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# Books 'N Pieces Magazine

**AUGUST 2024**

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**William Gensburger**



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We're also coming out with **TWO WORKBOOKS**. One is a useful guide to **writing your story/novel** and getting it published, and the second is about **marketing** and **why the techniques you always read about usually do not work**. If you would like to be notified when these are ready (eBook and Print Workbook) email [editor@booksnpieces.com](mailto:editor@booksnpieces.com) and we will be sure to let you know.

With that said, enjoy this issue and please let us know what you think. Please share the link on your social media and tell your friends (writers, readers, artists, musicians, etc) about us.

All the best,

William Gensburger

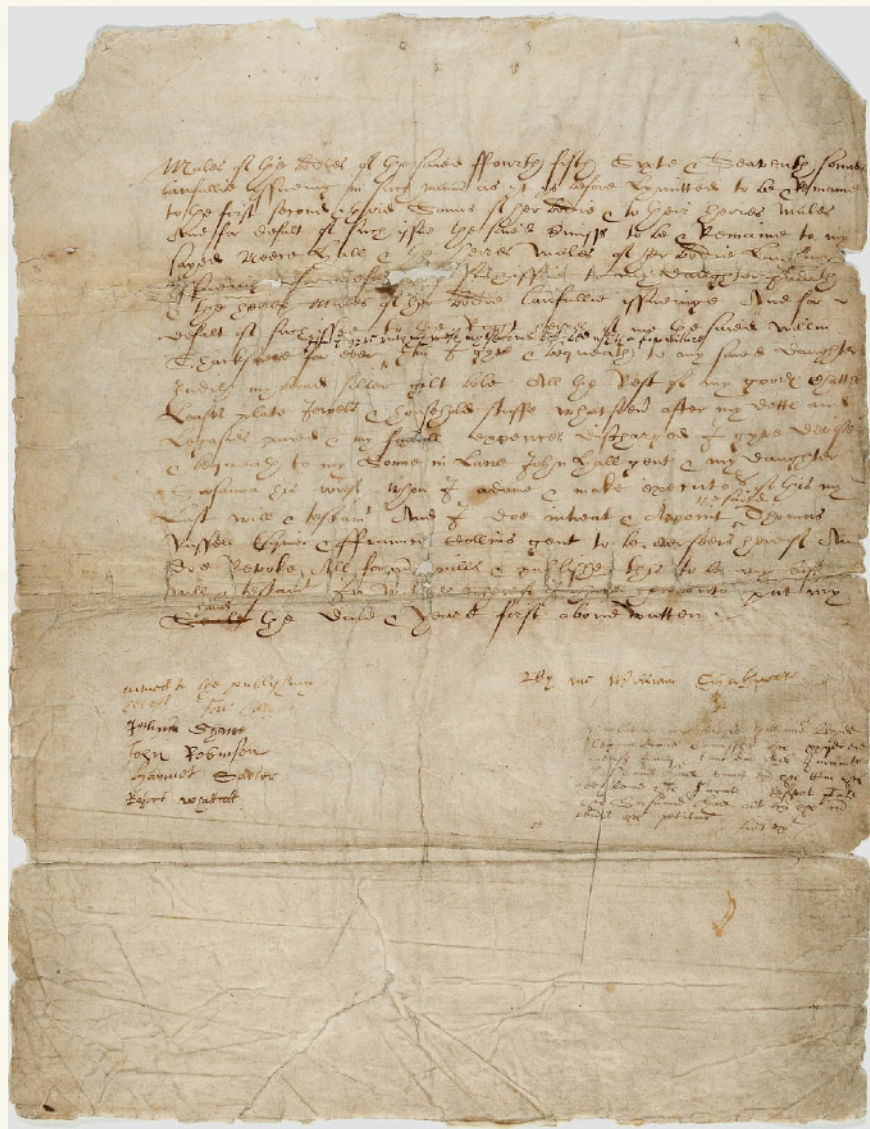
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# FACT

Handwriting of famous people. William Shakespeare had no shortage of words in his plays, and since he lived in the 1600s, he had no word processor or computer to help him. So you would think he would have neat handwriting, wouldn't you?

*To be neat or not to be neat...that is the question!*



[Courtesy of Wikimedia.org]



# THE LAST WORD

A LONG SHORT STORY BY CHRIS VROUNTAS

The rooster call spiked her ears at dawn. Maria cracked her eyes open into the black. Straw poked her head and scratched her face. Her bed in the stable she shared with the farm animals under the house kept her warm with the wool blankets the Germans let her keep. The NAZI officers in her house will be wanting for their breakfast soon. She had to get up.

Andonis was already out. He and their youngest son, Yianni, had all the farm work to do these days. All her boys except her youngest escaped to the mountains when the Germans took the village. Too much work now for an old couple and a teenaged boy. Andonis had already begun feeding the goats. Yianni was out, but Maria did not know where.

She sat up to take a breath before starting the day. Red sun bled into the dark sky, seeping daylight slowly above the silhouetted trees. Her breath smoked in the cold. She'll warm when she builds the fire for the soldiers in the house.

Maria swept the straw off the clothes she slept in. The soldiers came into Moulatsi months ago and the officers picked her house to set up their office because she was the only one with running water. In return, they let her and her family sleep with the animals in the stable under the house and expected her to



keep their quarters and cook their food. She and her family could eat the leftovers, if any.

She stood at the open stable door and looked out beyond the sloping field to the church where her daughter, Anna, married before the war. The bell tower reached above the distant mountain ridge, coming out of the darkness and just touching the new beams of the day. Burning wood scented the crisp air like the incense in church blessing the people. We could use a blessing now, Maria thought as she looked for her boots.

She found them by the door, pulled them on, tied them quickly and cut through the fenced yard to the steps up to the house over her head. Maria stopped at the foot of the stairs to catch her breath. She assumed that it was just her age and her hunger, but her head felt light and her chest felt heavy. She looked up to the door to her kitchen. “Ti na kanoume,” she thought. What can we do?

“YIANNI!” She called for her son, her voice swallowed by morning stillness over the fields. She needed him to fetch eggs from the chickens so she could make the occupying officers their breakfast.

He came quickly from the road to the kafeneio at the center of the village. It was a risk for men to gather, even old men over coffee in the mornings. What could he have been doing there at this time of day?

“Ti theleis, mitera.” Yianni said as he marched up from the road. He was gruff this morning. Not his usual self.

“Get me eggs. For the Germans.”

Yianni turned his sights down field toward the church. He shook his head, faced back to his mother and squinted his eyes, hands on hips.

“That’s why am here?” He asked, sharply, as if already in the middle of the argument that had been raging in his head since speaking with the men at the kafeneio. They had connections with the units in the mountains fighting for the



resistance against the fascist invasion. “To feed our NAZI masters?” Yianni pressed.

“They are not our masters.”

“How can you say that? This is ridiculous. They take our home, make us sleep with the goats. They treat us like animals. How can you live like this? Are you that deluded?”

“Yianni, they only become your master if you hate them. Then, they live inside you, like a disease. That’s how they kill your soul.”

“No. They kill you with guns. Or by starving you. Look at us. Look at you! They are killing you. You are skin and bone. And you FEED them? This is pointless. I should be with my brothers in the mountains with the units.”

“You live by the sword, you die by the sword. Where will that leave us?”

“Better to die like men than to sleep with goats.”

He is so young, thought Maria. She shook her head. He can't see that resistance is a long game. So many wars, so many occupiers, over centuries. And, we're still here. Her grandmother remembered the Turks. They occupied for 400 years. How long will the Germans be here? No matter, she thought, we will still be here when they finally go.

“Empires fall. Survivors go on,” Maria said.

“Hah!” Yianni scoffed. He could not believe how even his own mother could justify such passivity. “And how do we survive as we starve and feed the murderers?”

“Yianni, you talk big. You just want to cut off the soldier’s ear in the garden.”

“Maybe Jesus should have let him fight.” Yianni saw no point in turning the other cheek.

“And where do you think that would have gone?” Boys are all the same. “Oli ta jourounia exoun ta ithi miti,” she thought. All the pigs have the same nose. They



fight fire with fire. “The people traded Jesus for Barabas. Remember? What did Barabas do for them?”

“That’s a fine story, mitera, but not everybody can just come back from the dead after letting themselves get crucified. The rest of us need to fight to keep what is ours.”

“I’ll tell you what he gave them!” she raised her nose towards Yianni’s chin, pressing her point. “War. And what did that give the people? The temple burned down and the people driven out.” She waved her arm demonstrating the banishment and shooing Yianni back. “And now we have NAZI’s,” she continued, pointing up the stairs. “So, you can thank Barabas!”

Yianni was tired of his mother’s sanctimonious passivity and snarled, “Don’t you think you’re worth more than this?”

“Nobody is special. We can only work to be useful.”

“And feeding NAZIs is useful?”

“How is war useful?”

Yianni spun toward the coop, swirling in his cloud of rage. His father was defeated and his mother was deluded. He had to do something to stop the madness. He had spoken to one of the old men, Takis, at the kafeneio. His grandson, Costa, was with the units. Yianni knew Costa. He was probably with Yianni’s brothers. Takis said Costa comes to the village at night about once a week to pick up intelligence and whatever food and supply could be offered. Costa would be coming tonight, Takis said. Yianni agreed to meet him and learn how he could join the fight.

Maria paused at the base of the stairs and caught her breath. This did not bode well. Her sons, all but one, had left ahead of the Germans to join the guerilla units. Thank God Yianni had stayed. They needed him to keep the farm going. Maria knew many who would rather die rather than accept occupation. Yianni now

appeared to be one of them. She respected the fighters but who really won wars? The men boast, “Eleftheria ee Thanatos!”, but death seemed like the easy way out. A short cut to satisfy pride. No, in the end, survivors won wars. The ones who outlast the occupiers, the ones who struggle to carve out a life for their children even when there is nothing left to carve out. Instead of dying for country, what about living for people? Maria saw no glory in death. Life can be sacrifice enough.

She began her ascent, holding on to the rail as she watched her feet and took one step at a time. It felt like a march up to Golgotha itself. She pushed through the door at the top and entered the kitchen. The soldier guarding the officers was asleep at the table, his head leaning on the wall behind him. Just a boy, she thought. The officers were in the next room the other side of the wall. She flicked on the light to disturb the boy’s sleep and got to work. He rubbed his face lazily as she filled her pot for coffee. He stood at the sink to wait his turn so he could wash his face. They didn’t share a language so they could only gesture. When she moved to the stove, she nodded her head to the sink to let him wash. Strange this boy knew how to be polite after stealing her house and taking their food and forcing them to sleep with the animals in the cold.

The soldiers had kept the fire in the woodstove burning overnight, but sleepy one let it settle to embers and Maria needed to stoke it back up. She looked for the wood bin. Yianni needed to refill it, but there was enough to get the morning started. She grabbed a thinner cut piece to jump start the flame and dropped it in the stove. The radiating glow sprouted limbs around the log and embraced the fuel quickly. Maria lingered at the opening to feel the warmth on her face. Spring dawns cold in the mountains and a morning fire is always a blessing to savor. There were such few blessings for her to enjoy these days.

Maria rose from the stove to face her chores for the morning, but her head seemed to float and the kitchen began to swirl. “Frau!” the sleepy one called out.



She turned to the blond boy. Curious, she thought, he could be Yianni, except for that bloodless skin and that ridiculous army uniform that turned the human into a machine. He didn't know what he was doing either, she thought. She couldn't talk sense to Yianni. What could save this boy from that uniform? He spoke again but God forgive him she didn't understand what he was saying. Her ears blurred sound as the kitchen began to spin. She reached for the kitchen table to steady herself. Strange, she thought as she went down clinging to consciousness along with the back of the chair, that dull metal cross dangled on the boy's chest when he reached for her before everything went black.



Andoni heard the officers bark orders inside his home. He stretched his back from the buckets he brought out to his goats. He gave the goats garbage, but it was less than usual. The soldiers did not leave much for the people, which meant the animals got less. Still, he needed to feed them all enough, the chickens, the goats, the donkeys, otherwise there would be no eggs, no milk, no food. Andoni with his elementary education understood this. He wondered if the Germans did too.

The shudders overhead burst open. "Mann! Kommen! Der Frau! Kommen! Macht schnell!"

Andoni hated their language, but he understood some. They were saying something about the woman who could only have been his wife. Something was wrong. Above him, he saw one of the officers reaching out the window overhead waving him inside. "Schnell, schnell, schnell!"

He dropped his bucket and started for the stairs. The door to the kitchen was open and the young private stood at the landing, "Schnell, mann!"

Andoni sprinted to the top of the stairs and barged through the open door. His wife laid sprawled on the floor, her head by the dull black boots of the officers who looked down at her and up at Andoni. Maria showed no life. Andoni first thought

the soldiers had done it, but they wouldn't kill their cook and housekeeper. More likely they would kill him or his son.

He knelt to touch her hand and came close to her nose. Not even breathing. He bolted back up and yelled out the door, "YIANNI! ELLA TORA! YIANNI! TORA!!"

Yianni appeared at the bottom of the stairs. What other servile task would he be asked to perform?

"Ei mana sou. Kanei katerrevse. Fennei Dimitrios. To jiatros. TORA! PAI! Fernei to yiatros etho. Tora!"

Yianni, stunned, at first saw only white. His father's sunken face floated over him at the top of the stairs. It told the whole story. His stubborn workhorse mother finally broke. He shook his head and caught his breath and remembered the harsh words he left with her. The pit of regret and fear stabbed from inside.

"Nai baba!" Yianni called as he ran off the property to the dirt road. Dr. Dimitrios Yiorgantas was a cousin who lived just a couple hundred feet up the hill.

Yianni panted at the doctor's door as he pounded. "Asta Vrai!" a man called from inside, clearly annoyed. The door swung open and the disheveled young man in a stained undershirt and wrinkled shorts who just woke blinked at Yianni, looking for what sense could come from this madness.

"Lee pah meh Theo," Yianni referred to him as his uncle because of the age difference, but they were really cousins. "My mother. She's collapsed in the house."

"Is she breathing?"

"I don't know."

"Vlahos," Dr. Dimitri spat, confused, and rubbed his face. "How can you not know!" He turned immediately to put on shoes. Where did he put them? He gave up. There was no time. He pushed passed Yianni in just his undershirt and shorts and bare feet and ran to the house.



They arrived in what felt like seconds but had to have taken at least a couple minutes. Dimitrios stopped short at the door. His aunt lay dead on the floor. There was no doubt.

“How long has she been this way?”

She collapsed about ten, twenty minutes ago? Andonis answered.

It takes just 3 to 6 minutes for it to be over, thought Dimitrios. He stepped to the body, knelt, and touched her neck for a pulse. Nothing. He held her wrist. Still, nothing. He put his ear to her nose and mouth and his hand on her chest. No breath, no heartbeat. Already, she was beginning to feel cold.

Dimitri held her wrist again, just to see if he missed something the first time. He waited. He felt the eyes on him, the pressure from Andoni. Did he seriously expect him to raise the dead?

Dimitri gently replaced her hand. Her eyes had already closed and so he didn't have to make the dramatic gesture of closing them for her. But he had to tell Andoni the truth.

“I'm sorry Theo. She's gone.”

Andoni showed no reaction. Not in front of the soldiers.

The blond guard turned to one of the officers. The officer waved his hand toward the door and gave an order to get the body out of the kitchen.

“Ella Yianni,” Dimitri called to the boy. Andoni bent to reach under her shoulders. She was a small woman, bony now from lack of food, but it was still awkward for three men to pick her up with any dignity. The blond guard stepped up and silently offered to help. Andoni nodded. They each had a hand under her back and the other under her shoulders while the other managed her legs and waist. Slowly, they walked her body down the stairs to the stable under the house.

Word got out and already a small group of people stood at the gate. As the small procession came down the stairs, three women from the group made it to the

stable and laid out blankets on the bed of straw where Maria had slept that evening. They would lay her there for her wake.

Andoni's sister Thespina managed her way through the growing gaggle and hugged her brother as he stood by his wife's body in the stable. He had felt nothing until her warmth. His head seemed to spin as he fell short of breath, but she held him up. "Ella brother. Can you stand?"

"Nai, nai." He looked down, turned to Yianni, and pointed his head outside the stable. He needed air. Yianni followed Andoni while Dimitri stood by the straw bed next to Thespina.

"She needs to be buried tomorrow Thespina. You know that."

"I know."

"I'll get the priest then get back home. I'll write up the death certificate and give it to you. I don't think Andoni will manage it well."

"OK."



The sun set and the body was laid out for the wake. Family and neighbors milled about in the stable under the house. The animals and equipment had been cleared out so that people could stand freely by Maria's body which appeared asleep in her straw bed in the corner. Yianni stood near his dead mother, watching the others approach pay their respects.

The priest arrived in full liturgical robes. His gold embroidered stole swept the floor by his feet and his royal silk cape draped over his black cassock. He frowned through his white beard and his eyebrows furrowed behind his glasses. The altar boy held the smoking incense and followed the priest as he cut through the crowd. The old cleric approached Andoni and whispered his well-practiced words of condolences and encouragement.



The people continued to murmur and the priest turned to his altar boy. The thurible rang and the priest swung the censor toward the body and began his prayers.

“Evloyeetos o Theos imon, pantoteh nin kai aei, kai eis tous aionas ton aionon . . .”

The same prayers that have been said for over a thousand years, the same prayers that were said for her parents and theirs, and their ancestors before them, and for others beyond memory began now for Maria. Andonis knew this day would come, but yet it came, as always, as a shock.

“ . . . Give rest to the soul of Your departed servant Maria in a place of light, in a place of repose, in a place of refreshment, where there is no pain, sorrow or suffering . . . .”

Yianni watched the priest as he murmured his prayers over the smoking incense. The double headed eagle spread across the back of the priest's robes, echoing the ancient imperial status that the church held as an organ of the Roman Empire. He sniffed at the liturgical futility. Liturgy, literally means “work of the people”. But what work did the church do? “Religion is the opiate of the masses” Costa had said to Yianni before he left to join the units. “They lead lambs to servitude and slaughter with false promises and cold comfort.” Yianni was not sure what angered him more, the NAZI's or the pitiful sheep who accepted occupation. He studied his father's face. The prayers washed over his father as he stood with an erect dignity Yianni did not understand given the humiliation they had been suffering. Yianni shook his head and turned to his mother and replayed their morning argument in his head. “Empires fall, survivors go on” she said. But she didn't survive. Still, he considered her words from the morning. They had talked about it many times. How the Romans persecuted Christians for years. Fed them to lions for spectacle in the ancient circus, burned them as torches to light the emperor's

garden parties. But they survived and eventually converted the emperor and became the dominant religion of the empire. How did turning the other cheek conquer the occupying legions?

Yianni looked back at his father and sighed as he considered the loss everyone had experienced in recent years. Their home, the entire people, were suffering a crucifixion in this war. Could they ever come back from this? Right or wrong, Maria had carried her cross long enough. She too, had a right to move on.

“I am an image of Your ineffable glory, though I bear the scars of my transgressions. . . Grant me the homeland for which I long and once again make me a citizen of Paradise.”



A pinprick of light pierced the black. Slowly, it grew wider and brighter. Soon, the shining white light consumed the blackness, and she could see nothing but the light. She drew toward its center until she found herself in a massive banquet hall. A long table stretched from one end of the hall to the other, and it was laden with food. Plates overflowing with fruits and pastries, cheeses and meats. It was an abundance beyond imagination. At the other end of the long banquet table, she saw a group of people. They were distant but they slowly came into focus. She saw her parents, who had been long dead. Her older brother, too. Others crowded around them, some vaguely familiar, but all the people she knew had died. Some waved, others reached out, all welcomed her, calling to her, “Come, Maria! Stay! The table is full! Come, stay, be with us! There is nothing to worry about.” She missed her parents and felt so deeply welcomed and happy. “Mama!” she called as she jumped on her toes in pure joy. They reached out again, some toward her, others toward the food at the table, “Stay! Eat!” But Maria knew that if she ate, she could not leave and, though she wanted to stay, she needed to go back. “No, Mama, Baba, I have to



go back. I have my family. I have work to do. I have to go back.” The people in the banquet hall continued to urge her to stay, but Maria backed slowly from the table, sad that it meant she was leaving them. As she stepped, the hall blurred, and the black narrowed around them until they were gone in the void.



“Aionia ee mnimi . . . God, have mercy on us and save us. Amen.”

The priest concluded his prayers with a final ring of his censor and handed it back to his altar boy. Incense hung over the heads of the small crowd, and the stable now smelled sweetly of Jerusalem Rose. He shook Andoni’s hand softly and put his hand on his shoulder briefly, then turned to leave without speaking with anyone else. His robes waved in his wake as he swung out the door.

Some crossed themselves, others laid hands on her, while others stood silently before they moved aside. But Yianni couldn’t leave. This was too hard to accept. Maybe by witnessing the others accept this harsh reality he could come to understand it too. The doctor, now fully clothed, had signed the death certificate authorizing burial and handed it to his aunt Thespina. There was nothing left now but to say goodbye and to bury her after church tomorrow.

Yianni pondered his mother’s face. Her head rested on their best-embroidered pillow. Colorful flowers and vines stitched from days near the end of the Turkish occupation. Now, it adorned her deathbed during the days of the NAZI occupation. He wanted to tell her he was wrong, but her death seemed to prove otherwise. Maybe she was right in the long run, but in the long run, we’re all dead anyway, and until then, he could not bear accepting an occupation that killed his mother and murdered so many others. He felt her bony hand, and his grief veered again to rage. Enough with suffering indignity like lambs to slaughter. He will meet up with Costa later tonight. He stared back at Maria, looking for some

message from the beyond, either to rebuke him or encourage him. Anything. But he knew that, too, was ridiculous. All of this was.

Something moved. Near her mouth. He thought his vision must have blurred. It had been a rough day. He blinked and focused on her lips and waited. He saw it again. Her tongue peeked out and touched her bottom lip.

“Baba!” Yianni called. He doubted himself. This must be some involuntary tick that corpses do shortly after death, but it had been hours. “Baba! Kita ‘tho!”

Andoni stood up from a chair that had been placed near the bed. He had been accepting the condolences from neighbors and leaning into the warm, strong hands on his shoulders, but his excitable son clearly needed to be settled and it was his turn to provide support.

“Come, son, I know it is hard.”

“Baba, look at her mouth.”

Denial. The boy was young. He couldn’t accept the hard truth that people got used to bearing with age. We die. Sometimes at peace. Sometimes not. But we pass and we have to accept it and whatever comes next.

“It’s ok, my boy. She is at peace now.”

“No, Baba! Look!”

Andoni humored his boy and looked at his dead wife. She looked no different from those early mornings when she stayed in bed as he got up to start the day. Those tired bones need their rest. She has earned hers. Andoni turned back to his son.

“She’s asleep, son.”

“She’s awake, Baba!”

Andoni wrinkled his brow, concerned that his son was hallucinating. He turned back to Maria and waited.

“Her mouth. Watch her mouth.”



And there it was. The tip of her tongue reached out for her bottom lip.

Andoni brought his nose to nearly touch hers, not trusting his eyes as they may have simply followed the suggestion of his hallucinating son. He watched her mouth. The weak little tongue peeked again.

“DEE-MEE-TREE-OS!” Andoni cried out. “DIMITRI!” Dr. Georgantas had left. Yianni did not have to be told. He turned to run back to the doctor’s home. This time, Dimitri answered the pounding door without yelling. He stood, resigned, expecting to have to comfort his young cousin.

“Theo, do dead people lick their lips?”

What kind of question is that, thought Dimitri.

“What do you mean?”

“Mama, she’s licking her lips. Do dead people do that?”

“No.”

“Well, she is!”

This was hard to believe. Dimitrios stepped back inside his house. Put on his shoes and grabbed his coat. There was no rush this time. But this was part of the grieving process, and he stepped out with Yianni and slipped his arms into his coat to cover from the evening chill.



The blond guard from the kitchen saw the young doctor and teenage boy come down the dirt road toward the house. The boy seemed excited, but the doctor grudgingly followed. The guard looked back into the stable. The villagers were now crowding around the body, creating a commotion. It was autumn in the mountains, and he felt a shiver.

Dr. Yiorgantas finally arrived with the boy and looked first at the guard as if confirming permission to enter.

“Herr Doktor,” said the guard and nodded to let him in.

Dimitri pushed through the small crowd to reach Maria. He didn't wish her dead, but this could be embarrassing. She still lay where he left her. Yianni explained again that she was licking her lips.

"Impossible." Dimitri crossed his arms.

"I saw it!" Yianni insisted. "How is it possible she could be licking her lips?"

"What can I say!" Dimitri shook his hands as he stage-whispered to Yianni.

"They had no class in school about how to raise the dead!"

"Did you miss the one about how to tell if someone is dead!?" Yianni shot back. Just like these villagers, accepting the worst without a fight.

"Let's just see for sure," said Dimitri. He began to sweat as he patted himself down. "Do you have any fruit? Like a lemon or orange?"

"Who has an orange?" Thespina asked in disbelief. There was no exotic food in the village. There was barely any food at all after the soldiers had their full. What a ridiculous question.

The guard heard the talking and looked in. He saw the young doctor motion with his hands like he was squeezing a lemon to explain how he wanted to check on Maria. He approached the doctor, tapped his shoulder, and opened his hands to ask, what do you need?

Again, Dimitri played charades for the guard, motioning how to cut an orange, squeeze the slice, and rub it on the lips. The soldier nodded. He knew where to find an orange.

The guard, just a young private, marched away and up the stairs to the kitchen door. He remembered the bowl of fruit for the officers that rested on a table in this old lady's house. It sat by the window with a balcony looking over the gate at the front of the property and the dirt road up to the village square. It was in the room next to the small kitchen where she collapsed, what had become the officers' quarters. They'd sit there with their morning coffee, enjoying their fruit while the



villagers struggled to survive. The private had seen enough. He strode to the table and grabbed an orange right in front of the officer sitting by the window, smoking his cigarette.

“What are you doing?” the officer said, his hand frozen while the smoke slowly curled out the window.

“What are you doing?” the private responded.

The officer raised his eyebrow as the private stepped back to the kitchen. The private knew he had been insubordinate. He would have a series of run-ins with this officer as the war went on, eventually ending in a confrontation months later in Stalingrad, where their unit redeployed during the winter. When the officer ordered a family’s execution after his unit seized their house during the fighting, the private cocked his weapon, pointed at the family, paused, then turned on the officer and emptied the cartridge. But he had no idea whether he’d saved the family as his fellow soldiers barged into the ruined house and fired in response to what they heard. Nobody noticed the dull cross dangle off his uniform from under his combat jacket as he lay lifeless in the rubble.

Back in the kitchen the private took a knife out of the sink and stepped out and down the stairs to meet Yianni and Dr. Dimitri looking over the old woman. He handed the orange and knife to Yianni.

Yianni took the fruit. He shot a quick look at the soldier and sneered at the soldier’s presumption. Now he helps? Could he not have shared an extra egg with the old woman when she was alive? Yianni held both the orange and the knife, feeling the choice he had at that moment. The soldier did not step away, but his shoulders sank at Yianni’s stare.

Yianni turned back to Dimitri. “Where will that leave us?” Yianni recalled his mother’s admonishment. He handed the orange and knife to the doctor. Dimitri fumbled the fruit under the blade. He was no surgeon, but he cut the orange and

brought the wedge to Maria's lips. He held it over and gave a squeeze. Her tongue poked again but then took a sweep along her lower lip. Dimitri dropped the wedge on her face in shock. She kept licking, and her eyes twitched. He picked up the wedge and placed it on her mouth.

"Sit her up! Slowly!" Dimitri called out to whoever was close. Neighbors reached behind her while Andoni pushed through and pulled Maria up by her arms.

"I told you! I told you!" cried Yianni. Yianni asked for a message and he got a miracle. He forgot about Costa, who left the village later in the evening without meeting Yianni after hearing the strange news. Yianni did not know that Costa never made it back to his unit. Costa took a bullet behind his head before he got to the tree cover. Nobody heard the shot. In the stable under the house, as his mother slowly sipped the water her sister-in-law held in front of her mouth, the noise muffled around Yianni, and all he knew was that his mother had come back from the dead.



Maria's story shocked the people and became a legend, but Maria thought little about it. The young men went off and died for their country, but she came back to live for her family. It was what she had to do. Sacrifice was a practical thing.

Meanwhile, Yianni stayed home through the end of the war. Yianni remained uncertain for some time about which would have been the better decision, but he let his mother have the last word when she returned from death. Later, the murderous cruelty during the Civil War confirmed how pointless fighting was for working people. He worked the family farm the rest of his life, stayed in the old house, married, and raised 6 children, all of whom moved away to make their own lives in Athens. He lost count of the grandchildren that visited during holidays and



during the summers when they escaped the Athens heat. He reaped the peace his mother sowed, and he was grateful.

Shortly after the war, Yianni saw a neighboring shepherd from one of the lower fields approach Maria near their house as she walked toward the church down the dirt road.

“Ella Maria!” the neighbor called out to her, “I have a small favor to ask.” Yianni stopped to listen.

“What is it?” she asked. When they say it’s small, they know it’s not.

“So, my son, he is herding our sheep from the upper field back home. He’d like to come through your land by the orchard so he can make the trip in one day. Otherwise, he will need to go all around the village, and it will take an extra day.” He circled his arms across the horizon to demonstrate the length of such a burdensome trek would be.

The shepherd offered nothing else but an air of entitlement.

“Oli ta jourounia exoun ta ithi miti,” Maria said, shaking her head with her hand on her hips. What made this man think she should just let his herd trample over the hay she was growing for her own animals?

“What?” he responded.

“No! What do you mean small favor? You want to flatten the hay and have your sheep feed on it on the way for nothing? No. Make yourself useful. Help your son go around.”

“I bought a hundred candles for you to light in the church when you died!” the shepherd argued. “This is the thanks I get!”

“Fine. When you die, I’ll buy you a hundred candles!”

She looked up at him as he peered down at her. Neither budged. She didn’t come back to this life to get walked over. She came back to work. This one needed to work more and whine less.

The shepherd mumbled something as he looked down and walked around her. She softened her shoulders and thought some more. She was on her way to the church after all.

She turned and called back, “Wait.”

The shepherd stopped and turned to Maria, hoping to hear a change of heart.

“I won’t wait ‘til you die. I’ll light a candle for you now. But, you still go round!”

He didn’t argue. He looked up the road to continue his walk to the kafeneio and noticed Yianni standing at a distance, observing the scene.

Yianni heard the exchange, but he was far enough away to pretend otherwise. He just gave a wave as the man trudged up the road. Yianni knew what it was like arguing with his mother. She always had the last word.



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Chris Vrontas is a writer and lawyer. He lives in Essex County, Massachusetts, with his wife, who still laughs at his jokes after 34 years. He has practiced law for just as long and serves as a mediator of discrimination disputes for the Human Rights Commission. He grew up in an immigrant faith tradition that has evolved over the years, and he writes about impermanence, hope, and rebirth. Most recently, his poems *Lenten Eve*, 2021 <https://www.vitapoetica.org/poetry/lenten-eve-2021> and *Meadow Aers* <https://www.vitapoetica.org/poetry/meadow-aers> were published in the Winter 2023 issue of *Vita Poetica*. His short story, *The Photo*, was published in February 2024 by the Academy of the Heart and Mind <https://academyoftheheartandmind.com/>.



# KNOTWEED

A SHORT STORY BY ROBERT STONE

The grey light shone on the plastic wrapped around the new spade, leaning on the piano, and made a veil of it and then a berg of clean ice. It had been a tough day. What with one thing. And then another.

He had been sitting in the easy chair for some time now. Tired and trying to relax. Yesterday he had rubbed his eye, and there must have been a splinter, something almost transparent, like a fish bone, which was impossible, tiny, near the knuckle of his index finger, and he had scratched the surface of his eye-ball with that. His eye was a little sore now, and it watered. Probably a minor infection that he could fight off if only he could get some sleep. He squinted. He couldn't see this splinter, just the point of a thorn perhaps, but he could feel it now and then.

He was looking at the sky through the highest and smallest window that gave onto the garden. It had an effect of blue, very pale, so pale in fact that when he isolated a particular patch, there was no blue there at all, only white, but overall, the blue was not lost. The room exerted some fascination upon him but an unsatisfactory one. The air in it was tangible, dense. To walk across it, which he could not quite bring himself to do at the moment, he would have to push that air out of his way wade though it.

He watched the sunbeams stream through the French windows, their weave directed unknowingly by wind and cloud miles away, thick with their millions of motes of dust. Dirt, another person would have called it. He reflected that he might be looking at them for the last time, yet they seemed so solid for a light of no color. He wondered if the new owners would ever notice these unownable things.

The property supplements do not recommend that hopeful vendors keep spades in the living room. That would not strike prospective purchasers as homely. They recommend baking bread. He had not baked bread, but he had ground coffee, which he never drank, and of that, he was now a little ashamed.

He did not play the piano. Could not. He knew why it was that he had one, but he did not wish to think about it. He really needed to get out of this house. To put an end to this idle and useless existence.

His hands were now coated with a not-so-thin layer of clay and some concrete mix. It was like wearing granular gloves of sand, skin tight. This would not wash off so readily. He was concerned not to fill the drain from his sink with concrete.

- These could be gravedigger's hands, he thought.

He held his glass without ever putting it down and could not feel how cold it was except when he drank from it. He clinked the ice. If only more things were made of ice. Temporary. Instead of all this stuff that lasts forever.

There were some lovely things in his room still. Vases, clocks, lamps, an hourglass. They did not now strike him as harmless. Calamitous more likely. Malicious snares, perhaps. His reverie was a troubled one. There was something he would look at only out of the corner of his stinging eye, a serpent in the garden, as always.

He stretched his weary limbs and took a last long pull at his drink. He plucked a smooth pebble of ice from it and crushed it between his teeth. A mower



droned angrily in the distance, perhaps the first of the season. The cry of a child, tired and upset. A barrel-chested dog gave a vicious cough, choked off short at the end of its chain as though the animal had been ashamed to give itself away. The soft swish of traffic was even-tempered at this time. The squeal of a locomotive brought to a sudden halt, just penetrated the walnut trees at the top of the garden. He needed to get away from this place. It was getting dark already. The sun was sinking. There was a knock at his door.

Arthur stared impatiently at the stranger on his doorstep, not quite listening to him, simply waiting for the right moment to tell him to go away. Arthur was a large man and could feel that he was filling his doorway nicely. He knew he was imposing. He did not pretend bonhomie. Could not. He could see a little tube of plastic on the steps behind this unwelcome man, perhaps dropped by him, the sort of tube that held filters for roll-up cigarettes. He would tell him to pick that up.

- There is a scheme, the man was saying. Should we find Japanese knotweed, then you can claim compensation from the local council to help pay for its eradication.

The man was showing him laminated photographs of Japanese knotweed printed on blue cards and obviously copied from the internet. One of the photographs even had the name of the photographer stenciled across it in pale grey lettering. To prevent illegitimate reproduction. This was a scheme, alright. The man was speaking too quickly. He was not a good cheat and slightly more likable for that.

- There is no Japanese knotweed in my garden.

- Well, you know, you would have to be something of a botanist, a plant-lover, to be sure of that.

With a chuckle, as if the man felt sorry for anyone who might believe that it was possible for a mere amateur to identify a wildflower.

- I am something of a botanist, insisted Arthur.

- It is a significant pest. It would be in your very best interest to get rid of it and that requires expert attention. You can get a grant.

- I like flowers.

- Well, you wouldn't like this one. Not if you are trying to sell your house.

He had seen the sign round the front. He was obviously so pleased to have someone to be high-handed with. He would be divorced, Arthur thought, so he no longer had a wife to push around. Well, out of that. Poor woman.

Arthur stared at the man's name badge, laminated like his photos and clipped to the lapel of his horrible suit.

- Your name can't be Sherwood Anderson.

The man was flummoxed. Off his script.

- No, it's not. My name is Anthony Sherwood. Anderson is the name of the company.

Arthur looked into the man's anxious face. What a desperate character. He was too old for this. Door to door at nearly six o'clock with his grubby cards and his creased suit. On commission. He had seen better days, no doubt: company car, modest expense account, maybe even a shared secretary. But he had lost all of that, knocked down and robbed of it, and now wouldn't, or couldn't, lie flat on the deck. He wouldn't take a hand-out, even if that did mean sleeping in the Fiesta now and then. He would work for a living, show them he could still do it, still sell, still make it, doing the job he had started out at thirty-five years ago. Arthur examined his almost-bald-man's grey-cropped hair, looked into his frightened blue eyes, and liked him. He had a hurt face. He bet the young chaps in the office gave him Hell. He was just one more disappointment from cracking. His name tag should have been a label with Hopeless printed on it. Except he didn't need that. Everyone could tell. He was cold. His suit was too thin for so early in the spring.



- If I could have a very quick look over your garden I could set everyone's mind at rest. A grant is available.

- Have you found knotweed in anyone's garden?

- Yours is the first house I've tried on this street. But they've found loads in Wherstead. On the Strand. It can travel along the embankment and into gardens that way.

Arthur had no doubt that the whole thing was a scam, or almost so. This fellow made out he was offering a public service. But it was quite interesting, and he felt sorry for him. He knew what it might be like to be him. Not that he could hope to find knotweed just to help him out. That would be terrible. In fact, a disaster.

- Alright, Sherwood. Let's have a look then.

Arthur was ashamed of the house. It was sold now, more or less, and he had let it slide back towards the ramshackle condition it had been in before he made an effort to persuade the buyers. It had taken two years and thousands off the original asking price to find them. He would have liked to have made his house a recognizably habitable space where a recognizably ordinary man might have lived, but he had failed to do this. If only he could have made the place normal, he might have been normal in it.

He thought of apologizing for the cobwebs that he only now noticed, but Sherwood was too pathetic to merit that. What was he even doing walking into the house of a man who was clearly drunk?

- Something smells good, said Sherwood.

Among all of the things, smelling not so good.

Arthur was cooking. A sort of chicken casserole but in a tomato-based sauce. The kitchen did smell of oregano and basil. He always cooked twice or even four times the amount and then stacked frozen portions in his huge chest freezer. But

then he didn't like to eat his supplies, to diminish his store, as though he might be besieged. He didn't really need to cook again for weeks. The freezer was almost full to the brim now. He hadn't seen the bottom of it for a long time.

Sherwood was back on his script,

- The Environment Agency says Japanese knotweed is indisputably the UK's most aggressive, destructive and invasive plant. It will destroy concrete foundations can damage flood defences and archaeological sites. It can regrow from even a tiny fragment of its root. You don't have to report its presence on your land, but if it causes a nuisance, there may be a civil liability. Research from the University of Exeter says that poor advice from local councils may result in gardeners unwittingly spreading the plant instead of destroying it. That's why you need a specialist like Anderson to see if you have it.

- I'd better not have it, Arthur said, grimly steering Sherwood around the spade and the piano.

He opened the back door and the doves flew up in a grey flurry from the mess under the bird-table. It was colder out the back. Almost freezing.

- This is quite a garden. I had no idea.

Arthur's garden was surprisingly long given the modest size of his late Victorian terrace. This was because the railway line ran along the back of these houses, gradually diverging from them so that the further you lived from the railway station, the longer your garden was. Arthur's house was the furthest in the street from the station.

The garden was in a state, naturally squalid, like the house. It was guarded by tall untrimmed hedges from the neighbors on both sides (one neighbor was a Kwik-Fit Tyre Garage) and where it wasn't overgrown with brambles, nettles, alkanet, and cow parsley, it was full of rubbish, unfinished projects, bags of cement, broken and rusted tools, pliers, saws and spanners, reels and nets of wire, the ashen stains of



several long-extinguished fires, shears crooked open like the beak of a bird, a pyramid of wet sand, lengths of cable inexpertly braided around cracked wooden spools, plastic bags full of recyclable glass and rainwater, more than one overturned, wheel-free wheelbarrow.

- I've even got a pill box. Right at the top. Built to cover the railway line.
- Keep the Germans at bay.
- But perhaps not the Japanese.

The garden was a tough place. Full of nails and stones. Arthur was not embarrassed by it as he was by his house.

Sherwood was still going on about knotweed as he made his way gingerly forward, hopefully threading himself through the wreckage of Arthur's nonsense.

- It will live forever, said Arthur. The immortal flower.

The flower that no one cares for that thrives despite all hostility. Arthur admired it, but he hoped they wouldn't find any. It was getting dark. He squinted at Sherwood and picked up a length of blue nylon rope from by the woodpile. He picked up the frosty axe, too and weighed it, appraising its edge. He struck it into a log with a sudden snap. Sherwood turned round, startled.

- I don't like to leave it lying in the grass.

So early in the year, but the growth was still lush. A jungle of barbs and blades. You had to follow the path. The ground was sticky and slippery underfoot with years of fallen fruit. There might be snakes. Torpid still in this weather. To be bitten by a poisonous snake is like being struck on the hand with a hammer, he had read. Either of them might have made that joke about Japanese soldiers who do not know the war is over. Both of these men, pottering in this improbable place, looking so like somewhere that men had once been very busy and important but which had been abandoned as no good anymore, long ago. They kept picking up

things they thought interesting and dropping them again when they found they were not. A locomotive screeched.

- Freight, I expect, said Arthur. All hours.

Sherwood nodded amicably. A smell of woodsmoke drifted over as though from another century. The lights fizzed to life over the line. Dark clouds were gathering in a bad mood and thinking about rain.

- Mind out for the pond. You can't really see it.

Sherwood admired the pill box. Arthur kept the ivy off it, and it was clean enough inside. He offered to light Sherwood into it, but he wasn't keen. There were cobwebs, as in the house, but with fatter, nastier prey. The pill box might have been an animal's lair.

Arthur started to feel he wanted to get rid of Sherwood now. There was no need for him to be so persistent. The stakes were high. How did you get rid of knotweed inspectors? Even the half-baked ones take some shifting. Arthur suspected this one didn't want to move on just to have another ten doors shut in his face. Arthur was also afraid that they might find something that would finally snap the line, tying his reluctant buyers to this unattractive bargain. He was starting to feel thirsty. Gin helped him think.

Sherwood was crouched over, scrambling at the sodden leaves around him in the failing light, careless of the thorns. Scattering the leaves more and more excitedly. Arthur stared at him blurrily, one-eyed and cleared his throat. Sherwood was looking at his cards.

- Bad news, I think.

He turned to Arthur with the triumphant grin, revisiting his stupid fat face for the first time in more than a decade.

- Several corms of Japanese knotweed, *Fallopia japonica*. If it's here, it won't be the only place.



He rummaged in his bag, looking for his camera. The light would be tricky. He had forgotten about the cold now. Sherwood had never seen Japanese knotweed before in the wild and he was childish enough to admit as much.

Arthur could see the plant sticking up like stakes of bloody bamboo. Punji sticks. His language was blistering, but he kept it quiet. His first thought was that he could run away. He didn't need the money. He had got talking to a bloke in Moorgate once, who lived in a one-man tent in one of the busiest streets in the capital. He had made little shelves in there and had rows of plastic bottles. A cardboard door when he slept. He hardly deserved to be called homeless. So snug.

Arthur was suddenly very tired. He felt a purpose loosen, uncoil inside him. What had been unclear was lucid now. He knew what he had to do, and he wanted to do it. Scales fell away and left a certainty that was cool and crisp. Untangled. What a pleasure it is to perceive a simple truth, a light in a dark place. The obvious can be lovely.

Sherwood was scuttling around with treacherous glee on his haunches, like a crab, trying to get in the right light to take a picture. He was too excited to stand up. It was as he moved around that he saw Arthur with the nylon rope pulled tight between his angry fists. Clouds of concrete dust puffed out of his clay hands. He was just standing there looking at this chubby little man in his silly clothes and thinking about what he might do, but Sherwood could guess one of the options he was considering.

- You can get a grant.
- Don't take a picture. Or do. It doesn't matter.

Arthur twanged the rope, testing its super-human strength and Sherwood, like the fool and the coward that he was, that most men are, started to talk Arthur into it.

- I will be missed. Anderson knows where I am. We always do that. It's procedure.

This gave Arthur too much to think about and cut a too-easy channel for his thought.

- No one knows you are here. No one in this street will say that they have seen you, because they haven't. You've parked in the supermarket car park like everyone does, everyone on the whole estate. You haven't told Anderson or anyone that you are here. Pretty female estate agents do that, not sad men like you. Desperate cases.

- I'll cry for help.

- Go ahead. I've done that hundreds of times. No one will come.

- We don't have to report it. I'll say I never saw it. No one will know. You can trust me.

- I can't trust you. But I can make sure no one knows. I'll bury you under the pill box. With my wife.

Sherwood turned his back, the worst thing he could have done, and began to walk away, still on his knees, still without the sense to stand up.

Arthur was taken aback by his own conjuring of his wife. He had no wife. He had never been married. He had never spoken of this fictitious woman out loud before and was himself amazed to see her glimmer into life, only to be immediately buried beneath this WWII relic. He looked at the plants Sherwood, weeping now, had uncovered.

- Equistema. Horse-tail. Not Japanese knotweed. Not even a flower, strictly speaking.

One of the last survivors of the prehistoric world that had existed even before the evolution of insects. He could see how Sherwood had gone wrong, seeing what he wanted to see and being an idiot for a start. He watched him kneeling away through the mulch. Making for the pill box.



Arthur thought,  
- Oh no. I'll never get him out of there.  
And opened his mouth to say something.

*[Editor's note: You will see that proper formatting for dialog has not been used here. Normally, we would have required a change; however, as it stands, it does not detract from the story and, instead, offers a slightly interesting way of presenting it. What do you think?]*



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Robert Stone was born in Wolverhampton, UK. He works in a press-cuttings agency in London. Before that, he was a teacher and foreman of a London Underground station. He has two children and lives with his partner in Ipswich. He has had stories published in Stand, Panurge, 3:AM, The Write Launch, Eclectica, Configo, Here Comes Everyone, Book of Matches, Punt Volat, The Decadent Review, The Cabinet of Heed, Heirlock, The Main Street Rag, The Clackamas Literary Review, The Pearl River Quarterly, Angel Rust, Lunate, Blue Stem and Wraparound South. He has had three stories published in Nicholas Royle's Nightjar chapbook series. Micro stories have been published by Sledgehammer, Third Wednesday, Palm-Sized Press, 5x5, Star 82, The Ocotillo Review, deathcap, The Westchester Review, and Clover & White. A story appeared in Salt's Best British Stories 2020 volume. He tweets mostly about stories here at [@RobertJStone2](https://twitter.com/RobertJStone2). Website: <https://robertjstone.weebly.com/>  
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# AN INTERVIEW WITH DAN FLANIGAN



Dan Flanigan is a novelist, playwright, poet, and practicing lawyer. He holds a Ph.D. in History from Rice University and J.D. from the University of Houston. He taught Jurisprudence at the University of Houston and American Legal History at the University of Virginia. His first published book was his Ph.D. dissertation, [The Criminal Law of Slavery and Freedom, 1800-1868](#).

He moved on from academia to serve the civil rights cause as a school desegregation lawyer, followed by a long career as a finance attorney in private law practice. He became a name partner in the Polsinelli law firm in Kansas City, created its Financial Services practice, chaired its Real Estate & Financial Services Department for two decades, and established the firm's New York City office and served as its managing partner until October 2022.

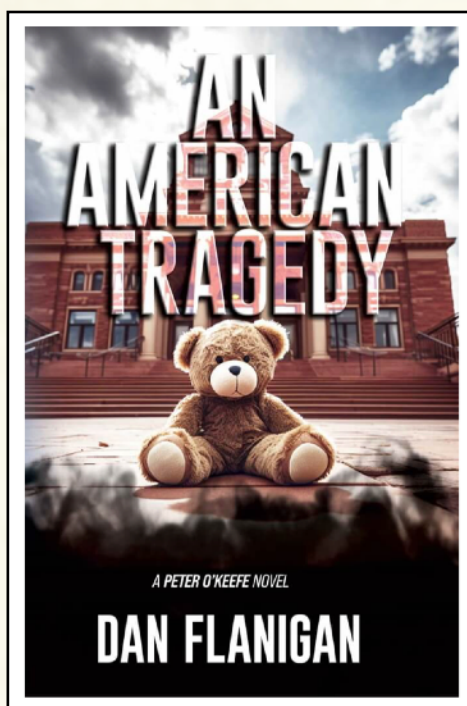
Recently, he has been able to turn his attention to his lifelong ambition—creative writing. In 2019 he released a literary trifecta including [Mink Eyes](#), the first in the Peter O'Keefe series, [Dewdrops](#), a collection of shorter fiction, and [Tenebrae: A Memoir of Love and Death](#).

**B&P:** Why did you want to be a writer? You started young, then detoured, but what was the motivation?

**DF:** I can't remember precisely, but it was a high school English class when we begged our teacher to stop making us diagram sentences and let us read and discuss some books. Once that happened, I do remember obnoxiously resisting the whole



idea of a “theme” in a story. But I came around. And somehow, from nowhere really, it just seized me, a mild but still powerful “spiritual” sort of experience: I wanted to “be a writer.” I remember creeping up to our English teacher priest who was presiding over afternoon study hall and said, “Father, I wonder if I could be a writer?” He said, “I think you could because you’re such a good reader.” That was enough for me.



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as readers can attest). But then a close friend of mine, reading the O’Keefe books, said something like “O’Keefe sure sounds and acts a lot like Dan Flanigan. It’s like having you there on the page.” But I assure you that my life has not been nearly as exciting as O’Keefe’s or Harrigan’s.

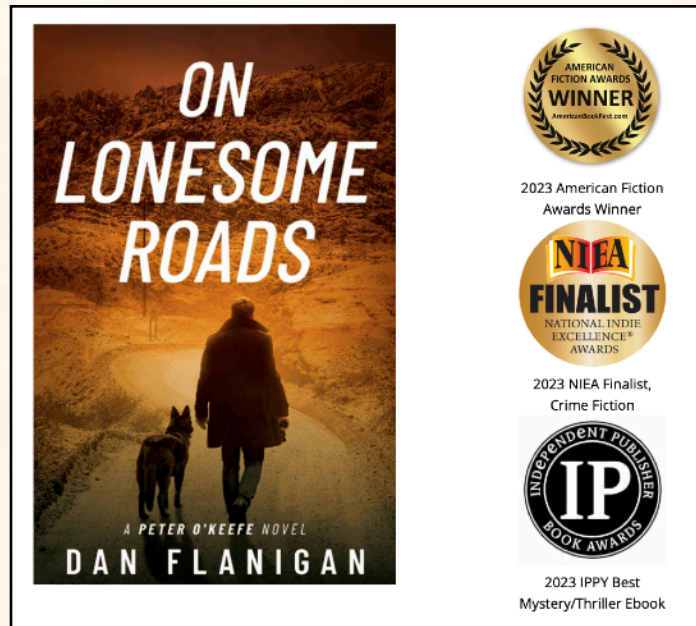
**B&P:** What was the worst part of publishing your first book? Any regrets?

**DF:** Putting it out there in the world and unsure it was worthy of it.

**B&P:** How much of you is in your characters and why do you find them compelling enough to write about?

**DF:** Not that much and a lot. I have deliberately tried not to put myself into my primary character in the series, Peter O’Keefe, and to help me avoid that, I have tried to put aspects of myself in secondary character Mike Harrigan, lawyer and O’Keefe’s childhood “blood brother” (not exactly self-flattering

**B&P:** Why do you find them compelling enough to write about?



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struggling hero they can bond with in a “sibling” or “best friend” sort of way. And I work hard on my so-called “secondary” characters, which at times have already and will in the future become primary, and those are also, I hope, “real world.”

**B&P:** What lessons have you learned from youth and what lessons from the first time you wrote before the detour, to now?

**DF:** After a burst of short stories and poems in high school, the “detour” happened. I don’t think I learned anything from that experience except the “be a writer” drive never left despite many decades of multiple detours.

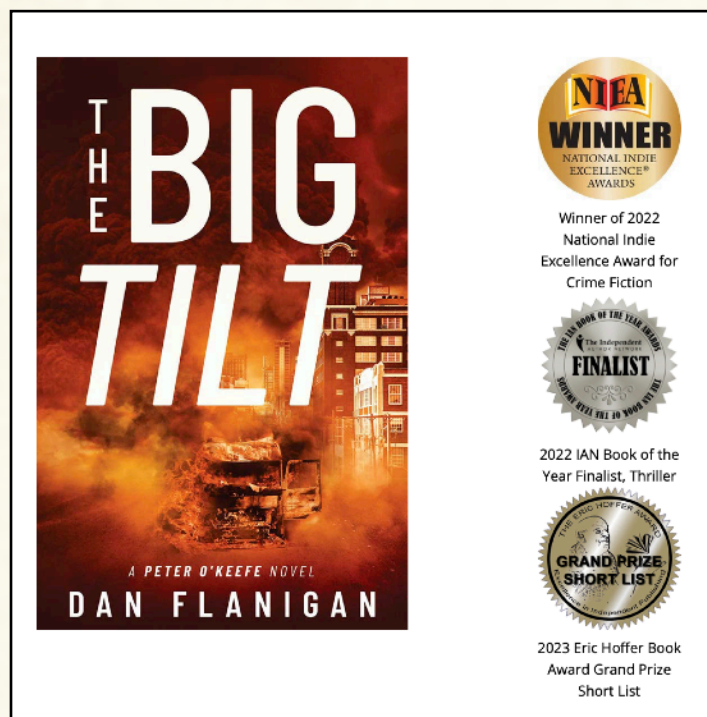
From “youth,” I’m not sure I learned any “lessons” except from my parents how not to live. I came out of it with enough unhappiness and neuroses that I doubt I would “be a writer” without them and have become perversely grateful for them. All the “lessons” I’ve learned in life came from addiction and recovery (cursed, damned, and saved; sin and redemption; spiritual death and resurrection).

**DF:** O’Keefe is a guy who is failing, achieving, searching, sometimes finding, struggling with the same things many in my generation have done, so he is “real world” in that sense though he lives a more exciting life than most of us. But even the excitement aspect is “real world,” nothing that either hasn’t or couldn’t have happened in “real life.” I am trying to give the readers a complicated,



**B&P:** How do you handle bad reviews?

**DF:** Not well. Luckily, there have not been many negative ones. I have the



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thinnest of skins. My daughter reads all reviews with the request only to send me negative ones that say something that might be helpful. And I have been helped by at least a couple of reviews that constructively identified problems.

**B&P:** What's your writing process like?

**DF:** Best description I can come up with is “manic depressive.” I have always been disciplined in my legal work (though maybe the

right word is “obsessed,” thus eliminating the need for discipline) but not so much so with writing. I don’t write every day. I often don’t write for many days. I am best when I can create a three-day or four-day weekend and just give myself to it full immersion and not be in a hurry about it. At the same time, I am terrified to give up my “day job” entirely and be relegated to nothing but that empty screen every morning. But I find it interesting that after taking two years to write *An American Tragedy* (with many ups and downs and even abandonments of the project), I am moving along much better and more “disciplined” with the current book. I think some of that, though not all, is feeling time’s footsteps clomping louder and closer behind me. In all events, writer’s block is a constant issue for me. The best remedy I have found for it is to skip the scene(s) currently stifling me and move onto

something I know I can do. The more I get written down (and thus the greater investment in and commitment to the work as a whole), the easier it is to go back and fill in--and some of those once seemingly impossible scenes have turned out to be the best.

**B&P:** For those not familiar with it, please explain the Peter O'Keefe series and why a new reader should give it a try?

**DF:** Cribbing from the series description at the end of my most recent book, *An American Tragedy: How did we get here?* Dan Flanigan, after a long career as a finance, banking, and bankruptcy lawyer in which he was both a player in and witness to some of the dramatic transformations of our era, intends to provide at least a few of the answers to that question through a series of novels, recounting, from the 1980s to the present day, the life and adventures of his private detective hero Peter O'Keefe and the assorted characters in O'Keefe's orbit as they wade through some of the legendary scams, schemes, and scandals of our troubled times.

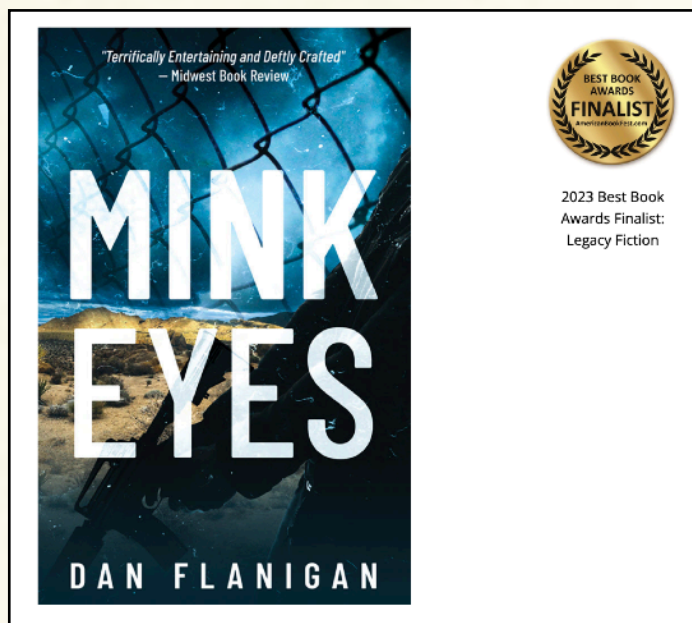
I think it is important to emphasize for potential readers what many reviewers have said: Each of the novels is stand-alone. If you pick up one of the later in the series, you can enjoy it without having read the earlier ones.

**B&P:** You write poetry? How did that come about and how much of a poet do you consider yourself to be?

**DF:** In my high school "burst," I wrote quite a bit of poetry but not much after that other than "in my head." I did through all the years read a lot of poetry and especially late in life immersed myself in Yeats among others. But when my wife died in 2011, I wanted to write something about her last illness and death (with flashes back of our 45 years together). I started out trying to do it in novel form, but it just didn't seem at all interesting. I found that poetry (both verse and prose)



let me condense things and hopefully make them much more powerful through the condensing and the rhythm and imagery of poetry. So I wrote *Tenebrae: A Memoir of Love and Death*. But even it was primarily a narrative (though there were a few



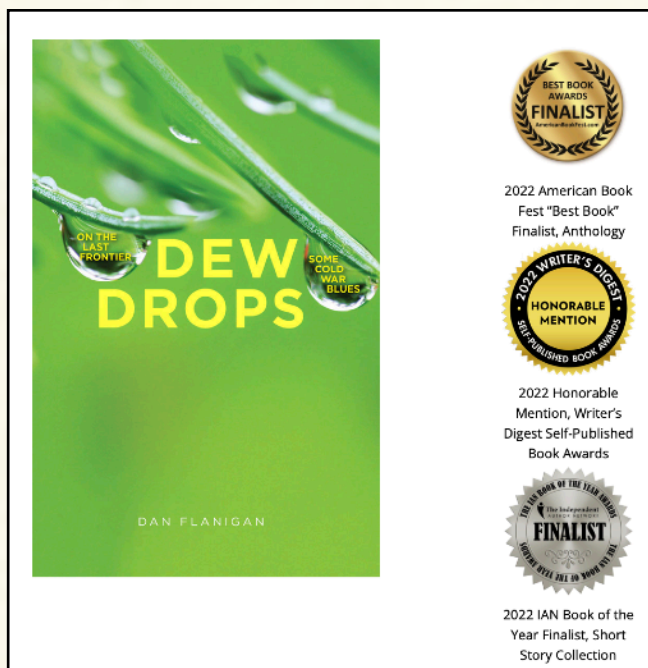
non-narrative poems in the collection). If I ever write poetry again, and I might, it will almost certainly be “narrative.” I don’t think my feelings and musings are interesting enough to express other than through characters acting in the world, i.e. “story.”

In addition to *Tenebrae*, I have published a book of short fiction titled *Dewdrops*.

Learn more or buy <https://amzn.to/3y6ydlp>

**B&P:** You were a civil rights lawyer before changing to finance and bankruptcy. How do you feel your lawyer side helps your writer side, if at all?

**DF:** As noted above, some of the main themes and plot lines of the O’Keefe series are the scams, schemes, and scandals of our times. My finance and bankruptcy career put me in the midst of many of these. For example, the mink farm situation in my first O’Keefe book, *Mink Eyes*, had its origins in a case I handled as a young lawyer (but without the “fun,” i.e. intrigue, sex, and violence). My civil rights career was brief and, ultimately, sad because in the school desegregation area where I was most involved, we were ultimately stymied by massive white resistance (active and sometimes violent in places like Boston, passive, i.e. move across the state line, in Kansas City) and Congressional



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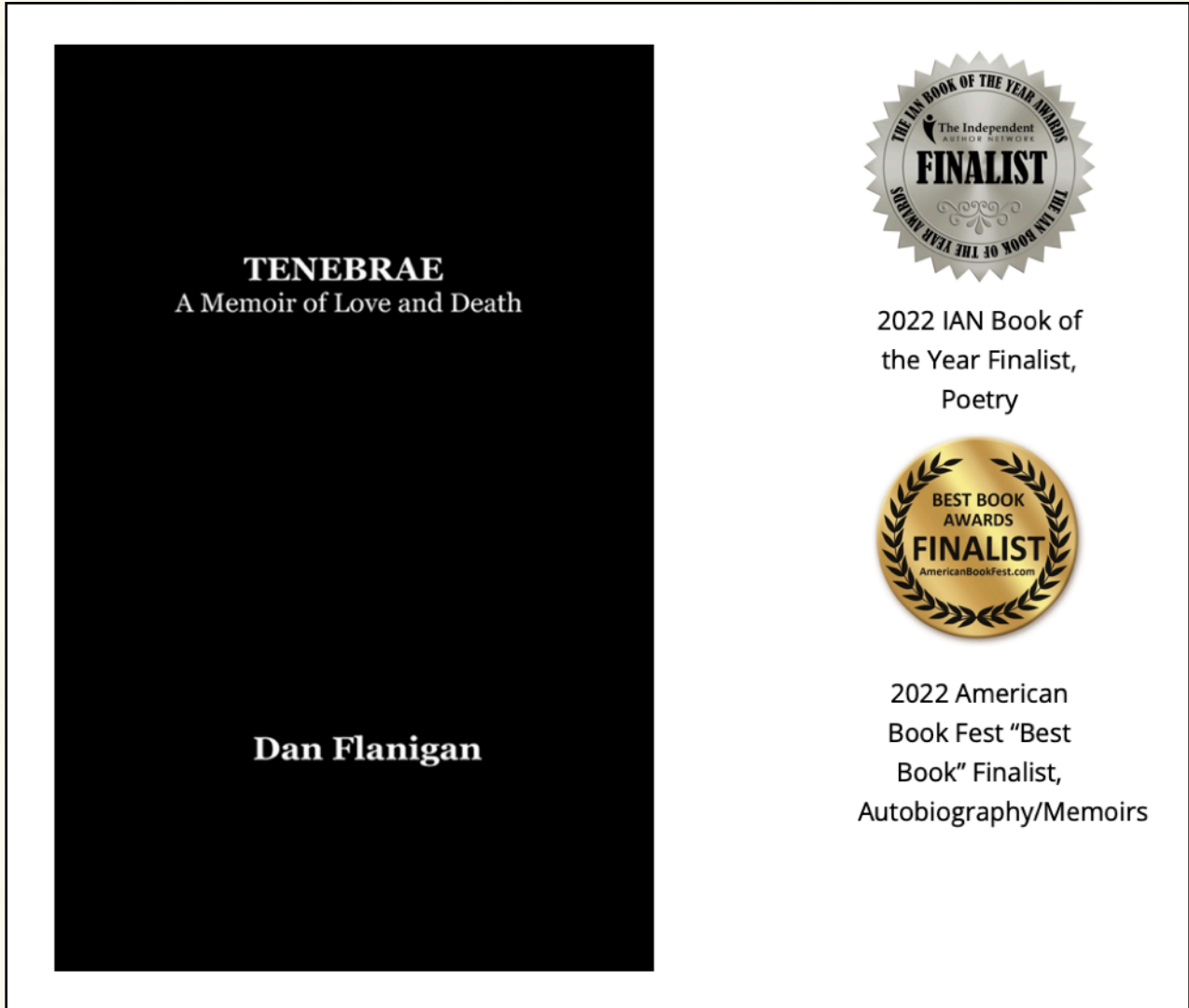
legislation (the Byrd Amendment in 1976, which prohibited the federal Department of Health, Education from cutting off funds to school districts that refused to bus their children for purposes of desegregation and that forbade the use of federal money to pay for busing of children beyond the school nearest their homes).

Most of all, it left me (which may be reflected in some of my writing) with the sense of the failed promise of the 60s and the civil rights movement (at least its school desegregation initiatives) and the thwarted initiatives of LBJ's Great Society. Defeated, exhausted, or just without sufficient gumption and staying power, we set about becoming Yuppies instead.

**B&P:** You and your late wife, Candy Gambrell, founded Sierra Tucson, the alcohol/drug treatment center. What was the impetus for that, and how does that affect your writing style and character analysis?

**DF:** It grew out of my own addiction and treatment experience and my desperate gambit to successfully recover. I disliked everything about my life—my town, my profession, my marriage--and I felt I had to try something else, something better for the world, or I would slip back into alcoholic hell. So, I put it all on the line. It turned out that Candy was more than up to the challenge (I had been misjudging her all our lives together), and we did it. But we couldn't keep it because we didn't have enough capital to get beyond the initial startup operating





Learn more or buy <https://amzn.to/4bWs67n>

losses and had to sell it, but it was the experience itself that was crucial. And, incidentally, I enjoyed a burst of writing during that period that, despite an additional long “detour” thereafter, established the foundations for the literary work I have been able to accomplish in the last ten years. Ironically, I ended up not only in the same marriage but back in the same town and profession—but a different man (though still with many faults). That, to paraphrase Robert Frost, made all the difference.

**B&P:** What's next for Dan, the author and poet?

**DF:** I am working on the fifth O'Keefe book. I am surprised I have become so committed to this O'Keefe series. I am an accidental crime writer. I wrote Mink Eyes as a detective story to make more interesting what I envisioned originally as a purely "literary" novel. But the series gives me opportunities, which I hope I am somewhat capitalizing on, to write "literary" but pulse-quickening meditations on some of the things that have made us who we are (and aren't), create a large gallery of characters and observe/develop them over time, some over a long period of time, in the crucible of dramatic societal changes and exterior and interior challenges and crises. I may write something else someday, but have no specific plans to do so.

We thank Dan for his time answering our many questions. Click on the book covers in this interview to learn more or buy the books.

You can find him online on one of his many social media platforms.

Website: <https://danflaniganbooks.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AuthorDanFlanigan>

Twitter: [https://twitter.com/\\_DanFlanigan](https://twitter.com/_DanFlanigan)



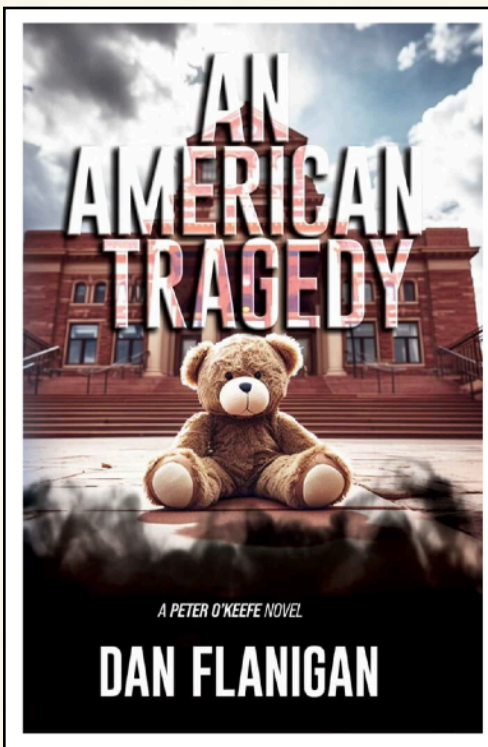
Watch Dan Flanigan on *Writers on Writers* <https://www.youtube.com/live/zQp40zUfOuY?si=sOK7Jl1dX6PjF9dv>



# BOOKS 2 READ SAMPLER

## An American Tragedy by Dan Flanigan

### CHAPTER 21



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FOR HIS FIRST visit to the site, O’Keefe wanted to be alone. No distractions. He told Hartley to hold off on the photographer until next time.

“All by your lonesome, huh?” Hartley said. “Spooky.”  
“No worries now that Bitson’s cleansed the place.”

He hadn’t visited the building for years, not since the last time he’d been the one to pick Kelly up at the end of the day, which he’d done only rarely, in part because he couldn’t always be depended on to arrive on time—or sometimes at all. Annie and he had still been married then, though they seemed to have taken up permanent residence on the bitter cusp of imminent divorce. They’d never seemed particularly “made for each other.” Just the opposite. But in

truth, it had been mostly his fault: the drugs, the drink, and the idiotic idea—one he’d not been fully conscious of at the time—that if a marriage wasn’t near-perfect, it wasn’t worth preserving.

He had obtained and studied the building plans. Typical of its era, it was brick, two stories, plus a semi-finished basement. Double entry doors opened into an abbreviated foyer where another set of double doors led to the building proper, a long hallway with four classrooms, two on each side. At the end of the corridor, a staircase led up to a second floor with administrative offices and a teacher's lounge. In the basement was an unfinished room, now infamous, containing the boiler and other utilities over which Marvin Smith had presided. Across the hallway was the also now-infamous large multi-purpose room used for naps, art, music, and special programs and gatherings.

A security guard greeted him. It would be ironic, O'Keefe thought, if the guard refused him entrance and turned out to be one of George's people, his own employee. But the guard was not his employee and did let him in. They'd turned enough lights on for him to see but not to see well. He wondered how his photos would come out and made a mental note to request proper lighting when the photographer came on-site.

Ginny's classroom was the first one on the left. He switched on the lights. Nothing noticeably different from the last time he'd seen it six years earlier. A bit scuffed up and shabbier than the fanatical festive spic-and-span orderliness of Betsy Mortimer's Children's Clinic, but far more comforting ... the miniature desks, the clutter of toys, the crude drawings pinned haphazardly to the walls, the goofy uplifting slogans on banners and blackboard. Here is the Eden from which we fall.

He'd forgotten about the window in the doorway, though not the four windows spaced evenly along the opposite wall. Those looked onto the parking lot, where parents and others came and went throughout the day, and onto the adjacent building used by the church for administrative offices and various parish support functions and meeting areas.



The church people had initially denied vehemently that such abuses would be possible given the busyness of the area, all the comings and goings, and insisted they'd never witnessed anything remotely suspicious, nor heard one complaint of any kind of abuse in all the years the school had operated.

That was before some of the parents announced their intention to sue the church as well as the school. After that, it had been “no comment.”

Between the two classrooms were restrooms, the boys' on one side of the hallway, the girls' on the other. Crimes were alleged to have occurred in both. Some of the children were barely toilet- trained when they started at the school. Others occasionally had accidents or just needed help. Money for teachers' aides was scarce and volunteers sparse. If kids needed help, their teacher might ask a colleague across the hall to take an occasional look into her classroom while she accompanied the student to the bathroom. The female teachers—and they never seemed to be male—had to help the boys as well as the girls. The bathrooms were alike except for urinals in the boys' and two additional stalls in the girls'. There were windows, but they were frosted. Both rooms had stalls. Unfortunate, O'Keefe thought. While it was difficult to believe that the alleged abuses could have occurred without detection given the number of windows and doors and fairly constant and unpredictable traffic in this environment, the partitioned toilet areas allowed for concealment. The prosecution had already picked up on that theme, and the children's stories had begun to emphasize it.

But the real problem for the defense was the basement, where most of the alleged horrific events had occurred. Sliding his hand along the banister, O'Keefe felt his way down the steps, wondering if they'd deliberately left the basement lights off. As he felt along the wall for a light switch, he noticed the clicking, whirring, and bumping sounds that since childhood had made him anxious when he found himself alone in dark places. He felt the light switch, flipped it, and

tensed, anticipating a revelation of something in the hallway to be afraid of. Of course there was nothing. The hallway just looked old, bruised, defeated.

He found the multi-purpose room. Kelly's graduation ceremony had taken place there. She'd been five then, and blushing proud of her achievement, even if not quite sure exactly what she'd achieved other than a vague but somehow special marker of progress toward the cherished goal of "growing up." In the boisterously decorated room, each set of parents had received a hand-decorated program made by their child. Annie still probably had theirs stored away somewhere.

Now, in this quite different present, he noticed the complete absence of windows. No lock on the door either. Marvin Smith could easily have come in, but so could others—teachers, administrative staff, parents. Surely the other teachers and administrative people would travel back and forth to the room at will and unannounced, and maybe the parents too, when picking up their children.

Marie Dreyer, the school's principal, had greeted the abuse allegations with contempt, and had been vociferous about it, using words and phrases like "insane" and "hysterical idiocy" and "witchhunt." The authorities had responded by promptly opening an investigation of Marie Dreyer. Not long after, a couple of children identified her as an occasional witness to the abuse, and it was rumored that she might even have been an active participant.

"That didn't silence her," Hartley had said, "but it sent everyone else involved with the school rushing for cover. None of the other staff had supported the accusations against Virginia and Marvin, but they aren't saying anything publicly in their favor either." O'Keefe intended to try to interview them but couldn't force them unless Judge Snyder could be persuaded to order depositions, which was unlikely. It was enough to hope that during the remaining proceedings Snyder wouldn't maintain the unmistakable initial hostility to the defense he'd shown at the preliminary hearings. Certainly he'd do nothing special for them, nothing out



of the ordinary that would allow the parents and the media to paint him as a black-robed abettor of the depraved.

At the back of the larger room, behind a wall extending the width of a room, there was a nook with hooks in its walls that had served as a cloak room. There was no door, just openings at both ends. Vile things were said to have occurred here. If any of it were true, the evildoers must have been seized with a desperate, insane courage to take the risk, so easy would it have been for someone to come through the unlocked main door and through to the nook and behold the shocking scene. Ginny seemed the opposite of a risk-taker.

He crossed the hallway to the boiler room and opened the door. The door was a little too large for the doorway, and the floor squeaked, as if in pain, as the door dragged across it. Since the place had been untended for weeks, the spiders had wasted no time asserting their dominion. But aside from the webs and the crumbly stuccoed walls and ceiling, the place was surprisingly clean and Mr. Smith's nook tidy.

On his worktable were a couple of pencils and a small, crumpled notebook with writing on it that appeared to be a to-do list. There was a cot, a dark-gray pillow, a thin mattress covered by a sheet, and a soft, thin blanket. Very comfy. Dainty, even — disturbingly so. He wondered what that might mean, and whatever it really meant, how the prosecution might spin it.

On his way out, he spotted a padlock latch at eye level on the inside of the door. Why would anyone want to lock the door to a boiler room from the inside? Had this been installed at the time the building was constructed, probably in the 1930s at the latest? It didn't look that old. If Marvin Smith had installed it, that could be a problem. Hartley would need to ask Marie Dreyer about that.

He climbed back to the main floor. At the far end of the hallway toward the entrance, the security guard was shifting from one foot to another, broadcasting an air of hostile impatience.

“Almost done,” O’Keefe called out. “Just need to do the second floor.”

He waited for the guard to say something, which didn’t happen. O’Keefe mumbled, “Okay,” and headed up the stairs, pretty sure he’d find nothing of interest since there’d been no mention of anything untoward occurring on that floor.

The man navigated his van through the streets adjacent to the St. Stephen’s complex. It was now a mostly commercial zone, older buildings of the same vintage as the Operation Go! structure, most of the businesses closed on this Sunday afternoon. Only a single bedraggled block of houses and a shabby two-story brick apartment building indicated that the area had once been residential, and those stragglers looked like they were only barely managing to hold on for dear life against the commercial onslaught. But the whole area had so deteriorated that they now risked little danger of anyone even bothering to want to tear them down. Which worked for him just fine. It was unlikely that some resident would notice him circling and report a suspicious vehicle to the police. The people who lived here were the type likely to still be snoring in bed, even on a Sunday afternoon, and even if awake, they probably wouldn’t care enough to call anyway.

He found three available spots around the St. Stephen’s quadrangle where he could position his van inconspicuously and still be able to observe the Operation Go! building entrance and the Jeep Grand Wagoneer parked in the lot. To minimize the risk of attracting unwanted attention, he could stay for a while in each place, then move to another. But even if someone challenged him, he’d simply explain that he often came here to observe this horrible place where his son and the other children had been violated. It was part of his grieving process, approved and even encouraged by his therapist.



He'd used only two of his observation posts when the man exited the building, walked around to the side and into the parking lot, checked out each of the windows of the witch's classroom and took photos. He understood the man to be Peter O'Keefe, a private detective hired by the witch's lawyer to assist her in thwarting justice. He'd begun following O'Keefe, thinking that the PI might be doing the same to him and other parents of the violated children, sneaking sinisterly around, maybe even stalking the children themselves. Would he be trying to dig up dirt on the families? Maybe do even worse?

No way was that going to happen. He would turn the tables. He'd already visited O'Keefe's office, taken the elevator to the man's floor, walked up and down the hallway, ready, if challenged, with a story about looking for a business that was apparently no longer a tenant.

But this was the first time he'd observed the detective in the flesh for more than a few seconds. Taller than the average man, above six feet for sure, slim, dark hair worn a bit longer than most people were wearing it these days, short-sleeved polo-type pink shirt, jeans, loafers, no socks.

As he watched O'Keefe climb into the Wagoneer, Ralph's revulsion, turning physical, rose in his gorge.

Keeping what he calculated was a safe distance, he pursued. Ralph congratulated himself. He was getting good at this.

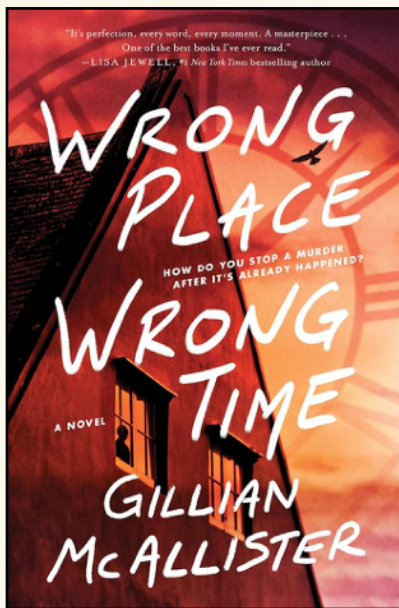
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# BOOK REVIEW

BY JILL HEDGECOCK

## Wrong Place, Wrong Time, by Gillian McAllister



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“Wrong Place, Wrong Time” (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2023 reprint, paperback, 416 pages, \$10.99) by Gillian

McAllister is a twisty suspense thriller full of tense moments and intriguing mysteries. Jen, a devoted mother and happily married wife, witnesses her son, Todd, do the unthinkable. In the wee hours of Halloween, eighteen-year-old Todd murders a man and is caught by the police while Jen watches in horror. Just like in the movie, “Groundhog Day,” the next morning, Jen wakes up on the day that her son will commit murder. But unlike the famous movie, Jen continues to move backward in time each morning.

With each revisit of the past, Jen finds clues she failed to recognize as signs that something was amiss. As Jen relives her life, regrets surface as she realizes she has been too caught up in her job and has neglected her son.

She begins to change certain things as she relives the past hoping to alter her son’s behavior. With each step back in time, Jen wonders if her meddling will be enough to stop her son from ruining his life as she worries that she might make things worse.

In one prior day, Jen removes the murder weapon, a knife, from her son’s backpack. Even so, she keeps regressing in time. One of Jen’s greatest regrets was not being there for her father when he passed away. When she wakes on the day of her dad’s passing, she tempts fate by going to her father’s house and changes the past. But even correcting her worst regret is not enough to prevent her freefall as years gone by resurface as her new ‘now.’ What is she missing? There are definitely twists and turns that McAllister throws at the reader without compromising the fundamental heart of this family drama.

“Wrong Place Wrong Time” has been sold in 31 foreign territories and became an instant global bestseller. It was selected for the Radio 2 book club and was the Reese’s Book Club August 2022 pick. It debuted as Number Two on the New York Times Bestseller List. Fans of Matt Haig’s “The Midnight Library” and Audrey Niffenegger’s “The Time Traveler’s Wife” will



enjoy this book. Part mystery, part time travel, and one hundred percent heart, this book kept me turning the pages.

Gillian McAllister was born in Sutton Coldfield and raised in Tamworth, England. She worked as a solicitor in two Birmingham-based legal practices, before focusing on her writing. She is a British Sunday Times and New York Times bestselling author. Her seven novels include “Everything But The Truth,” “The Evidence Against You,” and “Just Another Missing Person” which became an instant international bestseller, hitting the Sunday Times and Canadian Bestsellers list. Her work has been published in 37 languages. You can find her on X and Instagram at @gillianmauthor and at [www.gillianmcallister.com](http://www.gillianmcallister.com).



*Jill Hedgecock is the author of the suspense novels **Between Shadow's Eyes** and **Rhino in the Room**. To learn more visit: [www.jillhedgecock.com](http://www.jillhedgecock.com)*

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Non-Fiction

# MY GOD LOVES ME MORE!

BY WILLIAM GENSBURGER

It seems to me that throughout the history of mankind, one premise has stood as the prime motivator of all action: a just cause empowered by the most powerful deity. In short, My God loves me more!

Ancient tribes of men, wrapped up in fear-beliefs, offered sacrifices to appease the wrath of the Gods of the wind, volcano, and Earth. And in the name of their God, they ventured out to capture additional territory in order to live in peace.

Throughout the ensuing centuries, this quest for peace has become more complex, steeped in ritual language, song, and art, but with the same overriding premise: My God loves me more! Depending where you popped out in the world would determine which God you might refer to.

In India, all traffic stops when their sacred cow decides to sit in the middle of the street. You are not permitted to “shoo” this God, although, in the West, we are happy to eat It.

The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and others covered all bases with many Gods, each designated to a particular territory over the mortals. For them, it was pluralistic: My Gods love me more! Even when they did not.

That’s the thing about deity—mere mortals cannot compare, cannot explain, justify, and indeed, cannot rule over—unless you conquer their people, in which case, all things are possible.



The Crusaders wanted to purge the heathens. The heathens wished to destroy the infidels. With such support, it became fashionable to try to straighten the other side out; after all, you had to prove that your God loved you more!

Atheists have no God. They love themselves more as the ruler of their lives, although many an atheist in a life-threatening situation resort to the plea, “Oh God, don’t let me die.”

Just as brothers may squabble over the value of their father’s love, humans obsess about their worth and the worthiness of their creator’s blessings. Like all things temporal, these blessings are temporal and tend to require ongoing renewal by those in power at the time.

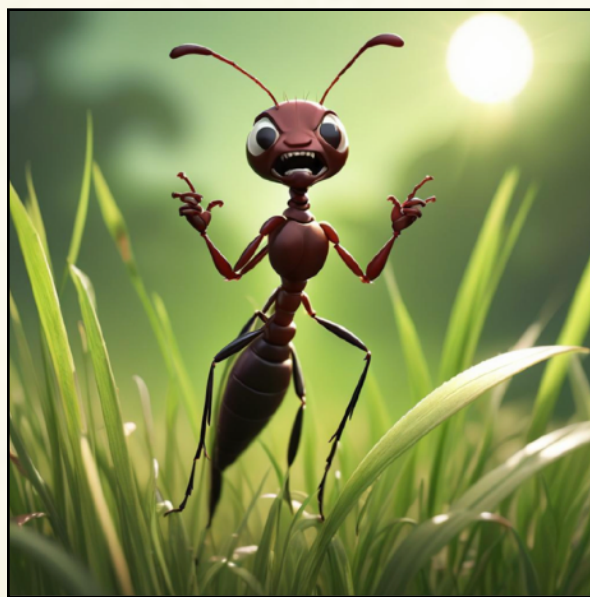
In contemporary times, we see the Christian churches, so diverse and splintered into different flavors—one denomination for each believer—that they cannot find a

common unity within their own precepts, regardless of what they claim. Yet they remain in the judgment of others who look for a common God.

I suspect that long after the humans of the planet have extinguished themselves through toxic pollution or technological bickering or war, the next species to inherit the planet might well stand high upon the rubble of the once great and quickly lost human world and, with a

gasp of insight proclaim in whatever form it can: “My God loves me more!”

From: *Homo Idiotus* by William Gensburger (2016)



# AFTER THE FALL

A SHORT STORY BY BEN MACNAIR

It had been a while since I had last seen Jack. With him, though, that was never anything unusual. If you did not see Jack for a while, you knew he was alright.

When you saw him for longer than a month in any one place that was where the trouble started.

I last saw him three months ago. He called our little town home, but it was always somewhere for him to arrive at or leave; it never seemed to be a place for him to stay.

I don't remember the first time I met him, and I was never sure if the last time I saw him would be the last time I saw him.

I, and some of our old friends, had received a postcard. Jack had said that he had found himself a girl, and the girl had brought trouble. Jack needed a place to stay, and here seemed the perfect place. As he said, it was right on the harbourfront and just big enough to get lost in but just small enough for someone in a room to know what you were getting up to.

It had been mid-October 1971 when that postcard arrived. Jack always made an entrance, and the next time was no different. Dean and I had seen him down at the Seafront Diner. He was playing boogie woogie piano with an old jazz cat blowing away on a saxophone. In the corner, tapping her foot, was a beautiful blonde, looking like you would expect Marilyn Monroe to look if she was in a place like this. You just knew that she would be Jack's girl.

Now, Jack was not what you would call a classically handsome man. He was a little on the short side, and he had a face that would be described as being lived in.



He had left school at 14 and left and came back a number of times. Our parents had said that he was trouble. At the time, I had defended him, but now I knew they were right.

Jack was trouble to people who didn't know him well. He was even more trouble to anyone that he did know.

Dean and I had recently graduated. I was going to be a writer; Dean was going to work in defense. It had been what the president had promised was going to be a golden age. We had just seen Vietnam and Altamont, and as we were soon to find out, Nixon was one of the bigger liars going. The three of us had been for military training, but we never made the grade. I had been shortsighted, Dean had found out he was colorblind, and Jack, well, Jack was a little too short.

No one had said that you had to have perfect vision or be of a certain height, but those were the rules then. We had heard that Rob had lost the use of a leg and that Charlie had seen things that he didn't want to see.

We knew that we were lucky, but it had destroyed our friends' lives. We always asked how they were. Dean and I felt bad, but we put it down to Survivor's guilt.

That was all that we could do.

Rob tried to blank some of the pain with drink, but we were there for him when he realized he had a problem. He is on the mend now, but we have to keep an eye on him.

As he said, the line was only thin, and he needed help to stay on it. We are his safety net.

Charlie had not been seen for months. Last we heard, he was traveling and wanted to see some of the world. We waited for word from him, but it was never forthcoming.

Dean had a job with the local army base. I had a staff job at the local weekly rag. I really wanted to write the great American novel, but as Rob had pointed out, at

least this way, I get paid to write, and the characters, stories, and people that I will write about as fact may sometimes work their way into fiction. I had my misgivings; after all, I had known the people here all my life, and it would seem wrong to write about them, even if I did my best to hide their true identities.

Rachel was the name of Jack's latest squeeze. She had been a singer but owed some money and had to get away. Jack's life had always read more like a movie than real life, but that was always the type of man he was. When you were with Jack, you just couldn't help but be whisked away by his ideas and his plans. Of course, none of them ever worked out the way that Jack would have wanted.

That was why he was never in one place for more than a week or so. He was charming, but his people skills were always somewhat lacking. Dean, Rob, Charlie, and I always tried to do our best for him, but he never saw our efforts as help. He always said it was charity, and when his luck came in, then he would repay us everything that he owed.

Luck never rode on a horse or could be found in gambling, drinking, or womanizing. Jack always attracted trouble. When he was around, it was always best to keep your head down and your nose clean. Over the years, the four of us had always forgiven Jack, and that took a lot of forgiving.

He had taken Rob's girlfriend while he was in Vietnam, and just after midnight, after he had his way, he left her to make her own way home on a twenty-mile road.

When I first started work on the paper, he pretended to be all types of people. I had followed the leads, only to find him there. Then one day, I got a scoop, but it was so unbelievable that I knew it just had to be Jack. The junior I sent got the big exclusive story, and now he is on more money than me, and he has his own column. That was always the type of joker that our so-called friend was.

Dean had come into the office one day in October with the postcard.



“Hey, do you think we should see him this time?” asked Dean, almost rhetorically.

“So he can spin the same lies and bullshit, say he is sorry, and then skip town with more of our money. No, he has had his chances with me this time.”

“Yeah, that was what Rob said. But just for one night, it would be good to see him”.

“Yeah,” I said, almost laughing. It would be good to see him, spend a night with him, and put the world to rights, but just one night, okay?”

“Yeah, alright. He will be in town early November. Says he has a new girl he wants us to meet. Her name’s Rachel. He says she looks like Marilyn Monroe. Just be his luck”.

Then, one night in November, the four of us were together. We were sitting in the diner. There was early Elvis playing on the radio, and the Beatles had been on a little earlier. We had grown up on this music. The four of us had been to see Hendrix. We thought he was the golden boy—played some of the most soulful guitar imaginable. *The Wind Cries Mary*, *Purple Haze*, *Castles Made of Sand*, *Little Wing*, *Foxy Lady*, and countless others. Now, even he was gone, and the four of us, as we sat there, knew that things had changed.

Jack needed money to help Rachel. He knew that we wanted to help him, but not everyone could. Rob had been in no position to help. As he pointed out, now that he had lost the use of a leg, he was of no use to anyone.

Jack still owed me big from the last time he visited. He owed me more than a thousand dollars. My job pays quite well, but not well enough to be able to write off a debt to a friend of that size.

Dean wanted to help, but he was in the same boat.

“Call yourself friends?” asked Jack.

“Yes,” I had replied, “but if you were any kind of friend to us, you would not keep taking money from us that you could not afford to pay back.”

“Hey guys, how are you? Long time no see?” said a strange yet familiar voice behind us.

We all turned and looked at once. It was Charlie. He looked better than he ever had before. We all stood to welcome him to the table.

“So, how are you all doing?” said Charlie.

“Not so well, to be honest,” replied Rob. “I lost my leg in Vietnam, and now I can’t get a job.”

“Oh, man, I am sorry to hear that. How is Sarah?”

“Sorry,” replied Rob, glaring at Jack, “I don’t know. We are no longer together.”

“Oh, that’s rough.”

“No, not really. I think it is all for the best.”

“So Dean, you still going on strong?”

“I am working down the army base.”

“Good work?”

“It pays well, which is something.”

“And you, are you Hemingway yet?” he asked, looking at me.

“God, no. I work for the paper.”

“And Jack, still keeping to the beat?”

“I wish. I need a thousand dollars, and I need it now”.

“Well, I would help you if I could, but I don’t have that sort of money just to hand out.”

“Yeah...You’re as much use as this lot, aren’t you?” said Jack as he stormed out.

“Trouble, eh? He never changes,” said Charlie, to himself as much to anyone else.



We left the diner early and headed to the pictures. It was a Gregory Peck film, none of us could remember which one, but we queued in the rain just so the four of us could be together. Dean, Rob, Charlie and myself watched the film, knowing that we were all on the cusp of adulthood, and knowing that the coming weeks would be full of trouble.

I was in the office the following Monday morning when the phone rang. It was the police, wanting to know if I knew where Jack was. Rachel had been found by the side of a road. She was alive and as well as could be expected, but she had no memory of how she got there or what she was doing there.

I explained that Jack was in some sort of trouble. He and Rachel owed some money, but I didn't know who to or how much. I also knew I had not heard from Jack in more than four days, but that was par for the course with him.

I was in the diner with Charlie the following Thursday when Jack walked in. He looked like Hell. He usually looked bad: too much drink, too many cigarettes, too many late nights, but this time, he looked worse than he had done in a while.

We made small talk for a while until he offered a sort of mumbled apology for his behavior last week. He and Charlie had always been mates. That was true; it was Dean and myself, Charlie and Jack, and Rob, whom we had met at high school. It was only the five of us. I knew that it broke Jack's heart to see Charlie like this. It broke my heart as well, but now I could see that Charlie was getting over the worst of his experience and was able to face better days.

At the time, we never knew how few better days Charlie would have.

Jack had said that he needed to get away. Things were getting too heavy for him at the moment. He owed big money, and now that Rachel had been hurt by the same men who had beaten him, the police were after him.

I knew it was serious this time. Jack had always tried to laugh things off in the past, but this time, I could tell that things were different.

He shook hands, but that soon changed to a hug. I liked Jack; he was trouble, but he was a friend.

“I will probably be away for a while this time. I will keep in touch. I will see you sometime, probably after the fall. I have never forgotten the money I owe you. When...”

“...your luck changes; you will pay us back everything you owe. I know you will,” I replied.

“I am giving Charlie a lift home,” said Jack, throwing his spare helmet to Charlie. “He is on my route anyway. It is the least I can do”.

“Your route?”

“Yeah, he lives out by the main road.”

“Oh, of course. See you, Charlie. Thanks for the drink; I owe you one sometime.”

“Don’t worry. A pint of beer is a price worth paying for the therapy you have given me.”

Charlie put on the helmet and got on the bike. He smiled at me through the helmet.

Jack and Charlie both waved at me as they roared off. I watched them, picked up my bag, and walked home in the light November rain that had just started to fall.

It was the last time I would see either one of them. I had a call from the Paper at 3 am. There had been an accident out on the main road that night. A motorbike had swerved to avoid a vehicle and had run off the road. The driver had escaped, but the passenger had died on impact. I knew it was Jack and Charlie before I even got there. The news copy I filed that night was the hardest I have ever had to do.

Rob, Dean, and I were at the funeral that Thursday. I had heard the ghost of Jack’s motorbike roaring through the hills. Nobody knew what had happened, only that Jack was missing, but Charlie was dead, and the motorbike ride that they



shared destroyed the lives of all of their friends. We saw the wreckage of Jack's motorbike on the news. Mum and Dad were both shocked, but they both said he was trouble. I had tried to defend him, but now I knew they were both right.

We never saw Rachel after the funeral. Word was that Jack owed the money, not her. He just used his girlfriend as a cover for all of his mistakes.

I visited Charlie's grave a number of times. Each time, fresh flowers and a blank postcard were by it. Charlie's family had moved away, and we had no idea who sent the flowers. We all suspected it to be Jack, but no one ever said anything. Like Jack himself, it was a subject we never spoke about again.

I last received a postcard three months ago. Dean and Rob also received one as well. We all knew what it meant, but could never find the words to express what was happening.

I had moved into a house just up the street. It was not a bigger or fancier house, just a different one. You need change; it makes you feel alive. Jack had told me he would contact me after the Fall. It is now November and a year since he last breezed into town.

This time, I knew not to hold my breath.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



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# WEARAWAY AND FLAMBEAU

A LONG SHORT STORY  
BY MATTHEW HUGHES

**R**affalon clung to the wall of Hurdevant's keep, the adhesive on his palms holding him tight to the gray stone. Above him, no more than arm's reach above his head, the hinges of the small window creaked again. A moment ago, someone had opened the left-side panel; now it was the right's turn. Logically, the next event would be the poking out of a head. Raffalon would be discovered, if he hadn't been already, and the consequences would not redound to his credit.

Raffalon's profession was the transfer of valuables to his possession without consultation or consent of their owners. He'd been practicing it since boyhood and had become quite good at wall-scaling, lock-tickling, and ward-hoodwinking. He was particularly versed in the art of the rapid exit when circumstances turned adverse.

In order to avoid such exits, he preferred to choose his own targets; but he was not averse to hiring out his hard-won skills to others, so long as they met his fee. And provided that the proposed operation's level of risk fitted the thief's definition of acceptable.

Neither condition applied to the present situation, however. The risk of at least one thing going wrong, he had calculated when informed of the nature of the mission, approached near certainty. Worse, he was about to incur the enmity of



Hurdevant, whose reputation for stringency had led his fellow magicians to dub him Ironhand—and he wasn't being paid so much as a bent sequint.

The griptight on Raffalon's left hand was losing its strength. He pulled it free and spat into the palm, re-activating its adhesive power, then pressed it again to the wall. In a few moments, he would need to do the same to the right hand, unless by then he was already being consumed by a blast of flame from the wizard's wand, or carried off by a summoned demon to its smoky lair, there to be used for unspeakable purposes.

A thief's credo is to avoid capture and punishment by any means necessary. But Raffalon had added a corollary to that code: when all is lost, at least go out with a bold face. He now set his features into as intrepid an arrangement as he could manage, and turned his gaze upward. He found himself staring, as expected yet hoped against, into the uncompromising visage of Hurdevant the Stringent.

"And there you are," said the wizard, as if continuing a conversation.

"Indeed," said Raffalon, seeing nothing to be gained by dissembling.

"Come up the rest of the way and through the window. I have disabled the spell that guards it."

Raffalon spat on a hand again and used the griptight to climb another arm's length. "Was it, by any chance, Bullimar's Differentiating Portal?"

Hurdevant snorted. "For a small window set high in a tower? Of course not. It was Pilasquo's Pinch."

"I don't know that one," the thief said, working his way up to the window sill.

The magician explained that, once Raffalon was halfway through the window, its frame would have closed upon his middle, squeezing it so tightly that he would have resembled one of those wasps whose thorax and abdomen are connected by a narrow tube of chitin.

"It won't do that now?" the thief said, one leg over the sill.

"No, now get in here."

Raffalon dropped to the stone floor of the tower. He scowled when he saw that the small, circular room was empty—another element of the operation that the one who had sent him into peril had got wrong.

"What made you think I would use the Bullimar?" Hurdevant was saying. "It's for doors. Especially for hidden trapdoors."

The thief was too disgusted to answer. A moment later, he realized that Hurdevant was not accustomed to wait for responses to his queries. The soles of his feet became convinced that they were in contact with live coals. Hopping about, though instinctive, brought no relief. "Glabro!" he managed to shout.

The magician made a subtle gesture and the burning stopped. "Glabro Malaprop?" he said, and his grim lips almost achieved a smile. "You're another one of his?"

"Not by choice, I assure you!" Raffalon scuffed the soles of his climbing boots against the stone floor in an attempt to cool his feet. The action had no great effect, but the burning sensation was gradually subsiding of its own accord.

"But Glabro sent you? And told you that the window would be warded by the Bullimar?" The wizard snorted again; Raffalon was beginning to think it was a characteristic action. "Feckless scantbrain," Hurdevant concluded. "What made you give credence to—"

But then, a suspicion further clouded the grim face. He sketched an invisible figure in the air and Raffalon saw an arrangement of lines of green light, some straight, some curved, come to hover before the magician's eyes. After a moment, the thief realized he was seeing a schematic of Hurdevant's estate. His captor studied it a while, then wiped it away with a wave of one long-nailed finger.

"It occurred to me," the wizard said, "that you might be a diversion. But, no, Glabro does not rise even to that lowly rung on the ladder of cunning." He pulled



his nose and then stroked its end, apparently as an aid to thought. "I presume you were after the Sphere of Diverse Utility again?"

"I have never been here before," Raffalon.

"I am lumping you in," said the wizard, "with all the other thimblewits and donnydunces Glabro has sent since I won the Sphere from him -- quite legitimately -- in a contest of skill."

"He seemed to think you had bested him unfairly," Raffalon said.

"Well, that's precisely the problem with the poor dolt: he only seems to think." The wizard clapped his hands to signal that a new chapter was about to open.

"Now, what to do with you?"

"May I suggest—"

"You may not." Hurdevant spoke a syllable and moved three fingers in an unusual way. Raffalon's power of speech deserted him. "I sent back the last one inverted, wearing his innards on his outside. It doesn't seem to have made a useful impression."

The captive waggled eyebrows and pointed fingers at his mouth to signal that he had a suggestion. The wizard gave him back control of his tongue and Raffalon said, "Perhaps I could bear him a verbal message? A stern lecture and an unambiguous warning not to test your patience in future?"

"I have," said the wizard, "no patience. If I did have any, I would not waste a scrap of it on Glabro." He thought again then raised both eyebrows and a finger. "Do you know, you present me with an opportunity. I've been experimenting with a synthesis of Ixtlix's Sprightly Wearaway and Chunt's Descending Flambeau."

"I'm not familiar with either," said Raffalon. "I would be delighted to hear about them. Especially from one with such a fine speaking voice."

Hurdevant returned the thief a dry look. "You seek to delay the moment. Also you offer flattery, to which, unfortunately for you, I am immune." He gathered up

the skirts of his robe and said, "I will need to refresh my memory. We will go to my library."

He crooked a finger and said an obscure syllable. Immediately, Raffalon's feet followed Hurdevant out of the door. The two men descended a spiral of stone steps to another level of the manse, then wove their way through a maze of corridors until they came to a strongly barred door carved to resemble the face of a fierce creature with inset ivory fangs. It was only when the wizard set his hand to the portal's latch, causing the thing's nose to twitch, that Raffalon realized this was no carving; it was an actual boldruk, enslaved and dragged up from the second plane, compressed into the dimensions of a door. Had the thief approached it without Hurdevant's protection, the fiend would even now be digesting his bones.

Beyond the boldruk was a high-ceilinged room, the walls lined with shelved books of many shapes and sizes, bound in a plethora of materials, from cloth of gold to dragonhide. Some of their spines were lettered in scripts Raffalon could identify only as ancient.

Hurdevant crossed to a high shelf and took down a small libram bound in yellow chamois, then stooped to lift a large folio of parchment sheets clapped between wooden boards. He carried them to a lamplit table and opened both, flicking through pages until he found what he sought. As he set himself to memorizing the words and gestures of power, the lamp dimmed and shadows encroached. Raffalon smelled a sharp tang of ozone and saw the wizard's hair lift slightly from his head while his eyes changed color several times.

"There," said Hurdevant, closing the books. He looked at the captive and rubbed his palms together. "Once both spells are operating, I'll have to send you to Glabro. That means a third cantrip, but I'll just use a simple sending spell. The fluxions should adjust themselves."



The wizard turned to a mirror hanging between two bookcases and touched its frame here, there and a third place. "Now to find out where Glabro is." A moment later, he said, "Ahah, there he is, in his pitiful excuse for a garden."

"What will happen to me?" said Raffalon.

"Ixtlix's Sprightly Wearaway causes you to dance a comical jig until you expire of exhaustion. Chunt's Descending Flambeau consumes you in a brightly burning flame from the top down. Together, they should make quite a spectacle. And the sight of two spells in combination must remind Glabro that I will always be one too many for the likes of him."

He ordered Raffalon to step away from an armchair upholstered in pale leather. "It was my father's," he said. "Literally. I don't want him scorched," and mused aloud that the thief had done him a favor by appearing just when he was ready to test the conjoined spell. He had been planning to use a reanimated corpse but said that their lack of ardor vita meant they never burned as hotly as did a living man.

And, as a bonus, the circumstances allowed the wizard to put an elbow in Glabro's eye—an activity in which he delighted.

Raffalon made a last try. "Perhaps, in gratitude for my having done you all these services, we could dispense with the dancing and burning?"

Hurdevant returned him a disparaging look. "But that would negate your contribution. Do you not see the logic?" He rubbed his hands again and said, "First the Sprightly Wearaway, then the Descending Flambeau, then the sending. I'll say goodbye now."

Raffalon made to protest, but the wizard again silenced him. Hurdevant assumed a precise posture and then uttered the mantra of the dancing spell, meanwhile raising his arm only to bring it down in a long sweep as he came to the final syllables, two fingers pointing at his target.

The thief experienced a sensation as of tiny bubbles effervescing through his flesh, an unbearable inner tickling. His knees bent, and he leaped into the air. No sooner did his feet reconnect with the carpet than he began to execute high kicks and daring saltations, left, right, left, and right again, while his arms alternately flew up over his head and then descended so that his palms could smartly smack his buttocks.

The wizard declared the effect to be excellent. Then he gathered himself, took a new stance, and began to intone Chunt's Descending Flambeau. Raffalon could not hear the oral part of the spell over his heavy breathing and rump-slapping, but the gestural component was impressive. It concluded with a rapid rolling of one wizardly hand over the other and a double snap of thumb and middle fingers. At that point, the thief's hair burst into flame.

Instantly, Hurdevant spoke two short words and struck his knuckles together. Just as instantly, Raffalon was no longer in the magician's library. But neither was he in Glabro's garden, surrounded by the other wizard's erotic topiary. Instead, he was . . . nowhere.

Around him, as well as above and below, was a featureless gray void. He turned and twisted—or at least thought he did; without visual referents, he could not be entirely sure—but on all sides, there was nothing to see.

It was a moment before the thief realized he was no longer kicking and slapping. Nor, he found when he touched his scalp, was his hair on fire. Well, that's good news, he thought, although he would reserve judgment on his overall situation until he had more facts to work with.

He looked again in all directions, then realized that in this place, direction might be a meaningless term. He tried listening but heard nothing. Nor was there any scent, and the air had no taste when he extended his tongue.



It was at that point that another realization came: there could be nothing to sniff or taste because there was no air. When he moved a hand from side to side, he felt no breeze stir the hairs on its back. Moreover, it occurred to him that he was not breathing. Nor needed to.

He wondered if he were dead. But his new environment matched none of the several hells and four paradises that had ages ago been identified by astral travelers. Raffalon's knowledge of the nine planes—two below his own and six above—was not extensive, but he was sure that none of them consisted of undifferentiated noneness.

Wherever he was, he was better off than he would have been had Hurdevant succeeded in sending him, cavorting and blazing, among Glabro's artfully pruned bushes and shrubs—probably igniting a few before he expired. But, having acknowledged that fact, he saw no need to settle for it.

What I need, he told himself, is to get out of here and into somewhere that's an improvement. At that thought, his mind conjured up an image of a tavern he favored when he was in funds—the Badge and Buckle, it was called—where the ale was never frowsty and the barmaids were liberal in all the ways that mattered.

As he contemplated the mental picture of the place, it occurred to him that he was seeing a simulation that was a good deal sharper and more detailed than his imagination could usually achieve.

I'm not imagining it, he realized; I'm seeing it. The how and why of it completely eluded him, but Raffalon was more given to practicalities than theoretical constructs. If he could see it, perhaps he could get to it.

He reached out, but the picture -- if it was a picture -- was beyond his grasp. He tried to stride toward it, but his legs moved without moving him. He swept his arms before him as if he were stroking through water, but there was nothing to push against, and he made no progress.

Frustrated, he hung in the emptiness. But a thief's mind, though not as subtle and capacious as a wizard's, is not without the ability to make connections. I thought of the Badge and Buckle, and there it was. What if I think of moving toward it?

He did. And did.

Now it was as if he were just outside the tavern's tap room, which was at the moment mostly empty. Raffalon had chosen mid-afternoon as the optimum time to invade Hurdevant's tower, reasoning that the wizard might well be occupied in his workroom, distracted by wizardly endeavors. That was less than an hour ago, and the tavern had not yet attracted the usual supper crowd, many of whom would stay on to become the usual all-night-carousal crowd.

He examined the scene: a couple of grim-and-bitter drinkers, nursing their tankards and grievances through the day; a dust-smearred traveler making a meal out of whatever was left over from the lunch menu; Boudin the barman, busy behind his counter with preparations for the evening rush; and Undula, the older of the two barmaids, cleaning off a table in the far corner.

He reached out and his hand encountered its first resistance since he had popped into this nonplace. It felt like a wall; but when he pressed, it seemed to give a little, like the side of a tent stretched taut between poles and pegs.

I thought of the Badge and Buckle, and there it was, Raffalon said in his mind. I wanted to move toward it and I did. What if I now will myself to be there?

His first thought was to seek to burst the membrane that separated him from the tavern. But before he could concentrate on doing so, some part of his mind warned that, once broken, such a barrier might not be reparable. And who knew what might then ensue? Perhaps the tavern, the town, the realm, and all the worlds beyond might pour through into the emptiness. That couldn't be a good result.



Instead, he focused on the tap room, then on him in it. As the thought crystallized, he felt a tingle along the front of his body, a sensation that then passed all the way through him to exit from his back and buttocks. And when it had passed, he was standing in the Badge and Buckle.

Only the traveler had noticed his sudden appearance, and the man quickly averted his eyes as sensible strangers do when confronted by events that are none of their business. Boudin looked up from a stack of glasses and said, "Raffalon! What'll it be?"

"Something strong," said the thief, seating himself at an empty table, his back, as always, to the wall. "I have some thinking to do."

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Raffalon was a thoroughly schooled thief, having served a full apprenticeship under Gronn the Shifter and being then duly accepted into the Ancient and Honorable Guild of Purloiners and Purveyors. He had since added twelve years experience to his training and was thus well-versed in the complexities of his art. But when an opportunity presented itself, he did not disdain to ply the simple technique of in-out-and-away. It was his grasping of such an opportunity that led him to become the unwilling servant of a minor magician who called himself "Glabro the Supernal," but who was more widely known by the sobriquet Hurdevant had used: Malaprop.

The thief had been walking the back alleys, looking for possibilities, when he happened to pass Glabro's house. He saw that the small door to the rear courtyard was half-open. On the tiles just within lay a bulging satchel. Next to it, propped against the door jamb, was a staff of the kind foot-travelers use. The picture was clear: someone had been about to depart on a journey, but remembering at the last moment something left behind, had stepped back into the house, leaving staff and luggage at the gate.

Raffalon stopped, looked both ways along the alley, then into the courtyard. Both were empty. He stooped and opened the satchel, rummaged within. His fingers touched a dense, smooth object even as his eye caught the gleam of gold. He seized the prize and stood up to depart.

Or such was his intent. What actually happened was that the golden thing refused to budge from its hiding place. Reasoning that it must be far heavier and thus even more valuable than he had supposed, the thief applied both hands to the task. But still, he could not lift the thing.

Frowning, he bent his legs—Gronn had always taught that a sprung back was the reward of an unthinking burglar—and sought to take a better grip. That was when he discovered that he could not remove his hands from the prize. He was still squatting and tugging fruitlessly when Glabro glided smoothly out of the rear door of his house, pointed a black rod at him and said something that made Raffalon's world go dark.

He awoke to find himself in the wizard's workroom, his hands no longer stuck to the bait, but his limbs stapled to the stone wall by iron brackets. His trousers were down around his knees and the wizard was fastening something about those parts of himself that Raffalon -- indeed all sensible men -- most carefully guard from sudden impacts.

Glabro straightened, saw that his captive was fully with him again, and said, "Jhezzik, a brief half-squeeze."

Instantly, Raffalon knew a pain the like of which he had never encountered before, and which he was certain he never wanted to encounter again.

"I see I have your attention," the wizard said.

"Every jot," the thief assured him.

"Excellent. Then here's what you will do for me." In a few short sentences, he explained that the thief would go to the manse of Hurdevant and gain entrance to



the tallest tower, in whose topmost room he would find an object called the Sphere of Diverse Utility—he showed an image—which Hurdevant had unjustly wrested from its rightful owner, Glabro.

To ensure the thief undertook the mission without delay, the sprite known as Jhezzik would accompany him there and back again. "Although it will not go in with you," Glabro said. "Hurdevant's grinnet would sniff it out right away and come rushing to seize it—which would be as unpleasant for you as for Jhezzik. So it will see you there, then wait for you to emerge with the Sphere. And, of course, accompany you back here."

Raffalon began to protest on several counts: Hurdevant's defenses were unbreachable; he was known to be unremittingly watchful; the Guild had a mutual non-interference agreement with the Ancient and Worthy Council of Wizards and Thaumaturges. He got no further before Glabro bade Jhezzik intervene.

"As for the defenses, he uses Bullimar's Differentiating Portal. I will teach you a counter-word to nullify it. You will go just after lunch, when he putters in his workroom. None will know of it, save you and I." When Raffalon attempted a fresh argument, he added, "And, of course, Jhezzik."

Thus did Raffalon find himself clinging to the wall of Hurdevant's tower when the wizard opened his window. Which led to his unexpected passage through the gray noneness. Which had delivered him to the Badge and Buckle, where he now sat, sipping a second beaker of strong arrack, his thinking done and his plan set.

He called to Boudin behind the bar. "Is that boy about, the one who washes pots? I have an errand for him."

Shortly after, for the promise of a coin, the lad raced off toward Glabro's house, a sealed note in his pocket.

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The thief was still nursing his second arrack when Glabro entered the tap room. The wizard gave the place a suspicious eye, but seeing nothing to threaten him, he advanced to sit at Raffalon's table. He peered at the man opposite from a number of angles before saying, "Why are you intact?"

"Instead of inside-out, like your last operative?"

"Hurdevant told you that?"

"We had," said the thief, "a brief conversation."

"And then?"

Raffalon sipped his arrack. "Is it possible, do you think, to combine two major spells?"

Glabro's greasy brow contracted. "Unlikely, but it is far from my area of interest."

"How about two major spells plus a third to transport their target to your workroom?"

The wizard's head drew back and his chin tucked itself into his neck.

"Impossible!"

"Specifically, Ixtlix's Sprightly Wearaway and Chunt's Descending Flambeau. I don't know the name of the transporter, but it involves two syllables and a gesture like this." He struck his knuckles against each other.

"Ridiculous!" said Glabro. "The fluxions are inharmonious. No synergism of--"

"He did it," Raffalon cut him off. He described the kicking, slapping, hair-igniting, vanishing.

"My topiary!" Glabro cried. But then he caught up with what Raffalon had been telling him. "But you did not appear before me!"

"Exactly!"

The wizard had the look of a man who realizes he has missed a clue. "So...", he began.



"Tell me," said the thief, "how many planes are there?"

"Wait," said the magician, "we were discussing what happened to you."

"We still are. How many?"

Glabro shrugged. "Nine."

"And does any one of the nine include a formless, featureless void? With neither up nor down nor sideways?"

The wizard's face expressed irritation. "No. Now what about--"

"A void from which one can see any place and go there simply by an act of will?"

"Never mind all th--" This time it was Glabro who interrupted himself. "Wait a moment, you're saying that you were in such a nonplace?"

Raffalon raised his beaker in an ironic toast. "Now you have it."

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Later that evening, they were in Glabro's workroom. Raffalon paced nervously as the wizard stood at his lectern, before him a yellow-bound book of the same edition that Hurdevant possessed plus a handwritten parchment scroll, partly unrolled and held down by bric-a-brac.

They had agreed that there had to be a test. And the thief was the only choice for its subject. He had, after all, shown that he could go and return; besides, only Glabro had the wizardly wherewithal to cast the three spells. But now that the moment approached, Raffalon's enthusiasm began to wane.

Glabro looked up. "Ready," he announced. An odor of ozone pervaded the room, but the wizard's eyes were not changing color as Hurdevant's had; instead, they alternately bulged and subsided, apparently in rhythm with the man's pulse. The effect was not an attractive sight, the thief thought.

He stood in a clear space where bidden by the other. Glabro took a moment to steady himself, then spoke the words of the jig spell—meaningless to Raffalon—

and brought his hand down in the same sweep, ending with the finger-pointing. The high kicks and rump-slapping began. Moments later, what remained of the thief's hair ignited.

Now should come the cantrip that would send Raffalon on his way. They had agreed, in case events did not go as planned, that the third spell should move him no farther than to another clear space on the other side of the room. Glabro could then extinguish the blaze before it could consume him.

But as the fire burnt almost to the roots of the test subject's hair, the wizard went pale and rocked a little unsteadily. Casting two powerful spells in rapid succession had taken much out of him. He had to put a hand on the bench to steady himself, take a deep breath, and blow it out.

Meanwhile, the thief capered and burned. The skin on top of his head was becoming uncomfortably warm. Finally, Glabro recollected himself. He uttered two syllables and struck his knuckles together. Instantly, Raffalon was adrift in the void, his limbs still and his scalp tender but unseared.

He rallied his faculties and conjured up an image of the wizard's workroom. As before, a clear view of the place appeared before his eyes. He could see Glabro coming from behind the lectern to examine the spot where he had just been, peering at the air and floor through a hollow tube of brass.

Raffalon willed himself to approach the scene. The image grew larger. Arrayed on the workbench were three objects: a plain wooden cup, a gold candlestick, and a fist-sized, purple crystal. The thief concentrated on the trio, drawing himself closer to them until they were within arm's reach. He put out a hand and again felt resistance as if a taut membrane separated him from the experimental targets.

Now he left his arm outstretched, just short of the barrier, and willed the limb to pass through it. He had no sense of motion but felt the same tingling as before, starting at his fingertips and moving at a moderate pace up his arm. But by the



time the sensation had reached his elbow, his hand had closed around the cup. Now he willed arm and hand to withdraw from the wizard's workroom. A moment later, he floated in the noneness, and when he opened his hand, a wooden cup hung beside him.

Back in the workroom, he could see Glabro, eyes abulge, staring at the spot where the cup had been. Raffalon readied himself again and repeated the exercise, this time retrieving the heavy metal candlestick. Soon, it too floated beside him in the grayness. He noticed, before he let go of it, that here it had no weight at all.

Then he went for the faceted crystal and drew it smoothly to him. This was a crucial part of the experiment because it was a receptacle for the storage of arcane power -- not a great deal of mana, but neither was it purely mundane -- and both thief and wizard were anxious to know if such could pass through the barrier.

It did so without hindrance, Glabro observing with his tube to his eye -- then watching again as Raffalon reversed the process, restoring cup, candlestick, and crystal to the bench before willing himself through the membrane and back into the workroom.

The wizard comprehensively examined the test objects then the man who had moved them. He pronounced them unaffected by any measure he could take. The crystal, when properly handled, delivered a flow of colorful energy that the magician captured as a liquid and poured into an alembic.

"Perfect," he said, holding up the vessel and making the stuff swirl.

"Completely unaffected."

"I will rest a little while," said Raffalon, "then you can try the spell that regrows hair. After that, we will make our first foray."

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Glabro had placed the Sphere of Diverse Utility on a plinth in his study. It was no longer his most prized possession, but it still deserved pride of place among the

wealth of thaumaturgical artifacts that adorned his shelves and lurked within the drawers of his cabinets. His overstocked library would have been the envy of any wizard in the Three Lands—if that is, he had ever invited a colleague to peruse his collection, but he never would because any of them would soon discover volumes that had gone missing, under circumstances so mysterious as to be baffling, from their own.

A conclave had been called, at the estate of Yssanek the Paragon, to discuss the scourge of disappearances. The attendees had eyed each other with suspicion, and veiled accusations had been whispered when allies put their heads together. Familiars and gate-guardians had been summoned and grilled—in one case, literally— but all inquiries had led to indefinite conclusions.

Glabro had attended the assembly, but no one had deigned to seek his opinion or invite him to join any cabals. He went home wrapped in secret smiles.

For his part, Raffalon was storing up treasures of a more worldly sort. The wizard paid him in coins, weighty ingots, and sacks of gems. And in that regard, Glabro was unstinting, his acquisitions having given him the means to whip up chestfuls of precious goods on demand. The thief bought a small house with strong walls and doors and built an even stronger room in its basement, where he stored his earnings, safe from his fellow guild members.

He and the wizard had established a "system without a system," as Raffalon put it. They made their strikes at different times of day and night and never at regular intervals. They chose their victims and their targets randomly so that no pattern would allow their prey to predict their next raid.

Sometimes, the thief would watch from the void as snares and ambushes were prepared for him, then will into being a portal to some other part of the target's manse, where he would stage a noisy diversion. When the defenders rushed there



to respond, he would return to his original view of the trap, delicately extract the bait, and be gone before the alarm could be raised.

It was a happy time for the partners. Glabro found that he was perfectly suited to the life of a secret gloater. Raffalon was considering early retirement, perhaps to open an academy to train the next generation of purloiners.

They had agreed to a long hiatus before their next outing, but Raffalon came to the wizard's manse a week before to discuss the intended target—the curio collection of Firondel the Incomparable—and plan a reconnaissance. They made themselves at ease in Glabro's study, where the wizard conjured up a flask of the golden wine of sunny Abrizonth, though that fair land had drowned beneath the invading waters of the Stygmatic Sea ten thousand years before.

The magician sipped from his long-stemmed glass and indicated a well-worn tome that lay open on his table. "I have been researching the phenomenon that is enriching us," he said. "And I have found something of interest."

"Will it put more gold in my strongroom?" said Raffalon. And, when the answer was in the negative, he shrugged and drained his glass, then held it out for a refill.

"At first," said the wizard, "I thought we had discovered a tenth plane -- such a thing is theoretically possible -- but one which the Demiurge left unfilled when he assembled the universe."

Raffalon made a noncommittal noise and looked out the window.

"But then I came upon this." He indicated the old book "that we got from the highest shelf of Zanzan's library."

"While he rushed off to see who was trifling with his menagerie of fanciful beasts," said the thief, adding a short, dry laugh.

"I had to summon up a ghost from Old Edevan to help me translate the script."

"Old Edevan?"

"Fourteenth Aeon."

"Never heard of it."

Glabro showed mild irritation at the interruptions to his flow. Raffalon noticed but offered no apology. "In any case," the wizard went on, "it's a record of how the present version of the universe was."

"There have been others?" Raffalon was not interested in the answer. He liked to goad the magician occasionally; he had not forgotten the touch of Jhezzik.

"Several. Now let me finish. This is interesting."

The thief waved his hand in a somewhat regal manner. "Pray proceed."

"The nub of it is that, for convenience's sake, the Demiurge first built himself a workshop."

"Sensible."

"It was a setting that enhanced his axial volition, which, of course, was already vast."

Raffalon swallowed the mouthful of Abrizonth he'd been swishing about his teeth. "What's axial volition?"

"The technical term for what you would call 'will.' It's what the universe runs on. If you have enough of it, you can become a wizard. If you don't, it doesn't matter how much studying you put in, your spells will always dissipate like a fart in a fresh breeze."

"Really," said Raffalon, holding out his glass. "A little more, I think."

Glabro handed him the flask and the thief poured for himself. "The thing is," the wizard went on, with enthusiasm, "he seems to have left the workshop still standing after the work was finished."

The thief shrugged. "Perhaps he kept it in case he needed to modify things later."



"I suppose," said the magician. "He might decide to adjust the gravitational constant or add some more colors to the spectrum." He paused to pursue the thought on his own.

"So what about Firondel's curios?" said Raffalon. The flask was now empty, and in a moment, so was his glass.

"If I've got this right," Glabro said, "that thing you call a void is actually the primal chaos from which everything was made."

Raffalon shook his head. "Chaos is busy-busy, everything higgled and piggled together. The void is nothingness."

"No," said the wizard, "chaos is the seeming nothingness from which the four elements of creation—matter, energy, spirit, and gist—are generated."

"Something from nothing?" said the thief, feeling a stir of interest. "By axial whatsit?"

"Exactly." Glabro consulted the tome. "And it may still be workable."

Raffalon sat up straighter. When his brain was engaged, it was capable of cutting through fog straight to wherever profit might be found. "Are you saying that, in the void an act of will creates something from nothing?"

"I suppose I am."

"What kind of something?"

"Any kind."

"And how much of it?"

"That would depend on the strength of the axial volition. The Demiurge's was powerful enough to generate an entire universe."

Raffalon was thinking now. His will had been powerful enough to show him anyplace he thought of and to let him penetrate the barrier between chaos and creation. "Hmm," he said.

"Of course," Glabro was saying, "there might be repercussions . . ."

But the thief was not listening now, though he did say, "Hmm," one more time.

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Raffalon hung in the void. Before him, seen as if through a window, was the tabletop on which Firondel the Incomparable kept his remarkable collection: a small cube of immortal flesh said to have been cut from the heart of an incarnate deity; a sextet of ivory figurines that, when brought into proximity with each other, performed simplified versions of a hundred classic dramas; the curved horn of a beast long thought to be mythical; a lens that permitted views of the fifth plane, adjusted to make them comprehensible to third-plane eyes; a thunderstone found in the belly of a great fish; and several other singular items.

The thief examined the surroundings for traps and defenses. And found one: above the table, concealed by a masking spell, hung a mechanical spider equipped with injector-fangs loaded with a powerful soporific, poised to fall upon any hand that reached for one of the small treasures. But Raffalon had learned that, when viewed from his present vantage, objects or persons supposedly screened by magic were nakedly visible to him.

Having surveyed the scene, as a good thief should, Raffalon now opted to pause before continuing the operation. Since his discussion with Glabro, he had been thinking about what the wizard had revealed concerning the effects of will exercised in the Demiurge's workshop. He now held out one hand in the void and willed that something should appear in its cupped palm. Nothing happened. He concentrated. For a moment, nothing changed. Then he felt what he could only describe as a ripple pass through the void around him and through his own being. He felt the sensation go down his arm and exit through his outstretched hand. And when it was gone, in his palm lay a pea-sized globe of purest gold.

Ah, said the thief, and so. He tucked the bauble into an inner pocket of his upper garment, then repeated the exercise, this time concentrating on a jewel.



Again, the ripple passed through him, and when it left his fingers, he saw that he held what poets call a gem of purest ray serene, and thieves a nice bit of sparkle.

He put the jewel with the gold pea. The experiment was concluded. Next time, he would make preparations: first, he must expand his strongroom to several times its size, so that it could hold all the abundance he intended to will into creation and pass through the membrane. No, better yet, he should buy himself a manse.

But first, he had to complete the lifting of Firondel's curios. He adjusted his point of view so that he was now seeing the mechanical spider from above. His eye traced the pattern engraved on its gold-chased back, then his hand reached through the barrier and turned its activating screw from energetic to inert. The threat of the spider thus neutralized, he repositioned himself again so that the membrane was just above the tallest item on the tabletop.

The thief had become so skilled at working from the void that he could will the intervening membrane to be mere inches from whatever prize he had come to collect. To anyone observing from the third plane, all that could be seen of Raffalon was his fingers and a portion of the back of his hand—and then only for the moment it took to appear and seize the item.

He reached for the thunderstone, drew it into the void, and popped it into a satchel suspended by a strap from his shoulder. Next, he picked up a silver flute known to have been played by the siren Illisandra. Into the satchel, it went. Then, one by one, the six thespian figurines.

Methodically, he stole Firondel's treasures. The second-last was the cube of the deathless god's heart. But as he reached for it, it moved away of its own accord, crossing most of the tabletop to stop at the farther edge. Raffalon lulled into a routine, did not think to withdraw his fingers, reposition himself, and try again from closer up. Instead, he merely extended his arm through the barrier until his fingers closed on the wandering morsel of meat.

But when he picked it up, he felt resistance. The cube was on the end of a string that had been used to lure him. Immediately, he dropped it but immediately was not fast enough. Even as the fragment of godstuff was falling back to the table, a steel manacle was closing around Raffalon's wrist with a fateful snick.

He pulled, but the only effect was to make taut a strong chain that connected the ring around his limb to another bracelet—and this one was around the wrist of the man now coming out from under the table: Hurdevant Ironhand, his grim features set into an image of triumphant vengeance.

The wizard pulled, but his strength could have no effect on a man anchored in the Demiurge's workshop, although the steel slid down onto Raffalon's exposed hand and compressed the bones and sinews, causing him pain. Now Hurdevant was moving his free hand in a complicated pattern and speaking a string of syllables—but again to no effect; magic could not trouble the membrane.

That left only one option. If the robber could not be pulled into the world, the wizard must go to where he hid. Hurdevant seized Raffalon's hand and thrust it back toward the barrier.

This suited the thief, whose quick mind had already assessed the situation. Hurdevant no doubt thought that his thaumaturgical arts would serve him well once he had his adversary cornered. But magic had no effect in the void. It was a place where only will mattered.

Hurdevant, as a wizard in his prime, would be equipped with willpower well beyond the ordinary. Raffalon had no illusions that he could match him. But the thief knew the ground, and the magician did not. While Hurdevant was learning that magic was of no avail, Raffalon would be willing a last unpleasant surprise for the man on the other end of the chain.



He focused his will, and the wizard came through the barrier. The thief saw two surprises register on the other man's face: first, at the nature of their surroundings; second, when he recognized Raffalon.

"You!" he said. And now that look of savored revenge was coming back. The wizard lifted his free hand, crooked its fingers in a certain manner, and began to utter a spell.

But Raffalon was already at work. He willed a pair of adamantite shears to appear in his unfettered hand. In an instant, they were there—I'm getting better at this, he thought—and a moment later, the chain was severed.

He let the shears float and saw that Hurdevant had already digested the meaning of his spell's failure. Now the wizard reached into his robe and came out with a springer, which he deftly cocked with a practiced motion. Raffalon had no doubt that the barbed tip of the missile in the weapon's slot would be coated with poison.

There was nowhere to flee and no time to create an exit; it always took several heartbeats to pass through the membrane, and Hurdevant's dart would make sure that one of those beats would be Raffalon's last. He needed to will something into existence that would change the dynamic of impending events. And he needed to do it now, as Hurdevant raised the springer and aimed it at his belly.

As a boy, Raffalon had been entranced by tales of adventure and derring-do, in which stout-hearted individuals faced down terrors and won through to rewards of great renown. One of those tales had featured a monster that had so frightened the young lad that it came to him several times afterward in nightmares. The shaggy, brutal creature of some storymaker's imagination remained Raffalon's private definition of the worst thing that could happen.

On impulse, he willed it now into existence, just behind Hurdevant. Thus, as the wizard's finger tightened on the springer's release, a thick, muscular limb, clad

in matted gray fur and ending in a paw tipped by two claws like black crescent moons, slid around his waist. The weapon dropped from the wizard's grasp as he was hoisted backward and upwards—the monster was oversized—and delivered to its serrated fangs.

The thing ate the wizard in two bites. Then its yellow eyes fell upon Raffalon, and the thief remembered that, in the story, the creature's appetite was insatiable -- and that, in his worst dreams, it pursued him wherever he fled.

He willed it to disappear to no effect; perhaps the Demiurge had another workshop for destruction, and so he willed instead the existence of a portal through which he could exit the void and find help.

Only one such place came to mind: Glabro's workroom. As Raffalon appeared out of the air, the wizard looked up from the book he'd been reading and said, "How did it..."

"Coming behind me!" the thief shouted. "Destroy it!"

Then his feet hit the carpet, and he ran for the door, seizing the latch and yanking it hard. Behind him, he heard Glabro say, "What's--" and then a sharp take of breath as the nightmare willed itself through the membrane in pursuit of its next meal.

Unfortunately for Glabro, he was not much talented in the art of wizardly improvisation. While he was assembling a spell in the forefront of his mind, the monster swept aside his study table and sank its cruel claws into his middle. Raffalon, at the other end of the corridor and fleeing down the steps at his best pace, heard the scream and then the sounds of crunching bones.

By the time he reached the bottom of the steps and opened the door into the wizard's back courtyard, he could hear the beast's slobbering vocalizations descending the stairs. He flung wide the gate and bolted into the alley, slamming it shut behind him. Moments later, he heard the skreek of its hinges being torn from



their posts. He put on more speed. Raffalon had often been pursued -- desperate chases were part of being a thief -- but never had he run with such conviction.

Glabro's manse was on the crest of a hill that ran down to the city gate and the road to Carbingdon. The thief sped along the cobblestones, leaping down the occasional flights of marble steps, until he came to where the road debouched into a small square. Here customs inspectors examined incoming wagons and mule trains and the watch apprehended ne'er-do-wells. There were always men with weapons about.

As he entered the square, he need not look back; he could hear the ogre's claws clicking on the stones behind him; it was closing on him. He saw the halberdiers clustered near the gate, their faces turning toward him in surprise as he raced toward them, shouting, "A monster! A monster!"

Then he saw their expressions change as the beast came into view. Raffalon had never cared for guards of any kind -- their interests and those of thieves were almost always opposed -- but he vowed to give a warm thought to these men as they charged their weapons and formed a resolute line -- through which he passed by scrambling between their legs on hands and knees.

The halberdiers slowed the nightmare. It reared up on its hind legs and swatted at their points, roaring and slobbering. Raffalon ran on through the gate, then paused long enough to look back. He saw a team of cannoneers reversing one of the great guns that stood behind the crenellations and depressing it to aim down into the square.

He had not gone another ten paces before he heard the boom of the weapon followed instantly by the crack of its missile exploding. After that, he heard no more roars -- only a hubbub of voices as the crowd formed. Raffalon kept going; the incident of the ogre would attract inconvenient questions. He walked some

miles out of the city, to where an inn stood at a crossroads and used his gold pea to buy himself supper and a bed.

In the morning, he walked back to the city but avoided the gate. Using a entry route and methods known to the Guild, he made his way to the house where he kept his strongroom. He watched from concealment for most of the morning but saw no signs that the house had become of interest to anyone other than himself.

Finally, he sauntered up the walk. While he was getting out his key, he noted that the almost invisible hair he had pasted across the crack between door and jamb was still in place. He went in and found no trace of an intruder.

Whistling, he hoisted the sack that contained Firondel's curios and descended the hidden passage to his strongroom. He opened the great door and stepped within -- to find that the space was empty. Worse, he was plunged into sudden darkness and surrounded by a roaring wind. When the noise stopped and light returned, he was in a place he had only seen from the outside: the headquarters of the Ancient and Worthy Council of Wizards and Thaumaturges.

He looked about him at the figures seated on the tiers of benches and saw no friendly faces. The questions began, and the inducements to give satisfactory answers.

Raffalon stuck to a plausible story: Glabro, resentful of Hurdevant in particular and generally jealous of his worthier colleagues, had planned the entire exercise. The thief had been a mere hireling and knew nothing of the spells the wizard had woven to defeat their wards and defenses. He did not mention the Demiurge or his workshop.

In the end, if he was not totally believed, he was not totally disbelieved. "What shall we do with him?" said Zhazh Optimus, the current chair of the Council, when the wizards understood that they had gained all the satisfaction they were



likely to achieve. Several suggestions were advanced while Raffalon trembled.

After a few moments, he interrupted the argument.

"Whatever you do to me," he said, "please don't let it be what Glabro threatened me with if I did not perform."

Zhazh eyed the thief the way a bird eyes a worm. "And what would that be?" he said.

Raffalon recited, as if by rote, "Ixtlix's Sprightly Wearaway, Chunt's Descending Flambeau, and a spell that would send me into the desert."

"All three together?" said a spectrally thin thaumaturge. "It would never work. No harmony of fluxions."

The thief made a gesture expressing his inability to judge the matter. "I only know what he told me," he said. "He'd done it to someone once. It sounded awful."

"Hmm," said Zhazh. He went to one of the bookcases in the Council chamber and ran his finger along the serried spines, looking for a particular volume.

"Hurdevant had a theory about synthesis." He found the tome he was seeking and opened it. "And if Glabro could do it . . ."

He paused, a finger halfway down a page, and smiled a wizard's cruel smile. "Ixtlix's Sprightly Wearaway, Chunt's Descending Flambeau, and a sending spell, you say?"

"Oh, no!" cried Raffalon. "Not that! Anything but that!"



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew (Matt) Hughes writes fantasy, space opera, crime fiction, and historical novels. He has sold 24 novels to publishers large and small in the UK, US, and Canada, as well as 100 works of short fiction to professional markets.



He has won the Endeavour and Arthur Ellis Awards, and has been shortlisted for the Aurora, Nebula, Philip K. Dick, Endeavour, A.E. Van Vogt, Neffy, Derringer, and High Plains Book Awards. He has been inducted into the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Association's Hall of Fame.

Readers who sign up for his monthly newsletter will receive a free ebook of his short story collection, **9 Tales of Henghis Hapthorn**: <http://eepurl.com/cyNSA9>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matt\\_Hughes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matt_Hughes)



# PHOTOGRAPHY

BY WILLIAM GENSBURGER



Residents of Lake Cascade, Idaho enjoy customized signs.



# ARTWORK

BY K.J.HANNAH GREENBERG



'Workstation'



KJ Hannah Greenberg tilts at social ills and encourages personal evolutions via poetry, prose, and visual art. Her images have appeared as interior art in many places, including Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Les Femmes Folles, Mused, Piker Press, Stone Lake Gallery, The Academy of the Heart and Mind, and Yellow Mama and as cover art in many places, including Angime, Black Petals,



Five on the Fifth, Impspired [sic], Pithead Chapel, Red Flag Poetry, Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine, The Broken City, and Torah Tidbits. Additionally, some of her digital paintings accompany her poetry in *Miscellaneous Parlor Tricks* (Seashell Books, 2024, Forthcoming), *Word Magpie* (Audience Askew, 2024), *Subrogation* (Seashell Books, 2023), and *One-Handed Pianist* (Hekate Publishing, 2021).

# CRANE

A SHORT STORY BY MOHAMMADREZA FAYAZ

Akbar had been plagued by a recurring nightmare ever since he signed the contract for his second job approximately three months ago. This haunting dream consistently played out within the familiar confines of the construction site. He would climb into the crane, manipulating the gears and switches with precision to lift and relocate the heavy and dark timbers. As always, there came a moment when he hastened his repetitive tasks, diverting his attention from the meticulous care he had initially given. It was precisely at such a juncture that he realized the timbers had transformed into human figures cloaked in dark shrouds. The hook ascended, tightening around the neck of each person in a chilling revelation.

That day, Akbar had smoked three packs of cigarettes, setting a new personal record. Tomorrow marked the first day of his second job, and he was certain that whatever awaited him at home that night would be the perfect distraction from the impending uncertainty.

As he approached his home, he spritzed a small sample of perfume he had in his breast pocket and put on the new sunglasses he'd purchased earlier in the day. He wanted his wife to see his eyes concealed that night.

Upon opening the door, he was greeted by Zari's jubilant exclamation, "Look at my handsome husband!"

Akbar blushed. He appeared to be embarrassed by the playful teasing of this beautiful woman as if he were meeting her for the first time. She had adorned herself with makeup and donned a black dress that revealed her shoulders and cleavage. It was one of her three party dresses, and it happened to be the newest



one he could afford after months of careful saving. Seven years had elapsed since their marriage, yet with each passing day, she seemed to grow more fabulous. He was tempted to step closer and plant a kiss on her radiant cheek, but that familiar hesitation regarding her reaction held him back.

She had turned on all the lights in the living room like the times they had important guests. The small dining table was set with a big bowl of chicken and barley soup, a big platter of baghali polo, and a platter of lamb shanks.

"I can eat them all!" Akbar said.

"Go ahead! I look forward to seeing it," Zari said, cautiously carrying a pudding plate to the table. He was about to blurt out, driven by extreme excitement, wondering about the last time she had prepared such a great feast.

His son suddenly jumped into the room and shouted. He stood motionless with his hands raised like a bear. Akbar put his hand on his heart, "uh..."

When Javid ran to Akbar, he opened his arms. But it turned out his son looked for playing with his hearing aid.

"Leave it, Javid!" Zari scolded.

"That's fine, Zari," Akbar replied.

"So, you have a birthday tomorrow?" Akbar asked.

"Yes!" Javid replied, now touching the misshapen edge of his right ear.

"What do you want as a birthday gift?"

"A crane!"

Akbar gasped.

"A crane?! Why a crane?"

"Do you really wonder why?" Zari replied, laughing.

"I can get you a robot. How about that? Or a truck?"

"No! I want a crane. Like the one you drive."

"Ok, let's eat for now."

Now, the dark feeling that he hoped not to show up that night took over and stuck.

"Akbar? Where are you?" Zari asked, waving her hand in front of his eyes.

"Sorry."

"How is the food?"

"Amazing!"

"It looks like I am more excited about your second job than you. Did you tell me that it is for a new construction project?"

"Yes. It is for a new project. A big one..." Akbar replied in a low voice.

When he noticed Zari playing with her food with that dejected look on her face, he realized the thoughts about tomorrow had haunted him for a while again. Akbar said, "I am going to buy the cell phone for you with the first paycheck. What was the name?"

Her face became vibrant again.

"It is the most recent Nokia phone, 6600. It has an amazing camera," Zari said, smiling.

"Everyone has a mobile with a camera these days," Akbar said.

"I wish you got this job sooner. What did I tell you? If you look for it, you will find it."

Zari spoke what she thought without any misgiving. This was much more like her than that caring, beautiful woman. She did not know that the job had been offered to him two years before, and eventually, he accepted it only because of her constant pestering.

"What else do you want? I was thinking about moving from Tehran to Shiraz. This way, we can rent a larger place."

He closely studied her face and found the disinclination he expected.

"Hm... I don't know. I don't have any issue with living here."



"But you always said that living here is like being in a cage."

"There are other priorities to go first," Zari replied after a few seconds of looking at the wall.

He tried to keep eating, but once again, the invading thoughts slowed down his chewing until he felt the presence of a disgusting lump in his mouth.

When he found himself concerned about Zari being vexed by his distraction again, he decided to tell her. Wasn't the pain he was suffering from mainly because of her? She had to participate in it.

"Do you know what I am thinking about?"

"What?"

"Today, I read the news about someone who raped a pregnant woman before her husband's eyes. Then, he killed them both."

She stared at him for ten seconds straight. That surprised, bitter face always scared him.

"So?"

"So?! Don't you think he deserves to be executed?"

"Executed?! Why should you even bring up such a subject now?"

"Because..."

When she noticed his struggling to find a plausible answer to her question, she raised her voice,

"Seriously, Akbar, why should you say something like this at dinner in front of Javid?"

Javid stood there, gazing at them motionlessly. Zari was right. He totally forgot about Javid's presence. Now, he had to distract him immediately.

"What is that you are playing with son?"

He stretched out his hand to show Akbar the big dinosaur.

"It was in a surprise egg. Mr. Saeed brought it for me." Javid said.

Akbar looked at Zari.

"He came here again?"

"Yes! Do you think I can carry everything I needed for the celebration you just ruined tonight?"

He looked around to find something distracting, and when he found nothing just took a deep breath to be able to suppress the erupting anger.

There could have been a good chance she wouldn't turn her back to him in the bed on that special night, but he had just blown it. The next chance would be on the night she would have the cell phone.

~~~

The neighborhood where Akbar and Zari lived used to be a small village in the south part of Tehran and had now become part of the city. Saeed had rented the main grocery store located close to the mosque two years before. Before him, whoever rented that store couldn't put up with the grumpy store owner and had left after only a few months. He was the only one who could get along with that man and stayed there for that long. The whole neighborhood unanimously agreed that Saeed was different from the previous people who had run the store. The first thing to notice was that Saeed was a clean and tidy young man who was passionate about his job. Every morning, he opened the store at 6:00 AM and closed it at 11:00 PM. You never saw him with stubble on his face or wearing the same clothing for two days in a row. Saeed didn't mind letting those retired elderly folks, looking for a way to waste time, come and dawdle at his store. He let them talk at length about old memories as much as they wished. This made them love him. He also made friends with many young guys, with whom he bantered about soccer and girls. Unlike his predecessors, he was fine with giving credit to the customers he knew. Occasionally, he used his bike to offer free delivery when people shopped for more than a few items.



At some point, he became so popular that he attracted loyal customers from surrounding neighborhoods. However, after a while, he politely discontinued offering credit and asked anyone who came to linger in the store to leave.

Unlike others in the community, Akbar's disappointment in Saeed had nothing to do with the discontinued promotions. Akbar understood that they were a part of Saeed's business strategy, and he saw no issue with it. Their first encounter took place around 10:00 PM when Akbar was on his way home, battling a severe headache. Upon entering the store and realizing there was a new shopkeeper, Akbar braced himself for the usual startled reaction people had when they first saw him. To his surprise, Saeed's facial expression remained unchanged. His steady and relaxed smile somehow brought a comforting feeling to Akbar, making him feel less self-conscious about his appearance.

"You seem tired... long day, huh?" Saeed asked.

"Yes, and I have a terrible headache," Akbar replied.

"Sometimes I get them too. I hate them."

Before leaving the store, they shared a smoke together. Akbar couldn't believe he had stayed there for half an hour. That vibrant and light feeling reminded him that he had never had a friend with whom he could talk so freely. From that night on, he made it a habit to stop by Saeed's store on his way back home, where they would talk and smoke. Over time, they got to know a lot about each other. Akbar learned that Saeed's parents had divorced, and he harbored resentment toward his dad and stepdad. In return, Saeed learned about Akbar's illness and the small village he came from.

Their intimate friendship did not last more than two months, though. Sometimes, Akbar absurdly wished Saeed had not brought surprise eggs to sell. But he insisted on carrying expensive and exotic items to make his business more

distinguished than before. The first time he had bought Javid one of those eggs after having a painful penicillin injection, his son fell in love with it.

Zari was strictly against spoiling Javid, so it was quite odd to see her so easily giving in to buying one of those expensive eggs for him every week. Akbar managed not to become too obsessed with it until that evening when the three of them stopped by Saeed's store on their way back from the park. What alarmed him first was the way Zari and Saeed greeted each other. They seemed like close friends who had known each other for a long time—certainly longer than Saeed and Akbar's friendship.

"So, Javid is here to get his free egg. You promised him if he gets a top mark in his math exam, you will get him a free egg," Zari said with a mischievous smile.

"Wait, what?! I don't sell anything for free here," Saeed replied, feigning surprise.

"See, Javid! I told you he would break his promise," Zari said, maintaining the same smile.

Then, Saeed laughed loudly and handed Javid an egg.

"Good job, Javid! What did I tell you?"

What bothered Akbar the most was not seeing his wife and Saeed obviously flirting or even being ignored by them. It was something in Zari's eyes he hadn't seen before—a spark reflecting a great passion, something that could animate her usually sullen face after a long time. This was irritating enough to make him look around for something interesting to focus on. He spotted a pack of mint cigarettes that Saeed had recently brought. He stared at it for ten seconds, imagining the taste and the freshness of the smoke in his mouth.

When saying goodbye, Saeed looked Akbar up and down, and suddenly, a spontaneous smirk appeared on his face.



After that day, he never stopped by Saeed's store, yet he didn't dare to ask Zari to stop shopping from Saeed. He knew it would only open a gateway to a new quarrel and give her a good excuse not to talk to him for a few days.

However, the day after the new job celebration, he had to stop by Saeed's store. He had to warn him. As soon as Saeed laid eyes on him, that same spontaneous smile appeared on his face. He folded his arms across his chest, and his eyelids were half-closed, giving him the same condescending look his classmates had always given him when making fun of his face.

"Look who's here! A disloyal customer and friend," Saeed said.

Akbar found nothing appropriate to reply. He just passively stood and stared, much like the times he had given in to being bullied by colleagues or friends. It was so disappointing to see that Saeed was no different from those people who enjoyed making fun of him. Not only was Saeed one of them, but he appeared to be the worst one.

"What brought you here, my old friend?"

"I have a question. Do you still offer that delivery service?"

"Hm... Rarely. You know, it depends on the customer. For some loyal customers, I still do it. Very few people, though."

And that grin was back on his face. Zari was right; he looked like the American actor who had played the lead role in *Top Gun*. Since she had mentioned it last week, Akbar asked around and found out that the guy's name was Tom Cruise.

Saeed could keep that smile on his face for as long as Akbar wished to look at him. So, he had no choice but to turn and apply the ten-second rule when leaving the store. He needed to walk away and think about something irrelevant to let go of his anger. But the grinning face of Saeed with half-closed eyelids was all he could see. At some point, he couldn't help but walk back into the store.

"You never deliver anything to our home again. Is that clear?"

"Sure..." Saeed replied. However, he couldn't hold back his laughter after a few seconds. It was because Akbar's voice had turned into an absurd shriek.

~~~

Akbar devised the ten-second rule during his first week at school when he was seven years old. The school was nothing more than a small, dingy classroom where children of various ages and grades gathered. This makeshift classroom had been constructed a decade earlier in the middle of a desolate piece of land by a benevolent wealthy man. Inside, there loomed a giant, ancient gas heater, a source of both warmth and danger. The children had to keep a vigilant eye on its chimney to prevent any unexpected carbon monoxide leaks that might endanger their lives, as had happened in a neighboring village school.

One other unforgettable aspect of the class was their teacher, Mr. Jabbari. He was a thin, frail man with a small face nearly obscured by a thick mustache. His greasy, unkempt hair hung over his brow and eyes. Each morning, he would teach a different grade for about half an hour. Afterward, he would briefly leave the classroom. Upon his return, he brewed a glass of tea, added a piece of opium to dissolve in it, and drank it. Then, he would place a rock candy in his mouth, savoring it slowly. Soon after, he would promptly fall asleep while sitting, and this marked the beginning of Akbar's daily nightmare.

In this confined space, Akbar found himself surrounded by a group of children from whom he always sought to escape. However, within those walls, he became the most conspicuous target for their teasing.

"Be careful, Akbar! Your eyes are falling off..."

"Look at that monkey escaping from the zoo..."

"How can you be so ugly?!"



Sometimes, innocent remarks hurt him more than the mean ones. The only child who didn't mind talking and playing with him was the niece of the village head. The girl needed a crutch to walk as one of her legs was shorter than the other. One day, as they sat beside the fountain where they often came to talk, she asked, "Akbar, we are friends, right?"

"Yes."

"Are you a djinn?" she whispered shakily.

"What?!" Akbar exclaimed.

"Sorry... but my brother told me you are one of them, living in the desert, and they just punished you by sending you here to live with us."

And when Akbar didn't reply, she continued in an imploring voice,

"Could you heal my legs? Please..."

Before he understood the reason for his condition, he admitted his relatives' belief that he was cursed. He could never forget the embarrassing, lopsided smile that appeared on his father's face whenever he was about to introduce his son to someone for the first time. For a long time, his mother expressed her affection for him by calling Akbar "my ugly son." One day, Akbar lost his temper and retorted that his classmates had suggested that his mother must have brought him into the world through her rear end. The smile immediately vanished from his mother's face as she slapped him. She never called him "my ugly son" again, though.

From a young age, he had a great deal of practice in seeing himself through other people's eyes. He could discern people's thoughts when they looked at him and overhear hushed conversations about his appearance, even when the speakers were far away. This is how he developed the ten-second rule. Initially, he tried to see it as a virtue, a sign of his forgiveness, but deep down, he knew it was a lie; the rule was merely a defense mechanism. The only thing that could instantly shift his focus away from his self-consciousness about his face was engaging in meaningful and

logical conversations. That's why he couldn't wait for the teacher to arrive and start talking about math, science, and history. He had to drop out of school due to his hearing impairment, though, a condition he later learned was also linked to his appearance.

He was about sixteen when the new medical doctor in town diagnosed his condition as Treacher Collins syndrome. Discovering that he was not cursed but sick brought him immense comfort. Furthermore, learning that only one in every 50,000 newborns was born with this syndrome made him feel like a hero as if he had sacrificed himself for the other 49,999.

After quitting school, he discovered another way to occupy his mind: driving his father's tractor to prepare the fields for planting. He became so skilled at it that he eventually convinced his father to allow him to go to Tehran and learn how to operate other heavy machinery.

Five years later, he had secured a promising position in a well-known construction company and had rented a place in Tehran. During their inaugural visit, Akbar could discern the spark of astonishment in his parent's eyes as they explored his orderly and well-furnished apartment. At a certain moment, they exchanged a wordless message through their glances.

"I never imagined in my wildest dreams that he could reach this level. Did you?"

His parents agreed, now convinced that their son was eligible for marriage. Holding a stable job and having a place to live in Tehran were more than sufficient to gain the approval of Zari's parents.

As far as Akbar could recall, Zari had been the young girl who frequently roamed the mountains in search of lizards and snakes. Could she make a suitable wife?

"She certainly could," her mother replied with a mysterious smile.



Upon meeting Zari for the first time, Akbar comprehended the significance of his mother's smile. Over the years, she had transformed into a radiant vision of beauty with her captivating emerald-green eyes that seemed to hold the secrets of the universe. Three months into their marriage, Akbar was certain that he could not anticipate any sweeter moments in life until his final days. The first time they lay naked beside each other, she traced his face and slender body with a curious smile, as if she had just discovered a new species of reptile.

Zari was a clever young woman, and Akbar had anticipated the moment when she might feel deserving of a more graceful partner in bed. However, he hadn't expected it to come so soon. The end of their honeymoon period began on the night she claimed to have a headache and turned her back to him in bed—a headache that recurred every night, except on special occasions when it made her exceptionally happy.

~~~

He initially found the crane cabin stifling, but when he opened it to let in the cold, fresh air, he still felt hot and dizzy. The number of people gathering around the crane kept increasing, and the growing commotion made him increasingly nervous. The crane was already parked somewhere in the middle of the square, with all the streets surrounding it blocked.

After about ten minutes, the approaching sirens silenced the crowd abruptly. Everyone turned their attention to the three police cars arriving with rotating lights. After a sudden halt, three sturdy men quickly exited the lead car. They assisted the blindfolded convict out of the vehicle. He had never seen a criminal before, even from that far distance. The guy was way tinier than a man who could be capable of raping and murdering a pregnant woman. He wore a prison uniform adorned with small pictures of a balance all over it, which appeared to be at least two sizes too large for his small frame. His bald head was bowed as he walked, and

there were moments when they had to lift him as his toes brushed the ground. Together, they made their way to the portable stage set up on the square lawn. The powerful projector on the stage illuminated the path of the convict, making it easier for the spectators to follow.

As he neared the stage, the man almost stopped walking, and the soldiers had to carry him. On the stairs, it appeared he sneezed, and a stream of liquid suddenly gushed from his mouth. The soldiers briefly paused, one of them assisting him in cleaning his mouth. People raised their cell phones to capture the moment, while some stood on benches around the square to make sure they could record the final scene with a better quality.

Suddenly, a woman in a black chador ran towards the stage, shouting. It seemed she had managed to escape from two others chasing her. At one point, she tripped and fell, resembling a small, trembling black mountain as she wept. Watching her, the man standing in front of the stool began shouting loudly, as if an intense pain had suddenly gripped him. When he became out of breath, the soldiers assisted him onto the stool. The third soldier, wearing a black mask, placed the noose around his neck. Akbar couldn't see the man clearly, but he was certain that the man was trembling, much like himself.

"Mr. Ramezani?"

Akbar raised the radio and pressed the button on it with his cold thumb.

"I can hear you. Are we ready?" Akbar said.

"Not yet. The noose rope doesn't cooperate."

Akbar took a deep breath.

The man wearing a black mask was still struggling with the rope. Akbar wished it took him longer to figure out the issue. When the man with the black mask tested the rope by pulling it hard and repeatedly, he put the noose around the convict's neck and adjusted the knot.



"Mr. Ramezani, we are ready."

Akbar could hardly hear his voice.

"Yes. Give me a minute. I am working on it."

Akbar just needed to push that flashing switch to lift him and let the convict die. He knew that by lifting the rope, the man would not die easily, but gradually – a painful death.

While carefully observing the man, Akbar made an effort to center himself on the reason for his presence on the stool. It was justice that had brought him here. What if the victim were Zari? He closed his eyes and attempted to employ the ten-second rule once more but with a different approach.

In his mind's eye, he found himself in their living room, as if he were sitting on the couch. Zari opened the main door, and upon seeing the man with a gun aimed at her, she screamed. He advanced, and she retreated. Despite the black mask fully concealing his face, it seemed as though he and Zari were locked in a gaze. Suddenly, he tossed his gun aside, swiftly removed his mask, seized her hand with a firm grip, and passionately pressed his lips to hers. Yet, their motion ceased abruptly. The scene faded away, leaving Akbar with a sense of unreality.

"Mr. Ramezani? Are you ready?"

He wasn't.

"No. Something went wrong. Please bear with me."

His hands went completely numb. He just stared at the flashing switch and, after a few moments, closed his eyes again.

He took a deep breath, seeking something stronger. Perhaps he could imagine her with a swollen belly, pregnant with Javid. He even tried to picture Javid observing them. But his efforts were in vain. The pieces couldn't fit together correctly.

At some point, the two motionless bodies on the floor started moving again, without him needing to animate them. They were not struggling; they were making out. Zari moaned, clasping her hands around his waist. Akbar could see the deep sensual pleasure in Zari's eyes, something that he had seen only once in the first month of their marriage.

"Zari?! " Akbar yelled.

They paused, and both looked at him. When the man removed his mask, he saw Saeed staring at him with a grin and half-closed eyelids.

"Could you see him?" Saeed asked.

"See who?" Zari replied.

Akbar opened his eyes. His whole body felt numb, and his vision grew blurry. He involuntarily closed his eyes again. It felt like he was about to faint or fall asleep. However, he fought against it, summoning all his strength to raise his hand and push the flashing switch. An external force seemed to prevent him from closing his eyes. The new projector lights illuminated the area, making it as bright as day. The hook began to lift the man, and Akbar expected to witness a struggle or wriggling before death took hold. To his surprise, the man's body remained motionless, as if he had died long before. As his body reached the highest point, Akbar looked down and saw the crowd pointing their cell phones at him, not at the hanging body.



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Mohammadreza Fayaz used to write fiction in Farsi, and has a novel published in Iran, short-listed for two prestigious literary awards. However, his second novel was banned by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in Iran due to censorship. Having



had that experience, he decided to start writing in English, and his first fiction was accepted for publication in BigCityLit Magazine.

Originally from Iran, he immigrated to Canada in 2009 to complete his PhD in Engineering. He currently resides in Charleston, South Carolina, and is a member of the South Carolina Writers Association.

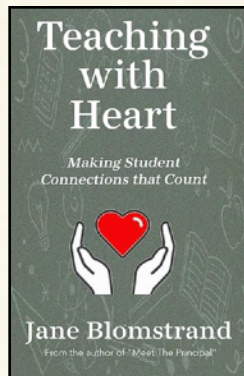




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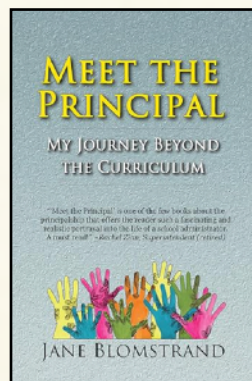


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California Author and former Principal Jane Blomstrand has released her second non-fiction book covering education topics important to her.

Titled "**Teaching with Heart: Making Student Connections That Count,**" the book covers

strategies to enhance teacher-student relationships to enhance learning.



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Blomstrand's first book, "**Meet the Principal: My Journey Beyond the Curriculum,**" offered an autobiographical look at her role as principal as well as handling some of the more delicate situations that arise in a public school setting.



From Blomstrand: "*Teaching with Heart: Making Student Connections that Count* is a must-read for educators everywhere and anyone working with you. If you know an educator, please share this book with them. It offers proven strategies that teachers can use to help students succeed. Connecting with students is where the magic happens in education.

Almost all of us have experience with school, either as students,



parents, or teachers. However, few have experience in school as principals. *Meet the Principal: My Journey Beyond the Curriculum* is a collection of stories from the life of a principal. Some are funny, some are sad, some may surprise you, and some may touch your heart. When you put them together, hopefully, you will have experienced what happens in a school beyond the curriculum.”

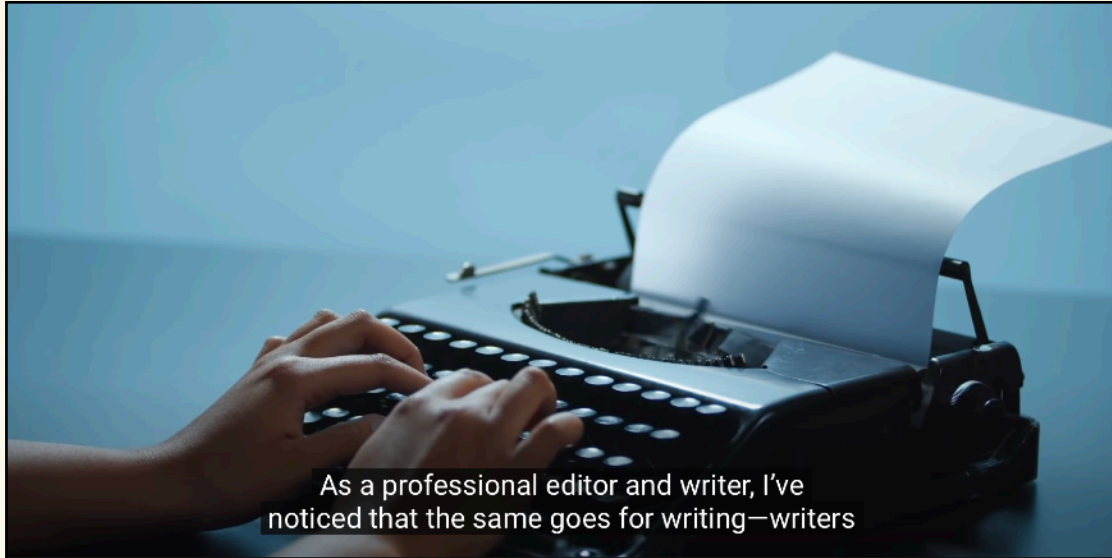
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