we have been through, you know how I feel about you.”

But her words had little impact. Lucy stood up, rushed to the dresser, grabbed her car keys, and shrieked over her shoulder at the top of her voice as she headed for the door,

“I guess I’m not enough for you. So go and get your fucking baby if you must, but you won’t bring it home for me to nurse. I’m done with you.”

Tag stood transfixed, statue-like, as if struck by lightning, her eyes staring at the wall, listening to the sounds of a car speeding down the driveway. Nothing made any sense. What had happened? It should have been a perfectly natural, open and loving discussion. What did she say that was so disturbing? How had it gotten out of hand and so fast? She couldn’t remember how long she remained there. Her stomach was in knots. She felt physically sick. Lying in their bed that night, she felt lonely and couldn’t sleep, yet knew she had to get up early to go to work. It seemed like the tears wouldn’t stop. Lucy never returned. By the time she left for work in the morning, she had still not come home.

Sitting in her truck as the night closed in, she knew there was one thing above everything else. She loved Lucy, and desperately wanted to get their relationship back on track but didn’t know how. She didn’t even know where Lucy was. They were both strong-minded women and a little stubborn. She just wished she’d never raised the topic—if only she could turn the clock back as if nothing had happened. She wanted things to be the way they always were. She didn’t open the garage to put the truck away or to see if Lucy’s car was there. She was too afraid it would be missing.

As the tears continued streaming down her face, she realized she'd been sitting there for almost half an hour.

The motor was also still running.//

ALSO BY MICHAEL BARRINGTON

# The Last Omaha Beach D-Day Survivor

An article by Michael Barrington

Having written two books about World War II, I couldn't wait to meet Papa Jake Larson, almost one hundred and two years old and one of our last remaining veterans of that conflict. And more incredibly, he was living close by. As I was about to discover, this amazing man and his extraordinary history might have gone unnoticed by most people had it not been for a small group of friends at the Bagel Street Café in Martinez. In 2019, he mentioned he would like to go to Normandy for the 75th anniversary of D-Day, 6th of June. He wanted to pay homage to his fallen comrades. However, most of his military records had been destroyed in a fire at

the National Personnel Records Center in St Louis in 1973. He couldn't even prove he had fought in Normandy and been awarded a bronze star for meritorious service in a combat zone. The family however, did some investigation and friends Linda Lannell and her daughter Janna started a Go Fund Me campaign that received support from all over the world.

But how did a country boy from Minnesota attract such notoriety and survive some of the deadliest battles of the war? Self-labeled as the "Luckiest Man in the World," he pointed his finger upwards, saying, "Somebody up there is taking care of me."

It all began in high school, where, he took an option learning to type, believing that it would help him progress in life, the only boy in a class of thirty six girls. It was a fortuitous decision. His father at first refused to allow him to go to high school since he was needed for chores on the family farm. But his older brother offered to take them on, and his father relented. Later, penniless, he and his cousin decided to join the National Guard, soon to become the US Army after the attack on Pearl Harbor, to earn \$12 a month. Big for his age, he lied about it and was fortunate the recruitment officer never questioned it. He was only 15 years old. Four years later, he found himself shipped off to war.

While stationed in Northern Ireland with the 135th infantry as the company clerk, he was shocked when he was transferred from the

infantry to the G 3 Operations—Training and Planning for Fifth Corps. Such a move was unheard of in the army, and it happened just because he could type 50 words a minute! He also got a promotion to corporal. Luck followed him soon afterwards. When most of the 135th were shipped out to North Africa, and now promoted to operations sergeant, he was singled out by Colonel John Hill. “You and I are moving to Portsmouth, England,” he said. “We’re going to be involved in some very special work.”

For the next two years, he found himself involved in the planning for the D-Day assault in Normandy. “As a top-secret BIGOT (British Invasion of Germany Occupied Territory) I typed the name of every single man who landed on Omaha Beach,” he said, holding out his hands to show me — “34,000 names.” He later survived the landing on the beach because he was the first onto the landing craft and, therefore, the last man off. As the men ran single file up the mine filled beach, dodging machine gun and mortar fire, he followed in the footsteps of the man in front of him, knowing he would be safe. There would either be no mines, or they would already have exploded! Having dug a foxhole in which to pass the night, he was suddenly ordered by the colonel to take the night shift at the command post. Lucky for him! In the morning, he found that a huge piece of shrapnel had fallen directly into the hole. If he had slept



there, he would most certainly have been seriously wounded and possibly killed.

When I asked Jake for more details of D-Day since he landed at 10:00 AM, on that June morning, it was curious that other than for the first hour when he dodged his way up the beach, and then being on duty that evening and all night, his mind was almost blank. It was as if there just too much horror to

remember. I was touched to see him tear up when he spoke about Colonel Hill, for whom he worked as an assistant. It was very obvious there was deep affection, respect and admiration. Advancing inland, they were involved in the battles of St Lo followed by that of Paris, and where for the first time in two months Jake had a proper



shower. And finally they fought at the Battle of the Bulge, where the US suffered 90,000 casualties and 19,000 killed. Miraculously, he was never seriously injured. After one near death incident, Colonel Hill remarked, “You’re like a cat with nine lives.” When he was demobilized six months later at the age of 22,

Jake Larsen had been a soldier for seven years.

Jake returned to Normandy again in June 2024 for the 80th anniversary of the invasion, got to meet several world leaders and shook hands with President Biden who thanked him for his service. “You are a real, national hero,” he was told, “and our country is so proud of you.” But then Jake looked at me with his piercing brown eyes and said emphatically, as he shook his head, “The ones that did not make it back from the war are the real heroes.” He paused for a second as if lost in thought, then said, “I’m the luckiest man in the world. I really shouldn’t be alive.”//

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael Barrington 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) and on Amazon [HERE](#).



# On the Lake

A short story by David Gershan

*W*e had taken the boat out painfully early that morning, maybe 4:30, and I couldn't help feeling some shame for switching from coffee to beer at 7 am. But what the hell, I told myself as I cracked open a sweaty can, it was a father-son fishing trip, a special weekend on Spider Lake, and I was supposed to let loose. "Make sure you don't catch any piranhas," I told him after a long swig.

"Wait. There's piranhas in here?" my son asked, seemingly more out of curiosity than fear.

"Just kidding." He gave a smile and cast out his line with surprising confidence. I gave a cast in the opposite direction. It'd been decades but the motion was instantly familiar, like riding a bike, or ripping a rope start.

It was June. The sun was a torch on the back of my neck. I envisioned my skin turning red and blistering, and hissed a string of expletives when I realized I forgot to put on sunscreen, which meant I also forgot to put it on him. I felt him glance over at me but kept

my eyes on the bobber, gave it a soft tug. We fished in that spot for quite a while, only the reels of our poles breaking the silence.

“Aw man, I lost my worm,” he said after reeling in his line.

“I thought I saw you get some nibbles.” I took his pole and opened the can of bait. I liked the feeling of omnipotence when manipulating the little earthworm onto a hook, maybe because I knew I was just as helpless. It was stuck on a hook; I was stuck in the debris pile of divorce.

“Let’s move closer to the shore,” I said. I started our little Evinrude 6 HP motor and aimed toward shaded water next to a pier. With the motor humming and my son facing fore, I popped open another beer. I killed the motor and let the boat glide through a mosaic of lily pads. Again we were enveloped in nature’s stillness.

I replayed the fights before my ex and I split, remembered the terrified look on my son’s face when I screamed and slammed the basement door, ignoring his pleas to stop. I thought about the apologies – so many that they ceased to make a difference, no matter how heartfelt or tearful. I tried not to think about how much my son probably remembered. I had made a promise to all of us that I would change, but began to realize I couldn’t be helped. Therapy-informed beliefs, however rational, were no match for that indelible wiring deep within, that terrifying core of some ancient origin. Drunk or not, the anger would eventually bubble to the surface.

I thought about how most people in my life – work friends, old friends, acquaintances – never saw that side of me, and therefore probably had a decent opinion of me. They might view me as a “nice guy” or “chill” – something that showed they didn’t really know me – and I realized their judgments made them delusional. My reputation remained untarnished in the eyes of some, and I felt like I was conning them.

I looked over at my son. Suddenly a teenager, he was caught in the throes of acne and an unexpectedly deep but still crackling voice, and I prayed that the paternal curse skipped over him, that there’d be some sort of break in the cycle. If only he knew how precious he was to me, despite me destroying the marriage, despite me having him only every other weekend. All I could do was hope he turned out more like his mother.

To my relief, the boy made a catch that day. It was just a small bluegill, one with a particularly orange belly. I took the hook out of its lip and he threw it back in the water. Afterwards I found myself looking forward to a valium and scotch back at the cabin, but I didn’t want to cook.

“Tell you what, I know a great spot for pizza. Let’s go for lunch,” I said after I docked the boat. I waited anxiously for his approval.

“Do they have garlic bread?”

“The best,” I assured him, praying I was right. I told myself to bring the bag of salt water taffy, and to not forget. It was from a local candy shop and I put it together for him. I couldn’t wait to surprise him with it. //

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When not grinding away at his day job as a psychologist, David can be found spending time with his wife and son and indulging in creative writing. He has published short fiction and poetry in various literary magazines over the years.



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