

B&P

Books 'N Pieces Magazine

JULY 2024

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Abhishek Udaykumar

Michael Sussman

Penny Newcombe

Samantha Horne

John Grey

Jill Hedgecock

R.H. Nicholson

Emil Rem



**Interview:
Charles Breakfield
and Rox Burkey
Award-winning
Authors &
Tech-Experts**

Happenings | Book Reviews

Poetry | Artwork

and more....

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INKDROPS

Welcome to the July 2024 issue of Books & Pieces Magazine.

We've had some terrific feedback on our past issues, and we are glad that you enjoy the publication. When a writer or a reader emails us with the statement, "I love your magazine," it brings us joy as this is a labor of love.

You may have noticed that we are not advertiser-heavy at all. There's nothing worse than having an ad on every page when you read. We wanted this magazine to be like a book, one you can enjoy without interruption. Of course we would love to have more revenue coming in so we can start paying authors, but it is what it is.

I would like to give a shout-out to [Chill Subs](#). If you have not heard of them, like [Duotrope](#), they offer markets for writers and are quite comprehensive. Many of our story authors get here through [Chill Subs](#) and [Duotrope](#). I've hyperlinked both for you to check out.

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,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "W. Gensburger". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

William Gensburger

This issue is available as a PDF and on our Heyzine platform where you can read it like a magazine, or download it. If you need an epub version for your Kindle or eBook reader, please email editor@booksnpieces.com and one will be provided. We now have VIDEO embedded in our flip-page magazine, and also on the website. This means we can share your interviews, music, artwork, and more.

FACT



Your brain is constantly eating itself. [This process is called phagocytosis](#), where cells envelop and consume smaller cells or molecules to remove them from the system. Don't worry! Phagocytosis isn't harmful, but actually helps preserve your grey matter.

[Courtesy of [ScienceFocus.com](https://www.sciencefocus.com)]

ADULT FRIENDS

A SHORT STORY BY ABHISHEK UDAYKUMA

Mauna hadn't been out in a month. Except to the grocer's, the pharmacy and the ice-cream shop. The cold didn't demand much. And life was simple with a different sweater every week. She was busy indoors, writing her last journal for the year. After months on the field, she felt content with spending her evenings on the terrace, listening to the raspy city streets. It wasn't till the previous evening that she decided to attend a literary meet. It was a motley group that talked about books. Most of its people were older by ten years at least. Except for one girl who was around thirty like her. But it was their mutual interest in snakes that got them talking. They spent the following hour at a diner that looked like it was out of Sherlock Holmes. Ridhima took her number and promised to call the next day and plan a more extensive meeting. Mauna woke into Saturday with an old serenity, much like a girl sipping tea after a day at the pool. She had barely spoken more than a few words that month, until the previous evening, and the feeling of speech made her long for more.

She chewed her French toast, listening to country blues, and then shook off the mood and switched on the news. It helped her get back to work. She'd lived in the jungle the whole of last year, her phone barely received any tower there and the food lacked salt and protein. She had returned thin and colorless, like a pale leaf clinging to its bark. The following year was for publication. She had published five journals starting in February. Her most recent volume studied the patterns of the Russel Viper in the territory of the King Cobra. Her research was aimed at investigating the nocturnal habits of Vipers and its impact on the Cobras' mating. Mauna sat on the computer and looked out of her room. It wasn't a romantic city by any stretch of the imagination. She was often confused about whether she preferred the forest. It was hard to ignore loneliness in the city and easy to forget people in the mountains. But she knew she needed a companion before she went back to the field.

It was eleven-thirty. She had hoped to hear her phone ring by ten. What if Ridhima had already made plans for the weekend? She didn't think she'd meet her on a weekday. Mauna regretted that she didn't take her number. Perhaps Ridhima had agreed to meet in the heat of the moment. Maybe she'd forgotten her already. She didn't seem like a regular at the literary meet, and perhaps it was but a passing hobby. It was for Mauna. She had seen a poster of the literary group outside a coffee shop and had decided not to work that evening. But Ridhima wasn't merely intrigued by snakes. She had

spent the summer of that year at a snake awareness camp organized by an NGO, clicking photographs and writing articles for them. Her corporate job had restricted her from venturing out, and she decided to take a sabbatical. Mauna had imagined that they would go out for lunch and then to the park. If Ridhima wanted, she could come over and have a cup of hot chocolate with her.

The morning hobbled into a breezy afternoon. A subtle fragrance of sandalwood filled her house after a long shower. She had left the phone outside the bathroom and had plugged it into a speaker. She checked it inadvertently as she dried her hair. It was past lunchtime, and she didn't have anything prepared. She toasted some sourdough and made a sandwich out of fried okra and potato. It wasn't the happiest of meals, but she satisfied herself with a healthy bowl of vanilla yogurt. She sat at her desk and sighed. She had spent considerable time last year learning the local language to build relationships with the forest dwellers. The dialect was similar to her native tongue but difficult to remember and keep up with. A year away from the mountains had spoiled her, and though she longed for the forest, she had grown wary of hard work, patience, inadequate information, lack of entertainment, and disillusion. There were times when her conviction felt like her own invention.

By four, she shut her computer and went up to the terrace. She thought she'd read for a while before getting a milkshake. The anticipation of activity helped her overcome the severity of routine –

which often resembled a desperate form of actualization. The clouds had formed into a stainless-steel plate that obscured the rain. She thought about a boyfriend she had some years ago. It was her first year as a research scholar, the only time she felt like she was still in college. They had regular classes, eight hours a day, five days a week; the only respite was library study on Saturday—which she spent with him. They weren't from the same class, but it seemed like their only difference, and they decided to pursue their research in the same region. They had even considered living together until their fieldwork began, but Mauna said she needed her space. She wondered now if living together would have helped her see their differences earlier. And if she had moved to the field sooner, if she had known. They were together for six months; it was the only relationship in her life so far. She had never understood why he wanted to work close to her, but she realized later that he didn't have the ability to endure his loneliness. And she was unwilling to sacrifice hers for someone who had yet to catch up.

She closed the book and flipped her phone unconsciously. She didn't expect to make a friend outside her niche. It was an occupation hazard she had accepted. Conservation was hardly known to commoners whose ordinary lives seemed ludicrous to researchers. She didn't long for a friend as much as a participant in her world – a teammate and confidant. Ridhima was intelligent and brimming with passion, though less with experience. She seemed to

look up to Mauna and absorb her stories and judgment about the land. It felt great to have a human to speak to rather than a field recorder and a local who barely understood her.

She remembered that the poster outside the coffee shop had a number on it. She decided to look it up while she was out. It was half past five when she found herself staring at the poster and sipping a tall banana shake, regretting that she didn't get strawberry and wondering who Armani was. She didn't remember meeting any such person in the group. Perhaps he was an old member who hadn't shown up. She saved the number and looked at it several times. She would have to make up a reason. It was weird to call someone she didn't know and ask them about a person she'd just met. She decided to wait another hour for Ridhima's call. Maybe she wouldn't need an excuse after all.

Mauna walked around the park thrice before going back home. She stood on her balcony and watched families and bachelors lingering in theirs, scarcely meeting each other's eyes. Dark and dry, the evening hung itself out like a roll of film, inverting everything into deep blue negatives. She had an urge to do something. Go somewhere, laugh, flirt, be heard. She had always been a staunch student. Academia had been her world until she hit the field. Ground research had not featured on her list of options when she finished her masters, but a friendly teacher had advised her against burying herself in reading. He had said that everything that could be discovered

through books had reached a stage of 'recycling,' and that anything new could only emerge from the field. She sulked. She couldn't remember the last time she had been naked with someone. The thought caused her much agony. She had to sit down.

She dialed Armani's number. It was a while before she finally pressed the call button. The phone rang for what felt like an hour. She held the phone away from her as though this could make it less real. The world outside was the same. It felt outrageous. She was almost relieved that he didn't pick up when a voice sprung out of the device. It was businesslike, odd for a Saturday evening.

'Hello? Hello?'

Mauna smiled nervously and tried to find her voice as though he was in front of her. But she could not. Not when she didn't know what her words would be or how they would be understood. She hung up and hid the phone in her pullout, flipping the pages of her first-year soil study journal and feeling the heat between her lips. She was aware of a dampness building in her armpits and streams of sweat wetting her scalp. The idea of hearing his voice again felt more ridiculous than calling him about Ridhima. She heard his quick tone saying 'hello' and felt stupid. The house was but a concrete cave with wooden cabinets and panels covering its exits. Suddenly, there was either too much light or excessive darkness filling the world.

She dragged herself up to the terrace and felt instantly lighter as though a part of her had suddenly reappeared in the forest. She

watched the city untie its laces and put away its shoes as the worn-out bulbs kept the neighborhood alive. The wealthier bungalows were subdued in cosmetic incandescence – their slender lights glimmering like slices of cantaloupe draped in creamy white curtains.

She sat against the edge and listened to the breeze. Perhaps it was time to go back. If she submitted her journal by the end of the year, she would buy herself enough time to get her permits in order. She had to make friends where it mattered. And though it didn't feel like the absolute truth, her circumstances demanded that perception of her. She would never understand why people said things they didn't mean and made promises they couldn't keep. It hurt her to think that hope was so easy to create but so difficult to face. She felt tired. She had exercised her imagination beyond her capacity. It was seven-thirty. She got up and looked at the metallic sky, and wondered what she'd say to Ridhima if she called.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Abhishek Udaykumar is a writer, filmmaker, and painter from India. He graduated from Royal Holloway University of London with an English and Creative Writing degree. He writes short stories, novels, and essays and makes documentaries and fiction films. His narratives reflect the human condition of rural and urban

communities. He has been published in different literary journals and has made thirteen films and several series of paintings.



ARTWORK

BY ADDISEN GENSBURGER



Addisen Gensburger has been drawing for many years. Among his credits is a logo for the Eagle, Idaho Chamber of Commerce. He currently attends college with an eye for graphic design. Learn more at <https://addisengensburger.myportfolio.com/>

FACT:



Striking your head against the wall, you can lose 150 calories an hour.

It's not the ideal weight-loss method, and might cost you money with home repairs.

Do you have some oddball facts that our readers might enjoy?
Send them to us at editor@booksnpieces.com

CHARLES BREAKFIELD & ROX BURKEY

AN INTERVIEW



Charles Breakfield & Rox Burkey, professional technology experts, have series and standalone stories available. Using their knowledge of technology, they weave compelling, relevant contemporary stories filled with technothriller, suspense,

romance, humor, travel, and intrigue. They also ventured into writing cozy mysteries with the Underground Authors in the Magnolia Bluff Crime Chronicles.

Breakfield and Burkey run a small publishing company, ICABOD Press. They have published twenty-five works of fiction and numerous non-fiction papers. They wear many hats and must depend on each other to meet deadlines.

B&P: Rox wanted to be a ballerina. Charles wanted to be a starship captain. Tell us a bit more about those childhood aspirations and how you feel that directed your life path toward the Enigma Heirs series?

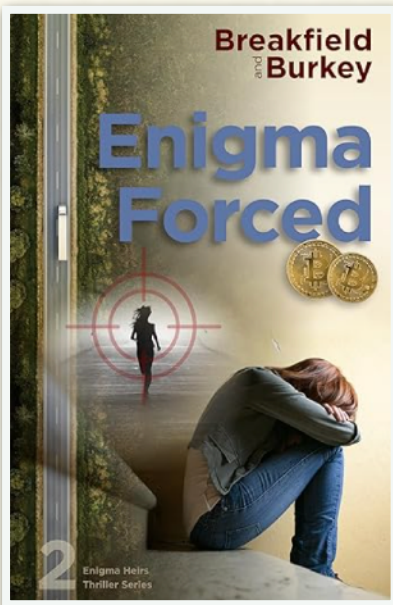
C&R: Rox strives to be a perfectionist in her actions and thoughts. When she was young, her parents took her to a performance of The Nutcracker. The grace and perfection of the performance stuck with her as she tried to mimic the steps at home as the music and images replayed in her mind. Her father explained that practice and commitment were needed for a person to achieve greatness at anything. Though her parents could not afford ballet lessons, the alternative was rigorous memorization routines. These two combined into a love of words for Rox and the value of creating images with words. Her attention to the artistic side of things she works on for the series always comes through in her writing and marketing ideas.

Charles, the oldest of three brothers, took on the role of active man of the house when his dad was overseas performing his military responsibilities. Charles was determined to make certain he not only helped his mother but kept his brothers out of too much mischief.

He turned to high achievement in his grades, athletics, and making amazing things from castaway items. The early discipline and responsibility helped craft his sense of duty to his family as well as opened a door to creatively thinking out of the box. He excelled in school and his early business ventures. His creative nature often jumpstarts their growing number of published works.

B&P: Writing fits around your day jobs, which are both tech-related. How did you meet, and how did you decide that writing would be a good addition to your already full careers?

C&R: Charles was looking for work, and Rox ended up helping hire him as the technical expert. They worked together at a couple of companies as they hopscotched technology advancement during their careers.



Rox is an amazing time-slicer and visionary who helps drive the direction of the stories. She often has two computers running. One is for early morning creative writing activities or during lunch, while the other handles virtual work efforts with video conference calls and real-time responses to the teams she supports. She is the go-to person at her regular work and the go-to person for many of our publishing issues.

Charles works full-time as the Chief Technology Officer for their publishing company. He finds answers to the influx of opportunities for our stories with marketing fulfillment, podcasting, interview scheduling and resolving publishing problems. We each do a lot of research daily, which becomes the raw input for our story material. We thrive in this approach as we create new stories with elements of

technology, humor, action, suspense, mystery, and a cast of characters assembled from real-life interactions.

B&P: How is the writing process for the two of you? Together? Piece-meal? Over wine?

C&R: Oh, consistently over wine. We generally start with an idea spawned from research on a technology threat or relevant event that touches people. Then, we frame it into a viable concept. We sketch out fifteen or so chapters in a spreadsheet and then start writing. We use our patent-pending technology, Literary Badminton. In this process, we bat the chapters back and forth until the story and characters are polished. Our ambition is always to make the story read like there is only one voice to the reader.

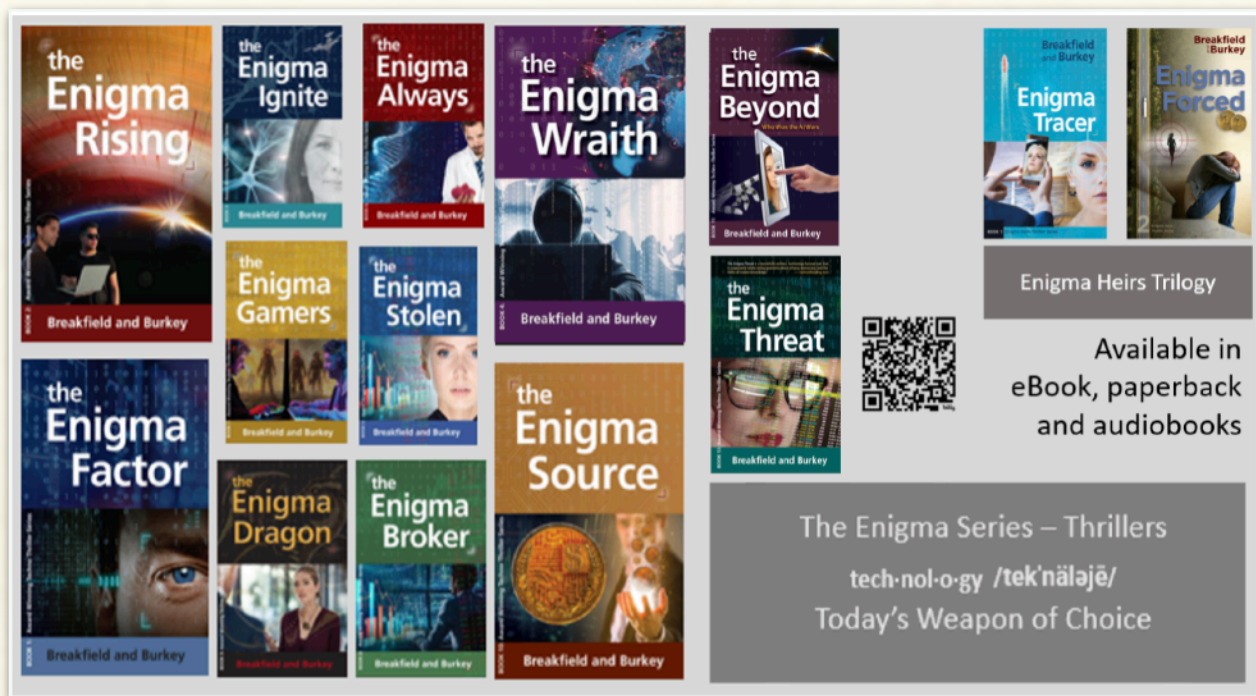
B&P: What's the worst part of the process? Best part?

C&R: The worst part is losing version control. Everything comes to a screeching halt while we retrace our steps to find the missing segments that occurred during our electronic manuscript exchange. Ugh!

The best part? When one of our beta readers or reviewers goes WTF! That was great! (WTF=Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot)

B&P: You write thrillers and crime stories. How many books have you written, and how would you describe the fan reactions? Fifteen Enigma novels and three Magnolia Bluff Crime Chronicles, along with numerous short stories and novellas. What else should I know about?

C&R: We love storytelling. We like to stretch our writing by experimenting with different genres. An excellent author once said, “Don’t give me more. Give me better.” (I don’t recall the name of the author). We don’t want to be cookie-cutter authors, so we push ourselves to improve.



B&P: What's your opinion on the state of publishing? Do you believe it is feasible for indie authors to make a living writing? I ask this because I know several authors with a large collection of published books and I believe the answer is interesting and relevant for new authors to consider.

C&R: Our answer may not surprise you. We don't think any author can make a living from writing these days. They must engage in marketing, selling, meeting people face-to-face, doing podcasts to interact with the host and new audience, and continuing to explore the dynamic world of publishing. Even established authors of big publishing companies must have a role in marketing their properties. Though everyone likely has a book or story in them, making a living from writing and publishing it without marketing is destined to sell to only close friends and family.

B&P: Are you married or just writing partners? And how does that work for your process?

C&R: Burkey and Breakfield are writing partners, not married. Rox hired Charles to work at her company many years ago. We've been friends ever since. Rox is the godmother to Charles' youngest daughter. We are co-owners of the Enigma Partnership LLC, the

parent company of ICABOD press, home to our published fictional works. We usually talk once or twice a day, even if it is over a video conference call. Our best collaboration, however is when we're walking the hound dogs and discussing the current writing project.

B&P: What's next for you both?

C&R: More research, more travel, new thrillers, and cozy mystery crimes are top of mind. We are dabbling in a couple of other projects, a fantasy, and a reluctant romance, to see how they evolve. The audio version of Enigma Forced is planned for release in August 2024. Our newest crime/mystery, The Ransom Enigma, will be released on August 10, 2024. We intend to finish the Enigma Heirs trilogy with Enigma Jewels by the first quarter of 2025.

If you would like to buy their books on Amazon click [HERE](#).

Social Media Sites:

Website: <https://www.EnigmaSeries.com/>

Blog: <https://EnigmaBookSeries.com/the-enigma-chronicles/category/blog-statement/>

<https://roxburkey.com/>



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AGING

BY WILLIAM GENSBURGER

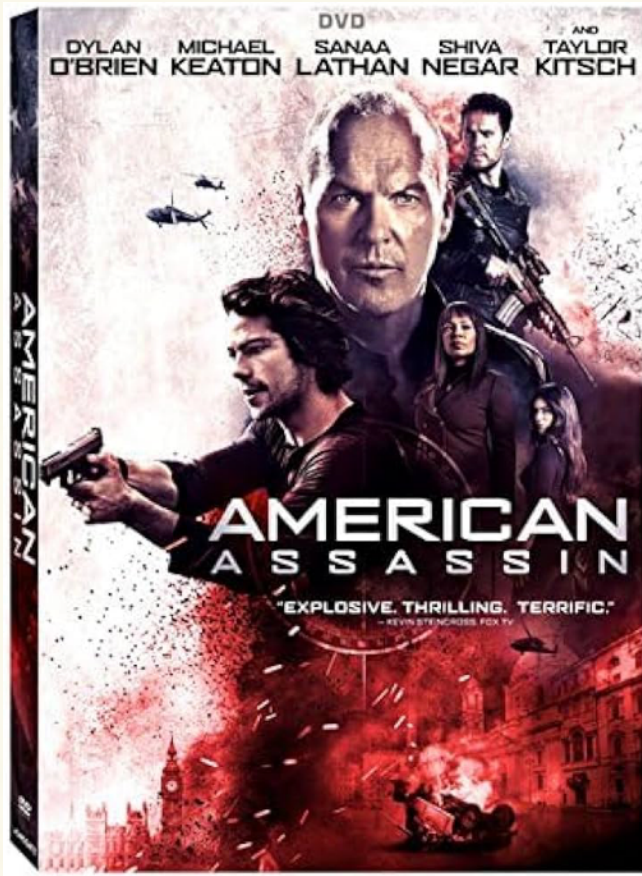


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AMERICAN ASSASSIN (2017)

A STREAMING REVIEW WORTH WATCHING

BY WILLIAM GENSBURGER



If you enjoy Borne, Bond, Mission Impossible with the action, exotic locations and compelling story, you'd enjoy this movie, available on Amazon Prime Video.

Following a wave of random attacks on civilian and military targets, covert mission veteran Stan Hurley (Michael Keaton) trains new CIA Black Ops recruit Mitch Rapp (Dylan O'Brien or Maze Runner fame), who has an

unstoppable need for vengeance after an earlier tragedy turned his life upside down.

As the plot becomes clearer, they join with an equally lethal Turkish agent (Shiva Negar), and CIA operations chief Irene Kennedy (Sanaa Lathan) to stop what could become a global war.

It's always good to see Michael Keaton who pulls off Hurley's hard-as-nails combat-ready strength.

Filmed in London, Rome, Phuket, and other UK locations, the film is visually compelling, the characters sympathetic, and the underlying message of this other world of military and covert operations out of our normal life, interesting and uncomfortable.



3 stars out of 5

PRODUCT REVIEW

BY WILLIAM GENSBURGER

Omron Pocket Pain Pro TENS Unit Muscle Stimulator



Let's face it; writers hunch over to type, whether standing or sitting. And after an hour of this the neck and shoulder muscles can cramp up leaving you in pain and discomfort for the rest of the day.

A year ago I purchased this unit and have found it to be effective, long-lasting and easy to use. The two pads remain sticky for a very long time, and the company claims 150 uses, which sounds relatively accurate. Replacing the pads is easy.

- **Personalized therapy: 3 pre-set body pain programs (Arm/ Shoulder, Lower Back, and Leg/Foot) and 2 massage-like modes (Knead and Steady) each with 10 adjustable levels of power intensity to help relieve muscle and joint pain almost anywhere**

- **Long life pads: Includes comfortable, self-adhesive Long Life Pads (1 pair) that are reusable up to 150 times and a plastic holder for storage**

You can buy replacement pads for under \$10. I've included a source at the end of this article.



Omron is well known for their blood pressure monitors and other medical devices.

With 2714 4.5 star ratings, I

recommend this product that I still use frequently.

\$31.25 on Amazon.

You can learn more and BUY it [HERE](#).

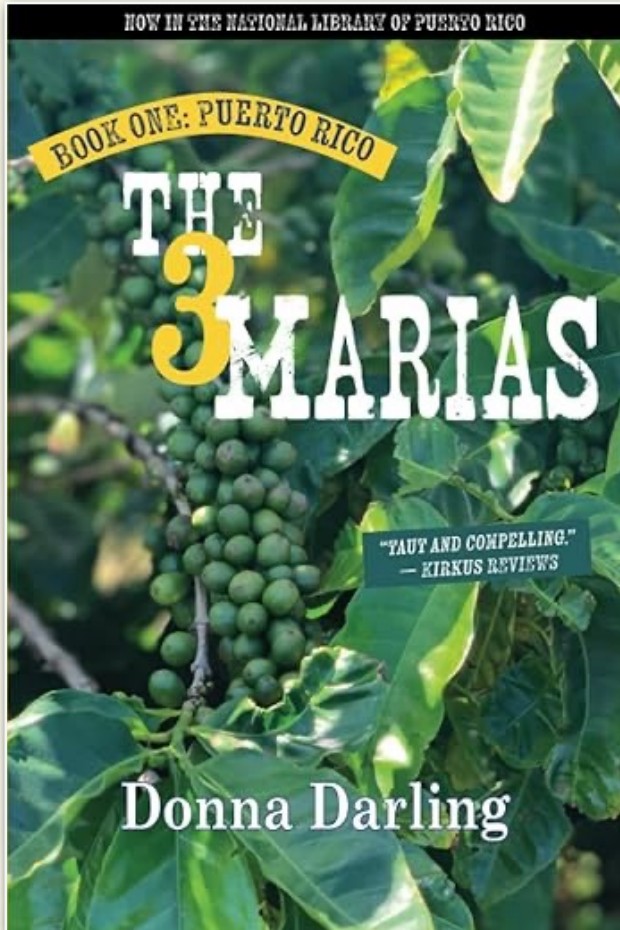
Replacement sticky pads can be found [HERE](#).

If you do get one, let me know how you like it.

BOOK REVIEW

The Three Marias by Donna Darling

REVIEW BY JILL HEDGECOCK



Because I love to read novels set in a country where I plan to travel, “The Three Marias” (Independent, 2022, paperback, 359 pages, \$12) by Donna Darling proved a perfect vacation read when I visited Puerto Rico in February. Not only was I not aware of the turbulent time in Puerto Rico’s history described in the novel, but when I walked around Ponce, I could envision a time when oxen and horse-drawn carts occupied the streets.

The family saga depicted in “The Three Marias” opens in the summer of 1895 when many Boricuas, a term derived from the indigenous Taino name for the island, were dissatisfied with being under an autocratic Spanish rule.

Three sisters, Maria Josefina (“Fina”), Maria Celia, and Maria Martina, are privileged girls living on a coffee plantation with loving

parents. Their world as they know it collapses after the death of their mother.

Told primarily from the point of view of Fina, the middle sister, readers soon learn that her father's gambling debts threaten their livelihood. To resolve Papa's financial issues, Fina's eldest sister, Martina, is forced to abandon her schooling in San Juan and become betrothed to a neighborhood plantation owner, Dino Cesari. Despite her husband being considerably older than her, Martina learns to love her elderly spouse. But unrest under the Spaniards and the Marias' brother and Dino's existing children's involvement in the uprising continues to create problems for the family.

Darling created an interesting timeframe for her novel, which transpires over the course of five years. Besides tackling the United States military involvement in ousting the Spanish from Puerto Rico, the author describes the devastating consequences of the massive 1899 hurricane to the island of Puerto Rico and its people.

Part love story, part history, and part family tragedy, "The Three Marias" is a sweeping tale of times gone by and the devastating consequences of family secrets. The illustrations of people and photographs of Puerto Rico are a bonus. "The Three Marias" is a compelling read for fans of cultural heritage fiction such as "The Island of Missing Trees" by Elif Shafak and "Wandering Stars" by Tommy Orange.

Donna Darling writes short stories, and historical and flash fiction. “The Three Marias” was inspired by her great grandparents, who came to America from Puerto Rico. Darling is a member of the Mount Diablo branch of the California Writers Club and is working on a second novel in the series. Darling grew up and currently lives in California.

To learn more about Jill Hedgecock, visit <https://amzn.to/3vXOazy> or www.jillhedgecock.com . Follow her on her author page on Facebook www.facebook.com/jill.hedgecock.3 and/or on Instagram: www.instagram.com/hedgecockjill

Originally published in The Diablo Gazette www.DiabloGazette.com

MAPLE AND FEDORA

A SHORT STORY BY MICHAEL SUSSMAN

In 1930s New York City, shy young man Jake Kutcher finds confidence and solace on the dance floors of swing ballrooms like the Roseland. Though talented, his childhood tongue injury makes him socially awkward, especially around women. When his meddling sister Molly sets him up with her friend Muriel at the Roseland, Jake begins to come out of his shell.

For a kid who grew up speaking two languages, Jake Kutcher didn't have much to say. He preferred to leave the talking to his affable twin Sammy, who always seemed to have handy a joke, a tale, a curse, or an alibi. Jake's mom and pop called him their quiet kid, which was fine with him. He'd speak up when he had something to say, get to the point, and then let it rest. Maybe Jake's efficiency with words was a good thing and maybe it wasn't. It was helpful to say more with less after his bike accident when he spent twelve days sucking on a cold, wet washcloth. Jake never agreed that it was all his fault since the Wolotsky brothers could already ride bikes down the front stoop of their building. Maybe if they hadn't dared him, he wouldn't have charged down the brick steps and flipped over the handlebars, or landed on his head, or bit through half

his tongue. His twin brother Sammy would say it was just stupid. Sammy could be efficient with words, too.

Ever since the accident, Jake's embarrassment over his mumbling lisp kept him socially timid. But Jake was also a smart kid, knew his strong points, and had confidence in his abilities. He was lithe and muscular, strong and graceful with his arms as well as with his legs. At Stuyvesant High School, he was a star athlete, able to clear hurdles, run a football, and field a baseball. To Jake, these were simply things he did, and he never made a big deal of it.

Jake liked to watch his pop fix small appliances in the garage of their home. The teenager became a helpful thirdhand, later a welcome associate, and finally a trusted repairman. He enjoyed disassembling whatever mechanical and electrical devices he could scrounge and rebuilding them into better condition. He wrangled and repaired dishwashers, percolators, radios, and sewing machines, and he kept things whirring, bubbling, clacking, and humming for any relative or friend who asked. His twin Sammy, all cocky, garrulous, and persuasive, pitched the idea that the two of them should open a hardware store. Jake was all in and joined his brother in their new venture. The quiet one knew what to do; the other knew how to sell it.

The Kutcher brothers were fortunate. One in four Americans were without a job during the peak of the depression, but those that held onto their homes did more of their own repairs. Jake and Sammy

didn't get rich, but they didn't get poor. They split the profits and helped their pop buy the rented house where he lived and worked. They remodeled the place themselves, adding a couple of bedrooms and a second bathroom. Life was on the up.

Jake took to going out on weekend nights to hear music playing around town. He started by going alone to college dances, where he first heard a kid named Goodman play jitterbug on clarinet. The music was great, but the shy young man didn't fit in with the rowdy college crowd, the girls in their tight defensive cliques, the boys egged on by beer-fueled bravado. He then tried a few of the taxi dance halls, but the bands were forgettable, the dances slow, and the atmosphere sodden with the smell of cheap booze. His younger sibling steered him right.

"Forget those joints," Molly told him. For all his brains, Jake couldn't figure out how his kid sister became an expert in social settings. "You wanna go to a big music hall? Someplace nice," she said. "Like the Savoy or the Roseland."

Jake took Molly's advice, and with a couple of friends or Sammy or sometimes alone, he'd head out to hear the likes of Fletcher Henderson, Chick Webb, or Harry James. He came prepared, fedora up top, dancing shoes below. Jake learned something astonishing. Some girls didn't come to talk. They came to dance.

#

The agility Jake had shown in high school sports was still with him. He found that he could slip right into the beat, his feet, knees, and hips flowing with the swings, steps, and dips of each dance. Rather than flaunt his dexterity, Jake displayed a quiet, smooth confidence. He was still shy between dances, but he found that when a single girl smiled and widened her eyes, she was ready to take a spin. And when he hit the floor for a Lindy hop, balboa, jive, or shag, he could connect with most any girl without having to say a word. The moments between songs, and when the band took a break, were a challenge for Jake. That's when girls could get chatty. *So, where are you from? What do you do? Which bands do you like? Have you seen that movie?* Jake tried to avoid conversation, ashamed by his ungainly speech. He'd keep to short answers, one or two words—*uptown, I work, swing, nope*—and avoid asking any questions. Jake learned something astonishing. Some girls didn't come to dance. They came to talk.

As much as Jake enjoyed both the music and the movement of dance, the social expectations, whether real or imagined, weighed on him. He wasn't certain, and no one was explicit, but Jake supposed his pals, his brother and sister, his parents, were all anticipating something further. A date, a girlfriend, a grandchild for god's sake!

He quite liked seeing the girls at the music halls. What they wore, how they looked, their smell, their curves. Then came the puzzle of what they were thinking. Jake's early inclination was that he could

figure this out. Collect some data, watch for cause and effect, note any patterns and reactions, and come to a reasonable conclusion. Of course, this got Jake nowhere. He turned next to trusted advisors, persons with greater experience and knowledge than him.

“Hey Sammy, what’s the deal with how girls think?”

“Don’t be stupid,” was his twin’s reply. “Who cares how they think? I like the way they feel.”

And “Hey Molly, explain to me how girls think”

“Sure. We all got a little machine inside our heads. You feed it a couple of quarters, the gears spin around, and we spit out a thought.” Jake stared back at his sister, wondering why he bothered. “Same as you do, chucklehead.”

Jake quit the dances and withdrew into his known world, spending more hours at the hardware store, nights reading Hammett, Buck, Steinbeck, and sometimes catching a Yankees home game with the guys. With each night home alone, his mom and pop wondered about him. When Sammy, who had been seeing the same girl for two years now, announced his engagement, they were thrilled for their gregarious son. And they pestered Jake that much more. The conversations around the dinner table one Thursday evening went from innocent to irksome.

“So, how’s the roast?” Mom asked, it being roast night.

“It’s perfect, Mom,” Molly chimed in. “Just needs a little salt.”

“Someone pass Molly the salt. I made it a little different, so it is what it is.”

“It’s very good,” added Pop. “Here, pass this salt. How was work today, Rosa?”

“Eh, work is work. I do my job, the men act like jerks, and then I come home.”

Sammy commented, “Same as always,” through a mouthful of potatoes.

“How about at the store? Anything new, Sammy?”

“It’s good, Pop. We got some new electric tools coming in. As soon as Jake figures out how to use ‘em, I’ll start selling ‘em.”

Before the second serving, the conversation shifted, and Mom got to the point.

“Have you set a date yet, Sammy? People wanna know.”

“What people?”

“Me people, that’s what people!” said Pop.

“No date yet. We’re good being engaged. It’s like being married, but with fewer parents.”

“What’s wrong with more parents? Are we so bad?” asked Pop.

“As long as we’re talkin’ marriage, Jake—” started Mom.

“Uh-oh,” warned Molly, “here it comes.”

“—how are you gonna meet someone if you don’t go out more?”

“He can’t talk with his mouth full,” Molly suggested.

Sammy, ever helpful, added, “Keep your mouth full, Jake.”

“At least when you went dancing, you met girls. Maybe you should go to shul more often.”

“The kaddish doesn’t swing, Mom,” again helped Sammy.

“At shul you’ll meet some nice, single girls. That’s all I’m sayin’.”

Jake, with nothing new to say, at least replied, “I’m fine, Mom.”

“Sammy could be getting married any day—”

“Not any day.”

“—and you’re alone in your room. Doing what, I don’t know.”

And Molly, jarred by her own imagination, concluded, “Oh! I don’t think we’re talking marriage anymore!”

No

The next morning, while all of the Kutchers were starting their days, Molly knocked on the door of Jake’s bedroom and walked in without waiting for his reply.

“I decided to do you a big favor,” she said.

Jake, used to his sister barging in, didn’t bother looking up. “Yeah, what’s that?”

“I’m gonna let you take me to Roseland tonight.”

“Why dontcha take yourself?”

“Cause I can’t dance the Big Apple by myself.”

“Lotsa guys’ll dance the Big Apple with ya.”

“Yeah, but none of ‘em do it right. C’mon, if you’re with me, you won’t have to talk with any strange girls. It’ll be fun. Maybe Basie’s playing.”

“Hm.” He did like the Count Basie band. “I guess.”

“Great,” said Molly. “I’ll change at work and grab a bite midtown, then meet up with ya there. You can thank me later. ‘Bye.” She zipped out and closed the door behind her, leaving Jake to wonder *thank her for what?*



Muriel Broder got her job as a swatch clerk at the Kleinman Dress Company when the girl she replaced could no longer hide her pregnancy, thereby being considered unsuited for the rigors of the job. She met Molly Kutcher there, friendly and cheerful, long dark hair tied back out of her face, a cigarette butt often smooshed into an ashtray close by.

The two women became close friends. Their camaraderie grew over quick lunches together, to occasional cheap suppers at the nearby Horn & Hardart Automat, to meeting in the city for a Sunday matinee. Sometimes, they spoke about men and whether they were better off with or without them. Molly had been married before. Her husband, a socialist labor activist from Cleveland, had been jailed too often and too willingly for Molly to expect a stable future. She divorced him, moved in with her parents, and went on with life. For Muriel, the question remained open. When Molly suggested they go to the Roseland Ballroom one Saturday night, Muriel was game. “There’ll be single men there, I’m sure,” added Molly. “Who knows, we might get asked to dance.”



Seven thirty was neither early nor late for music at the Roseland Ballroom. The venue advertised continuous dancing, which it delivered by alternating two orchestras throughout the evening. When Jake arrived, Mitchell Ayres & His Orchestra had the stage. Jake snared a small table just off the side of the dance floor. He stood up to look around for his sister or to be seen by her in the soft blend of pink and yellow neon light. The large dance floor was uncrowded yet, and the Ayres music was smooth and controlled. Jake was about to sit down when he heard his name called out. He turned and spotted Molly squirming toward him through the packed tables and chairs. She was dressed okay for Roseland, he supposed, in her calf-length shiny dress. Good enough not to embarrass him. She paused for a moment and turned away from him. Jake noticed that beyond Molly, catching up to her, was a nice face framed by waves of blond hair. His first thought was, *who the hell is this?*

This was, in fact, Muriel's first time at the famed Roseland Ballroom. She found herself falling behind Molly's quick pace, mesmerized by the view of spectral couples gliding through the subdued light of the expansive dance floor. She was aroused from her reverie upon hearing Molly call out a name. Looking beyond her friend, she spotted, standing by a small table, an unfamiliar man with a stylish fedora and Clark Gable moustache. Her first thought was, *who the hell is this?*

Molly reached Jake and flashed her mischievous smile. “Hi, big brother.”

Jake leaned close and asked, “Who’s this? You said no strange girls!”

“She’s not strange,” whispered Molly. “In fact, she’s a little too normal.”

Muriel caught up and stopped a step short of her friend. She looked back and forth from Molly to Jake, from Jake to Molly. “So, what’s going on?”

“Well, what a surprise! This is my brother, Jake,” she said to Muriel. “I told you about him. And this is Muriel, my friend from work. I told you about her. Here, sit down,” she continued, guiding Muriel to one of the chairs. “You two get comfortable. I’m gonna find us another chair.” With that, she took off through the people, tables, and chairs, taken or not.

“Molly, there’s a—” but Molly was gone. “Oh well, I guess these empty chairs nearby aren’t what she had in mind,” Muriel said.

“No, not at all on her mind,” agreed Jake, taking a seat.

The two of them sat there, watching for Molly’s return, looking around randomly, and sometimes meeting each other’s eyes and smiling nervously.

“Anyway, I’m Jake.” He held out his hand to shake hers.

“I’m Muriel. Pleased to meet you.” She reached out to consummate their introduction. “I guess we were both a little blindsided, huh?”

Jake shrugged. “A little. I should know better, right? I mean, not that there’s anything wrong. No, sorry.”

“That’s all right.”

“After all, she’s my sister.”

“And she’s my friend.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

They sat, watched for Molly again, and glanced here and there. Jake fiddled with his hat on the table.

“That’s a nice fedora. Is it fur felt or wool?” asked Muriel.

“Um...I’m not sure.” Jake turned it over, as if he might notice something new. “I like how it looks. It fits pretty good.”

“I think a fedora is more stylish than a trilby. Did you know the fedora got started in France? A lot of people think it’s Italian, but no, it’s French.” She gave a tiny smile when Jake did not reply, then looked around again for Molly to save her.

Jake didn’t know much about hat styles beyond what he’d put on his head. Still, it felt like his turn to say something. “So, I don’t think I’ve seen you here before.”

“Actually, it’s my first time.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.” She fidgeted with her fingers, tapping along to the jazz beats. “Molly says you’re a pretty good dancer.”

“I guess I’m all right.” Jake wrestled out something else to say. “I have a little secret that makes me look like a better dancer.”

“Oh, yeah? You wanna tell me your little secret?”

Jake scooted his chair up to the table and leaned closer to Muriel. “Actually, it’s in plain sight, but nobody sees it.” He gestured out to the dance floor. “Take a look out there. What do you see?”

“Well, I see a lot of people dancing. Most of them are dressed very nice. And a few look like they just fell off the el.”

“Everybody’s doing the fox trot. And most of them are doing it the same way. Take another look. Who are the best dancers?”

Muriel looked over the dancers on her side of the floor, then considered those further away. “Maybe that couple near the middle of the floor. See that guy in the tan corduroy jacket, the girl’s wearing a skating skirt dress, it’s sky blue—ooh, that’s a nice color.”

“That’s Joey Wojcik. I don’t know the girl. But everybody knows Joey. He’s a helluva dancer. What’s different about him?”

“Well,” started Muriel. She watched how the man moved, having fun, eyes staying on his partner. His suit was of a common fashion, just loose enough to allow for comfortable movement. While his right hand waved about like a careless band leader, his left hand kept hold of the fingers of his girl’s right hand. Muriel studied Joey some more. She saw how his heels bobbed in double-time, following the main pulse of the music as well as the subtler offbeats. With each step his knees and thighs jerked up and down in rhythm. Somehow

his torso was steadier, relaxed. He held his elbows away from his body, free to move with the music and with his partner. “He seems to, I don’t know, have this extra thing he does. Like an extra bounce between steps. You know what I mean? Like his legs are still going while everyone else is waiting for the next beat.”

“Yeah, that’s right. And his girl’s doing it, too. And they can do it all night. ‘Cause Joey knows the secret.”

“So, what’s this little secret that’s in plain sight?”

“Look down there at the floor,” Jake said. “That’s what ya call a sprung floor. Those boards are polished Canadian maple, eight feet long, very strong and real smooth. They’re supported by wooden battens. That gives ‘em more spring. When you step down hard, a sprung floor absorbs the shocks, and that makes it easier on your legs. And then they bounce back up, which puts a little more spring in your step.”

“Huh. I never knew that. To me a floor was just a floor.”

“Well, here’s the thing. The boards are all nailed down at the ends. So they’re not gonna bounce there. The most bounce is in the middle of the boards, between the battens. See there?” Jake pointed out the ends of a few floorboards close to them. “Each board is offset twenty-four inches from the one next to it. They’re laid out on a diagonal all across the dance floor.”

“Oh, yeah. I see what you mean. What does that have to do with how Joey dances?”

“Watch him. He keeps near the center of the boards, where the most bounce is. And he angles himself on the same diagonal. That way he can move back and forth and stay close to the centers of the boards, getting that extra bounce with each step.”

“I never would’ve thought,” said Muriel. “How come you know all this?”

“I got a hardware store. I know all about construction.”

“Oh, yeah. Molly told me that.” She was impressed and, for the first time, smiled at Jake. “I wonder how come Joey knows about it.”

This time it was Jake who smiled. “Cause I told him,” he said.

At this, Muriel laughed out loud. “Well, I guess it’s not such a secret anymore.”

“That’s okay. I got another.”

“What about the floor?”

“Sort of. Not exactly. You know how they finish the floor? Using wax or maybe polyurethane?”

“Sure. That’s no secret.”

“They do that not only to protect the floor but so people can glide their shoes a little better. But that finish gets worn off, and then it’s harder to glide.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So I do them one better,” said Jake. “I put a little wax on the soles of my shoes. Just in the middle. That way, I can glide when I want to but still control my steps. Here, look.” Jake swung one foot out and

clunked his heel down on the middle of the table for Muriel to see. But also, as she arrived with two drinks in her hands for Molly to see.

“For God’s sake!” Molly exclaimed. “I leave you alone for a minute and civilization comes to an end.”

“You’re still here? I was having a pretty good time without you around.”

“How about you take that foot off the table and put it back in your mouth where it belongs? Here.” Molly placed two glasses down where Jake’s foot had been. “I got us a couple of seltzers. Just for me and Muriel. Sorry, I only got two hands.”

“Um, what about a chair?” asked Muriel.

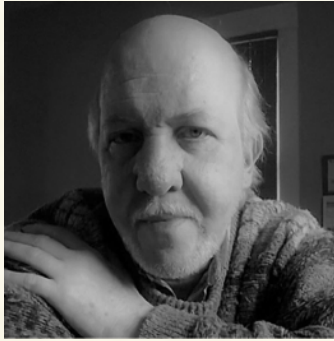
Molly looked around, then stepped a few feet over to where a young couple sat canoodling, a third chair disregarded. “You mind?” she asked, without needing an answer, grabbing the spare and swinging it around to her table. “Mission accomplished.”

Molly sat down and picked up a seltzer. “You might wanna get yourself a drink before the bar gets too crowded,” she said to Jake.

“Nah,” he replied, rising from his seat. “I’m gonna show Muriel how the boards bounce, if she don’t mind.”

“My pleasure,” said Muriel, standing up and taking Jake’s extended hand.

“What? I don’t get it. Is that a euphemism?” asked Molly. But they were already gone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in New York, Michael Sussman has lived most of his years in Oregon. He is a re-emerging writer with a background in film reviews, technical publications, humor, and theatrical scripts. Recent work has been published in The Piker Press and Star 82 Review. He is currently writing the novel *Electric Fantasy Land*.

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LANDED



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WHAT BRINGS YOU JOY?

A SHORT ARTICLE BY EMIL REM

Since his retirement several years ago, my client John and I meet every time he's back in town. His greeting is always the same. "Oh! I have a whole bunch of bills to pay."

"John, they're all for the trips you make. You have no mortgage. You spend \$20,000 a month traveling with Mildred because you want to and can afford it. You've got millions in your bank account you'll never spend. Your kids are doing well. They'll never need your financial help. You're both in excellent health. What are you complaining about?"

One day, fed up with his carping, I asked, "John, what's really going to make you happy? What brings you joy?"

He was flabbergasted.

I found my answer to that question on a Sunday morning stroll through Victoria Island, Hong Kong.

Emerging from the subway station, I encountered swaths of lush, manicured lawns surrounding the station. I sat on a park bench, absorbing this little piece of tranquility in the midst of a madding hubbub. A Filipina appeared out of the train tunnel, carrying a rolled-up piece of cloth. In her other hand, she carried a plastic bag full to the brim. She laid out what now appeared to be the tablecloth and

promptly sat on it, reserving the spot for herself. She took plastic containers out of her bag and began munching on lumpia—Filipino spring rolls. Within minutes a couple of friends emerged out of the subway and sat beside her. They were also loaded with plastic bags. They began to twitter and squawk to each other in Tagalog with fierce animation, sharing each other's food containers. Soon, more Filipinas turned up. One by one they covered the whole of the lawn as far as the eye could see.

Have you ever seen Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds*? A village school is about to be attacked by a horde of them. They appear one at a time, swooping down onto a telegraph wire until the whole length of it is completely covered with birds. It was exactly the same here.

My stomach grumbled. It was 11.30 a.m., and I hadn't eaten my breakfast. I entered the nearest Watson convenience store and purchased some fish balls. For some reason, I walked over to a group of Filipinas. "Can I sit down beside you?" pointing to a postage stamp of bare grass. "Of course," sounded back a chirpy four-foot-nothing of a girl. I began to talk to her. We exchanged names.

Bella was a university graduate. Having found no work back home, she contracted herself out for a pittance as a nanny in Hong Kong. She shared a cupboard of a room with two toddlers she looked after and was given one Sunday off every two weeks. She was asked to leave her home for the day. The rest of the girls with her shared the

same fate. They had nowhere else to go save here, set down on the grass for the day.

She was so happy. “Today I can finally sit with my friends and share news from home, after such a long time. I’m so lucky. I’m so blessed.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emil Rem, an eccentric accountant, becomes a writer of eccentric characters in exotic locales—each chapter taking us on a trip into his fascinating, twisted world. Born to a close-knit, middle-class Muslim East Indian family in Dar-es-Salam, Africa, in the 50s, he is then moved to Maidenhead, England, at the age of five. The next twenty years are spent shuttling between England and East Africa, wearing a St. Christopher’s cross one minute and attending church, to wearing a green armband and attending Muslim religious classes in Africa the next. Moving to Canada, marrying a woman from the Philippines, and having two boys only adds further texture to his stories.

His latest book ‘The Vanished Gardens of Cordova’ is available on Amazon and Kindle. Click [HERE](#) to learn more and buy.

5 POEMS BY JOHN GREY

THE BLACKOUT

For an entire day,
no electricity.
My house is a graveyard of appliances:
dead computer,
microwave (heart attack was it),
television six feet under,
worms devouring, not only its innards,
but all of today's scheduled programming.

Sky too gray to crack open a book.
Body too restless to sit in a parlor chair
and meditate.

Wind's blowing a frenzy outside.
I've no wish to be decapitated
by a tomahawking tree branch.
Staring out the window is amusing
for a minute or too
but then it's back to...
what is it back to?
I can put into words
everything but doing nothing.

My wife is spread-eagled on the couch
with her eyes closed.
She's not sleeping exactly
but not truly awake either.
She's like a house without power.
No lights, no whirring,
no "you have mail",
just some shuffling here and there.

I sit beside her,
kiss her on the forehead.
It's 10A.M.
Not the hour of passion's cue.

It's my latest self-realization.
I'm not independent after all.
I'm wired to the grid.
A break anywhere along the line
and I'm just one more juiceless device.
Eventually, the power returns.
So that's what I am.. .an eventuality.

DISTURBANCE

Gods bark at one a.m. Nothing out there.
No reason I can see for supreme beings
to get riled up, with gold eyes blazing,
and hair raised to the skies.

But they suspect that another religion
has intruded on their space,
with its own priests and holy books and followers.
Maybe a drunk spooked them.
Or a comet. Or the lights of a passing truck.
Or a secular racoon trotted across a driveway,

Their omnipotent minds can fashion
a threatening monster from the merest of sounds.
So they bark all night but I fall asleep anyhow.
A modicum of mood, a smidgen of stress,
my dreams are the work of gods.

SUNLIGHT EMPORIUM

Above - glorious - serene blue,
Yet I got careless with it, closed my eyes,
knocked on a cloud to be let in.
Race with the heart and roam about endlessly
between real people and their fading photographs,
and children with orange horizon grins.

Back before lightning, there was nothing to see.
Churches built themselves anyhow.
God was a telegraph pole. Crows stood in for angels.
Skin and eyes and body defined you for the rest of your
life.
The soul was as worthless as a gravestone.

Gold and black butterfly on a twig,
it flutters and yet stays alert, haunted by the shadows
of passing men, its sea of tranquility half-buried in my
afternoon sketches of the afterlife, that high-gloss
vener
that sets off sparkles in my green plaza at sunset.

The sun says it's holding some fire in reserve for me
but I don't believe a word it says.
For all its life-giving properties, the sun is nothing
special.

Sure, it gives mother earth her fix.
But it's mostly for the amusement of those
who bother to look up.

THE FOX INTRUDES

Some distinguished looking canines here;
you're wondering, are any of these creatures foxes

small talk breaks up into rear-end sniffing,
but who is lurking, who's elusive,
who rates superior to all this furry gnashing,
as a privilege of its inner foxfire.

Can this poodle shapeshift?
Does the sheepdog use its belly as a drum?
And how many lapdogs does it take
to pounce on a prey, kill and devour it?
Only Reynard upsets the order of things
with a fake bleat and then an avaricious leap.

The yapping is incessant.
Some of them are more pet than they are dog.
A rabbit could eat off their noses
and live between their teeth.

Hors d'oeuvres are being passed around -
watch the most practiced paw,
the one that can grab and swallow
without letting another dog's face rise again...
years beyond when it drops.

FISH BOWL

From deep within the fish bowl,
something orange with black stripes,
silently gestures.

A bare bulb above
shines down on my curiosity,
a tiger's slow pacing.

Everything else in the house
is what it should be
acting like it must.

Spiders creep.
Ants march.
Moths play with light and dark.

Then the tiger roars
and floor and ceiling,
struggle to hold their place.

The table that holds
the fish bowl rocks,
the castle within tumbles.

Life at fishbowl's edge
is communication's last stand.
The graceful feline

wishes to be fed.
It has me at the crossroads.
I could be meal or master.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Grey is an Australian poet and US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *Lost Pilots*. His latest books, "Between Two Fires," "Covert," and "Memory Outside The Head," are available through Amazon. Upcoming in *California Quarterly*, *Seventh Quarry*, *La Presa* and *Doubly Mad*.

A YOUNG READER



LOST

A SHORT STORY BY SAMANTHA HORNE

Her screams keep echoing in my head. That's why I often feel worthless. When your mom leaves you at 13, again, it messes you up. The first time, I was 9, the oldest of 3 on my dad's side. I can't tell you how many times she did it to my older half-sister; she turned 30 in December and hasn't had a relationship with her for seven years. Mother is many things; she's reckless, selfish, a liar, a narcissist, manipulator; you would think after five kids, she would get this whole mother thing down.

Strange, isn't it? But it's that fact I don't recognize her at all as a mom. I haven't seen her since 2018, and I turned 20 a week ago ... isn't that crazy? Ever since I was a little girl, I've been told, "You look so much like her." It strikes me like a knife each time.

At 5, all I wanted was her attention. Momma, can't you hear me? I am right here. I'm not invisible, am I? Pinching myself to see if I was there. It's not like she couldn't hear. She had perfect hearing ... that's the point. Each time I walked to my older sister, thick tears in my eyes and a rage in hers. The only way to ever get her attention was

by calling her by one name. She hated her biological name, Louisa. It was like you could see flames coming out of her head when my older sister would do this. "Don't ever call me that," she would say.

At 7, it was just me, Mom, and Dad. We celebrated my birthday with Chinese food and a trip to see Alice in Wonderland in 3D. I remember being scared of the Mad Hatter, especially with those glasses that made him seem so real. It was the best birthday ever... until it wasn't. I woke up in the middle of the night in excruciating pain and got sick. Dad stayed with me in the bathroom, comforting me through the screams and tears. Mom slept through it all; she was a light sleeper. All I wanted was for her to be there. Dad never left my side, tucking me back into bed once the pain eased. But when I woke up, she had gone straight off to work.

At 9, she left for a job in Canada, calling us maybe once a week. Each evening, Dad would pick us up from Mema's house after work, clean the house, cook or pick up dinner, check our homework, and tuck us in. It was the same routine every day. Meanwhile, she was cheating on Dad with some guy named Frank. He never complained, always wearing the most genuine smile as he looked upon us. Even when we cried for her, he found a way to make us giggle. Dad had a strong front. Nothing broke him ... until she ruined him as if she threw a bomb into his heart.

At 10, I heard my dad cry for the very first time. They never fought in front of me and my younger siblings, so when we were sat on the couch being told they were getting a divorce, it came as a surprise. It didn't make any sense. I learned later, before they ever even got married, my Mema—my mother's mother—had cautioned my dad about my mom. One would think such a warning from her mother would raise red flags, but love has a curious way of blinding us to reason. It's crazy how love can bring about moments of joy and fulfillment, yet at the same time, it could lead to deep pain and heartache.

At 11. 'You're the oldest. You have to choose.' That phrase came into my life. I think this is how I became so indecisive—never being able to make up my mind. What if I choose wrong and it's the worst idea I could ever make? What if it hurt people along the way? 'I can't choose; I love them both,' but I didn't have a choice. As the oldest child of divorced parents, it falls on them to make the biggest decision ever. This is how a child becomes an overthinker, how they have anxiety and panic attacks ... or is that just me? She made a promise she never kept 90% of the time. And he just tried to make sure we were happy, healthy, and cared for. He worked himself to death and put so much pressure on himself.

At 13, the heaviest year "You're the oldest, you have to choose," became a recurring theme in my life. It's likely the seed of my lifelong struggle with indecision was planted during this time. The fear of

making the wrong choice, of accidentally causing harm to others, became a constant friend. "What if I choose badly? What if my decision brings about the worst possible outcome?" These questions haunt my thoughts every day. "I can't choose; I love them both," I would plead, but it didn't matter; that choice of not choosing wasn't mine. As the eldest child of divorced parents, the burden of making life-altering decisions often fell squarely on their shoulders. This is how a child transforms into an overthinker, overwhelmed by anxiety and huge panic attacks... or was it just me? Promises were made, but often, they were left unfulfilled by my mother. On the other side, there was a drive to ensure our happiness, health, and well-being—a task shouldered primarily by my father. He poured every ounce of himself into this responsibility, often to the point of exhaustion that he never showed.

The year my Mema passed happened around the same time the mother stopped talking to her children for the second time. It was a hard time for me; I rarely spoke to anyone. Mema's passing and mother abandoning us marked my withdrawal into isolation following a stressful incident at school, urging a return to therapy. I shut myself off from my friends, retreating into a lonely existence. Amidst the darkness, there was one constant source of light: my dad. He became my confidant, the sole person I could open up to. Though he wasn't thrilled about my return to therapy, his priority was always my happiness.

At 14, my dad had become the engineer of countless joyful memories. His unwavering dedication to our well-being drove him to work even harder, ensuring that laughter filled our home.

At 18, he stood by me as I pursued my passion in color guard, cheering me on every step of the way. Through his support, I rediscovered my passion for not life but feeling alive and living in the moment, submerging myself in various clubs and lighting my creativity.

At age 19, I walked across the stage adorned with four cords of achievement on graduation day. My father stood beside me, a constant presence throughout our journey. His unwavering support and encouragement pushed me forward, reminding me that I was never alone in my pursuit of success.

A girl whose mother abandoned her, once again ... what a shame.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author of this story wished to remain semi-anonymous. Her bio: A girl who writes. You may share your thoughts on this story with me at editor@booksnpieces.com and I will pass them along.

A COUGH AND A HARD PLACE.

A SHORT STORY BY PENNY NEWCOMBE

Dennis's chest rattled. He swallowed his saliva hoping it would soothe the tickle, but it didn't and he let out three hoarse coughs. His lungs sounding like two saws rubbing together.

They'd managed to catch the bus just in time. The driver didn't put the ramp down for the buggy.

'A newborn...' Ella shouted as she struggled, dripping wet, to lift it onto the bus alone. The driver, safely behind a screen, carried on looking ahead as though he couldn't hear. With his beanie hat so low, she was surprised he could even see.

'Can you believe him?' She turned to her husband Dennis, but he had sat down in a chair meant for the disabled, trying to catch his breath.

'Don't help me and your daughter or anything. Get yourself comfortable first.' Ella said as though she was chewing on a wasp. Dennis didn't look up, just coughed that dirty smoker rattle. It made Ella cringe. The bus moved before she sat down, making her wobble backward. The rest of the passengers only stared. Ella settled her

sleeping daughter into the buggy area and stood holding the handlebar. There was nowhere close to the pushchair for her to sit. Nobody stood to offer her a seat despite her body language, screaming at them to move.



Ella was still having postpartum bleeding and had edema in her legs. Something she had never had before. It ached worse because she hadn't slept. Geriatric birth, they told her, that's why she'd gotten it. Should go by itself, they said. She was 37. She was young. It was her first baby.

How could she be like this? She would never have gotten pregnant ... if she'd known. She shook her head, hating that her mind went there. Her daughter was perfect; how could she possibly regret it? Of course she didn't! Sophie deserved a better mum. Ella wished she could ... she didn't know what. She was just tired, so tired.

'You want to sit here, babe?' Dennis asked. Ella looked at him as though it was a stupid question and swapped places with him, relieved to be resting her legs finally.

Rain was pissing down outside. She couldn't see a single building, tree, or anything that indicated they were on earth. They could be

flying for all she knew. The Wicked Witch of the West was probably passing them on her broom.

Dennis wheezed and then sucked on his bubble-gum flavor vape. Ella pursed her lips, the smell of it made her nauseous, but she didn't comment. Apparently, this was the only way he could quit. For the baby, he'd said. Yet he still smoked. He just added vaping into the disgusting mix without cutting down on tobacco. A sign on the bus said no vaping.

'How long until we're home?' Ella whispered to Dennis. She didn't know why all the passengers were so silent. They reminded her of the Mona Lisa painting because they weren't looking directly at them, but their eyes followed. Goose pimples appeared on Ella's arms. They gave her the heebie-jeebies.

'I'm not sure,' Dennis said, looking at his phone to watch the route, which was jerking from the movement of the bus. 'Five stops this says.'

'What did they say was wrong with the car again?'

'Something about the carburetor.'

'I still don't understand why we couldn't get a rental.'

'I've already explained...'

'I know, I just ...' Ella took a deep breath then whispered, 'I don't like buses.'

The bus jerked as though it went over a bump or a pothole, waking the baby.

'Hush now,' Dennis said, taking Sophie out and putting her head against his shoulder, rocking her slowly and tapping her back gently. It made Ella smile. Sophie routed into her daddy's shoulder, making Ella and Dennis giggle. Sophie looked so cuddly in her flowery baby grow. Ella put her arms out and then lifted her jumper up discreetly. Sophie latched as though she'd never eaten before. The elderly lady next to Ella, wearing a polka dot rain bonnet, huffed. Ella positioned herself so she could face the aisle. The woman's overuse of floral perfume, enough to attract a hornet's nest, was way more offensive than breastfeeding. Dennis positioned himself to cover her.

'We are now approaching Lower Street.' The automated voice said.

'What?' Dennis said, letting out six chesty coughs because he spoke too fast. He raised his eyebrows and looked at the route on his phone, then wobbled to the bus driver.

'Excuse me, mate,' he knocked on the thick plastic screen. 'Mate, the first stop was meant to be Greenfields. The voice... it said Lower Street.'

The driver looked straight ahead.

'Is this the one, four, seven?'

The driver, still looking at the road, shook his head. The rain outside was slamming against the bus's roof so violently that it was as though a hoard of chimps were up there cracking nuts with rocks. Dennis pressed the bell.

'We're on the wrong bus. We need to get off. We can catch a cab.'

'No car seat.'

'It might be OK.'

Sophie didn't like being suctioned off her meal and wailed. The other passengers stared as though they were employed to make Dennis and his family feel uncomfortable. Ella put Sophie securely in her pram, zipping up her coat onesie. Sophie's arms writhed. Her cry was all gums and gurgles. Ella had just put the rain cover on the buggy as the bus slowed.

The door opened to the sound of a pour so fierce that Noah was likely to be brought down from Heaven to build another ark.

'Brace yourself,' Dennis shouted over the sound. He put up his hood. Ella copied, and together, they lifted the buggy off the bus. They ran for cover under the bus shelter. Dennis looked at the number on the bus as it drove away, the passengers staring at him, their mouths gaped open like ghouls. 336? How did he not spot that as they got on? He felt like an idiot.

Ella took out a distressed Sophie, and the baby carrier from under the pushchair. Once Sophie was secure, Ella slipped her breast over the top of her jumper. Sophie let out a few more whimpers, exaggerating her trauma, tears around her brand new eyes until she calmed from the beat of her mummies heart and latched once again. Ella rocked rhythmically, making hushing sounds, underneath the discomfort of the bus shelter.

‘Are you OK?’ Dennis shouted over the noise of rain so powerful it felt like it would break the flimsy roof.

‘Where are we?’ Ella said, unsure if Dennis could hear over the roaring. She needed to change her pad; it was full, and she felt blood tipping over the edge and running down her leg, but there was nothing she could do about that now. The wind was forcing the rain to hit them even under the shelter. Ella felt it going inside of her trainers. She stepped as far back as she could to avoid it. Dennis looked around, but everything was hazed. He bit the bottom of his lip like he’d burned it with melted cheese. He stared hard at the bus map, which looked like a labyrinth of unfamiliar routes.

‘This is crazy,’ Ella shouted. Dennis nodded.

‘This doesn’t make any sense.’ Dennis shook his head at the bus map and took out his phone.

‘I have no signal.’

Ella took her own phone out of the back of her jean pocket. ‘Me neither,’ she said and leaned against the shelter. How could a bus stop not have any seats? Her feet throbbed. She would do anything to take them out of her shoes and get Dennis to rub them. She wanted to drop into the fetal position, cry, and watch the cheesiest romantic comedy with hot chocolate and...

‘We should go sit in a café.’ Dennis shouted over the rain after burning a hole in the bus map with his confused glare, ‘Log in to the Wi-Fi.’

Sophie had fallen into another one of her milk comas. It killed Ella to lift her off her chest and put her back into the buggy, but the weather was too much for a sleeping baby, and the rain cover gave her better protection.

They took out the crappiest umbrella known to man from the bottom of the buggy. Ella remembered putting it there for emergencies. If she had known this would be the said emergency, she would have invested in something better. This one had been left in her office at work by one of the many interviewees who attended to cover her job for maternity. The maternity was not going as she expected. Relaxed and loved? So far, it was pain and no sleep. She loved Sophie, of course, but it came with endless crippling guilt and worry. They lived in a small flat in London; they needed a house, more money to give Sophie a good start, and child care so Ella could go back to work. Both their parents lived far away and were too elderly to help, so they had zero family support. They were alone and Dennis wasn't as driven as she was. He was a brilliant father. Ella knew she had chosen well when she decided to find a husband and have a child, but he was comfortable in his career and didn't feel the need to progress. They would never survive on his wage alone. Ella needed to get back on the ladder fast before someone else took all she had been working towards. She needed to prove to her company that having a baby changed nothing.

'I can't see,' Ella shouted as they huddled under the broolly, holding it at the sides so it didn't flip out from the wind that was trying to snatch it. The rain was slipping down both their sleeves. Ella stayed close to Dennis, letting him lead. They both held the buggy as close as they could to their chests. They couldn't see the path or the road.

'Maybe we should let it slow down before we move...' Dennis said, aiming to lead them back to the bus shelter.

As he spoke, the storm dissipated as though sucked up by a Hoover. The sight of the road and the crossing made the couple laugh with ironic relief.

They were in the middle of nowhere, just a long motorway surrounded by ancient trees. A horde of crows watched them, barking that raspy 'caaa.' Ella found the sound as grating as Dennis's cough. On the other side of the road was what looked like, beyond the drizzle, a service station. It was the only place to go. The road was empty, and they sped up as they crossed, with hot drinks and Wi-Fi on their minds.

A mustard-colored building, which looked like it was constructed in the 1950s but was neat and freshly painted, had two plant pots containing pretty but unusual plants on either side of the automated door. With elongated stems baring a spike of white flowers each with six petals. They gave off a sweet honeysuckle scent. The doors opened as they stepped in front of it and warm air stroked Ella's face. The ache to sit deepened.

'You go on ahead,' Dennis said fishing in his back pocket for his tobacco. Ella's nostrils flared. She couldn't believe he was letting her go inside alone after all they'd just been through.

As the doors closed behind Ella, the sticky heat made her want to take off her coat. With saturated trainers and icy skin, warm air should've been a blessing right now, but there was something... off about it. It was a heavy kind of heat. It felt solid and stifling. Ella started with the baby, taking off the rain cover and her coat onesie. Sophie stayed sleeping, in her little bubble of heaven, like the little cherub she was.

Ella looked around. So many people were sitting at the tables, yet nobody was queuing up to buy food and drink, and there was no chatter. Ella shivered. She could feel many eyes on her, but whenever she looked at an individual, they all were facing forward.

Instinct told her to wait for Dennis. She knew this fear was irrational, probably just the hormones, but it stunted her. While she took off her coat and hung it on the handlebar of the pushchair, she looked around the shops, but she couldn't see any familiar chains. She spotted one coffee shop with pictures of those strange flowers that were in the pots outside on its logo. Lethe Tea, she read in white letters amongst an ash-colored board. She could see the server waiting, wearing a black apron. Stood there like an NPC. Ella licked her lips despite the pressure on the back of her neck. She wanted one of those frothy coffees with caramel and oat milk. Dennis appeared

behind her. Ella wrinkled her nose at the acridness clinging to his clothes and skin.

'Jesus, it's hot in here,' he said, and he took the pushchair, sensing her irritation. Ella hated smokers. He'd hidden it from her when they first met. She wrote non-smoker on her dating profile, and he thought lying would be a good way to stop. He had every intention of quitting, but then she caught him. He'd taken too long taking the bins down. Dennis remembered the look of betrayal on her face, five months pregnant with his baby. They'd just moved in together. Dennis could've handled it better, but instead, he said, 'Well, the cat's out of the bag now, isn't it,' and that was it. He smoked less when he hid it as well. Now, he was back on almost 40 a day, especially when at work. All the lads he worked with were the same traits of a tradesman, weren't it? He came from a family of smokers; his dad was seventy, and he was all right. No point in giving up now, was there.

Ella and Dennis walked together towards the Lethe Tea Room.

'Go sit down,' Ella told him. She was the one who earned more. It had become a habit for her to pay whenever they went out. She also didn't want to listen to him drone on about the cost of her frothy coffee.

Dennis took Sophie to one of the many tables. The dining area looked like a school cafeteria. He couldn't understand why the

people were so silent, sitting at the tables facing forward. Why weren't any of them eating? Why were they so still?

Ella stared at the exposed muffins, which were £6.00, and fruit flies landed on them. She looked into the eyes of the server; he had bags under his eyes. Maybe he ached for sleep as much as she did.

'Do you have oat milk?'

It felt like the server was looking through her. He scratched his greasy black hair as he shook his head. Ella heard a blue bottle buzz in her ear. It made her jump.

'Any dairy-free?'

The tips of his hair rubbed against his shoulders as he shook his head again. She couldn't read the writing on the menu; it was too curly like a doctor's prescription.

'Do have syrups, like caramel?'

The tips of his hair rubbed his collar.

'OK... Um... Can I have a pot of tea and an Americano, please?'

'£6.60', he said, sounding as though three different men spoke at the same time. His teeth were yellow with white scum in the corner of his mouth. Bile rose in Ella's throat, but she held her card against the chip and pin.

The server worked robotically. Ella stretched her aching limbs while she waited but stopped when she felt eyes on her. When she looked around, nobody was watching. Dennis waved, letting her know where he was, but he didn't need to. He was easy to spot in

the crowd, being the only person animated. All other customers continued to face forward. They could be dolls at a tea party.

The server handed Ella two mugs.

'Milk and sugar?' Ella asked. The man pointed his long finger toward the self-serve station. The dirt crust under his nails made her feel nauseous.

'Two sugars for Dennis,' Ella mumbled to herself and sniffed the milk inside the steel pitcher before she poured it. It didn't smell off, but she didn't like the smell of milk regardless. She couldn't have her coffee black, so she put in a splash and added half a brown sugar.

'Almost £7. She told Dennis as she put the mug of tea before him.

'You're kidding!' He replied, absentmindedly rocking Sophie's buggy.

'Charging £6 for a muffin too, covered in flies they were.

'Where the fuck are we?' Dennis asked and put his phone on the table. 'Dead,' he said. 'Can I use yours?'

Ella took a sip of her coffee. Despite her feeling grossed out by the place and the server, it tasted nice. She really needed it. Dennis took a sip of his tea too, and felt it was spot on.

Ella took her phone out of her pocket, too. It was on 5%. 'That's impossible,' she said. It was a brand new top-range iPhone with a good battery. The last time she checked, it was fully charged. 'I can't access my data either.'

Dennis scraped his chair standing up. He walked over to Asphodel Meal-doe. The server looked more like an undertaker. Dennis wondered who was working in the kitchen, the smell of burned toast made his stomach churn.

‘Excuse me, mate, do you have a Wi-Fi code?’

The man wore a hair net so low it almost covered his eyes; he lifted a stubby finger and pointed toward a board with a series of numbers on it.

‘Thanks.’ Dennis said, ‘I don’t suppose you’ve got an iPhone charger we can lend, do ya?’

The man scratched his unkempt beard, which was also covered in a hair net, and shook his head.

‘Chatty around here aren’t you.’ Dennis wheezed and let out barks of chesty coughs. The man looked right through him. Dennis felt a million eyes watching. He looked around at the other customers, sure it was them staring, but they still sat at their tables, facing forward. Ella’s eyes were wide, and she waved her mobile, ‘4%’. The sound of her voice echoed.

Dennis took the phone from her, trying to put in the code, still feeling like he was being watched. He couldn’t make out the numbers; the writing on the board was like a toddler’s Christmas letter. The things he tried failed to process, and just as he was about to ask the server to do it for him, the phone died.

'Fuck in hell!' Dennis shouted. The word hell, echoed back to him three times.

'It's dead, Els,' Dennis told her on his way back to the table. He asked a few people if they had a charger, but they all ignored him as though hypnotised. Dennis saw an information stand near the door. Another worker stood behind the desk, staring ahead as though she were nothing but a mannequin.

'Hi, my wife and I got on the wrong bus. We want to get to Green Street. Do you have any idea how we can get there?' Dennis fully expected her to look right through him and not speak, but she smiled and picked up a leaflet with a list of the bus times. She circled something and passed it to him.

'The nine, nine, one will be leaving at station eight at eleven minutes past four.' Her smile was too wide. Dennis looked at the clock above her head; eleven minutes passed eleven, counting under his breath that the next bus was in five hours.

'Where is station eight?'

'It is just outside on your left.' She sounded like Siri.

Dennis creased his forehead and walked to the exit poking his head outside, rolling another cigarette as he went. It was still raining, but it was not as hard as it had been before. He could see six bus stops and read the information on each of them as he sucked in smoke, letting it burn away the tickle. How had he not noticed these bus stands before? He walked to the one the woman told him about,

the 991 to Green Street. This was it. Dennis tried to match the other bus to this number, but he couldn't remember what it was. God knows how they ended up here. It didn't matter. At least they knew how to get back; they couldn't wait five hours, though. They'd have to take a cab. Ella's hormones were sure to make her hysterical any minute now. Dennis finished his fag, coughing up green and black phlegm in between tokes. His head was throbbing. He ached to have another sip of that tea, before it got cold.

'Excuse me love,' he said to the information lady. The woman gave a mechanical wide smile.

'Don't suppose you've got a number for a taxi service, have ya?'

'You can find the number for a taxi on the back of the leaflet.'

'Do you have a phone?'

The woman lifted a manicured nail and pointed towards a payphone. Dennis shuffled over to it. What bloody phone needed coins in today's age? Ella was rocking Sophie's buggy as Dennis, zombie-like because of heavier by-the-minute limbs, arrived back at the table. He took a sip of tea as though it was a starved breath.

'Do you have any change?' He asked Ella, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

'No,' she sniffed. Her nose was blocked like it always did when she felt run down.

'I better find a cash point then,' Dennis said, yawning, necking down the rest of his tea while it was still warm, 'so we can get a cab home.'

'Do you mind watching Sophie a bit babe? Just let me lay my head on the table for five minutes... just... to rest... my...'

Ella didn't hear Dennis reply, but she knew he didn't mind. She knew he would keep Sophie safe. She'd only shut her eyes for a few minutes.

Ella couldn't get up the hill. She kept climbing, glad she was wearing hiking boots but every time she took ten steps up, thinking she had a firm grip, she'd slip back down again. It didn't help that it was raining. Ella landed, bottom first into a puddle at the bottom of the hill. She let out a huge wail but got up and climbed again. She was going to make it to the top. She just had to keep going. She was covered in mud, but she knew everything she wanted was up there waiting.

'Want to get up there, do you?'

Ella jumped out of her skin. She thought she was alone here. A man was leaning against a tree; none of the rain that pounded against her was hitting him. He wore a tuxedo, like he'd just come from an elitist event. He was the most good-looking male she had ever seen in her life, as though he'd been chiseled out of the brightest star in the sky. Ella's mouth hung open; he knew it was because his gorgeousness stunned her. He gave her a flirtatious smile and licked the bottom of his lip suggestively. The sight of it made her weak at

the knees, and she tried to neaten her mud-infested hair. He muted her. Her mother told her many times if a man incapacitated you to the point that you couldn't even speak in their presence that, it was an adrenal response. That it was the body's way of warning you that something about that person was predatory. That real love was like finding friendship. In real love you will be able to speak. Ella never listened to her mother's advice in her early 20s. Back then, she thought that feeling was love, but she'd learned her lessons well.

The man leaned against the tree, looking like a masterpiece, waiting for her to answer. When she didn't, he asked again.

'I can help you get up there. I'll carry you there myself if you want me to?'

Ella looked at the top of the hill. She instinctively knew if she let him, she wouldn't feel this uncomfortable anymore because everything she wanted was there waiting, but something gnawed at her from deep within. A warning, the reason she was frozen in the fright mode her mother warned her about.

'What are the conditions?' Ella barely whispered, shivering. The rain pounded down harder, washing away every foot mark on the hill from the effort she had already made.

The man let out a lyrical laugh, which would be the envy of all songbirds.

‘Clever girl aren’t you, only one. You give me your soul when you die, and that is it. Then you can spend the rest of your days at the top, living the life you’ve been so desperately aching for.’

Ella ran at the hill, away from his words, anger from his offer fuelling her forward. She took ten steps up and fell straight back down. She looked like the muddy version of Steven King’s ‘Carrie,’ but she didn’t care. The man’s lyrical laughter while she struggled only made her work harder. She screamed as she ran, grunting like a tennis player and ran up the hill but slipped every time she got to the middle.

‘Offer’s there Ella. You can come and be with me when you die. You only have to say yes.’

Tears poured from her eyes harder than the rain. She screamed at the man, letting out every bit of frustration she had ever felt.

‘I would never give up my soul. Never! You hear me. I’d rather live here at the bottom of this hill, uncomfortable and in pain. I am a good person. I work hard at being a good person, and my soul belongs to...’

Ella’s head shot up from her hands, and she pushed the chair back from her sitting position. She was in that strange service station. Her face was covered in sweat and tears. She was breathless and she looked at Dennis, his head was on the table his eyes were closed too.

‘Sophie?’ Ella shouted out loud and she peeled Dennis’s hand off Sophie’s pushchair. Sophie was sleeping soundly. Ella sighed. Tears

were falling down her cheeks. She wanted to take Sophie out of her buggy and hold her close. Nothing else mattered.

Dennis was in a hospital bed, waiting for them fucking doctors to come round. Nurses said they'd be here at ten. It was almost three. His chest felt tight; the CPAP machine forced him to breathe, but the bridge around his nose was soaked with sweat, and his skin had broken down where it had rubbed. His tongue felt like sandpaper but was glued by the thick sputum to the roof of his mouth. His throat felt like a billion pins were stuck in it. He desperately wanted to cough, so he shakily grabbed the brown vomit bowl. He lifted the mask, and each cough felt like boulders landing on his frail chest. Blood clots the size of his fist came out with each hawk and heave. He couldn't stop... sharp, heavy pain, everywhere. He gasped, tears fell, the room was spinning, he was going to faint. He put the mask back in place to breathe for him, wheezing, waiting for his breath to settle; his chest sounding as though it was a washing machine full of coins.

'You're dying Dennis.'

The doctor was leaning against the door, wearing black scrubs and a stethoscope. He was too at ease. No trace of empathy on his handsome face. Why was this guy so intimidatingly good-looking? Dennis had spent his entire life feeling inferior to men like him, and now he had to have one looking down at him while he was knocking

on death's door. Dennis had no energy to cough, but another fit took over his body, making him heave and shudder.

'How,' Dennis wheezed, 'long,' his voice was hoarse, 'do...'

'How long do you have left?' The morning star interrupted, 'Minutes, hours. You will die at any moment.' The doctor looked at his nails and pushed himself up from the wall, and stood next to Dennis's bedside. '... but I can make you better if you like?' He drummed his fingers on the bedside table, not bothered by the bowl full of clots and phlegm. 'I can give you sixty more years.'

Dennis turned away from him and looked out of the window; it was raining outside. He liked the sound of rain. When he was small, when he had his Holy Communion, he was allowed to pick a middle name. Swithin he picked. He remembered liking it because it was theorized that if it ever rained on Saint Swithin's Day, it would rain for 40 days more. He told his mum, and she told him she liked it too. Dennis didn't trust this man. He turned back to look in his eyes.

Dennis lifted his mask up and tried to speak, but his tongue was stuck. He reached out for the jug of water, his hand trembling. He knew the doctor knew what he wanted, but he didn't offer help.

'Yes or no, Dennis?' Do you want to watch your daughter grow? Do you want to be there when she takes her first steps, rides her first bike, and has her first day at school? You can be there for all of it, with your health. You just need to say yes.'

'You...,' Dennis wheezed. 'Want...,' his lungs crackled. 'My...,' he wanted to cough again but he swallowed what little saliva he had left. 'Soul?'

The man smiled, making dimples appear. He looked even more angelic than he already was.

'Yes.' The doctor said simply. '... but that will be in sixty years. Only then will you come to me.'

Dennis cleared his throat, picked up the sick bowl, and spat out a mouthful of blood without breaking eye contact with the handsome doc. He behaved more stoically than he felt. 'Never...,' Dennis wheezed. 'I...' cough, 'belong...' cough, cough, 'to...' 'God!' Dennis shouted, sitting up fast. The table where his head lay had a pool of drool on it.

'Good morning,' Ella said with her eyebrows raised.

'Sophie?' He looked into the buggy panicked. Ella was feeding her on the breast.

'It's four O'clock,' Ella told him. 'I've changed, Sophie; we can head off in a minute; the bus will be here soon.'

Dennis rubbed his eyes, and mouth. His tongue tasted of iron. 'I'm sorry, I drifted off. You are the one who should've slept.'

'It's okay. I did, too. We are not great parents.'

Dennis looked around; no, they weren't, both of them falling asleep in this place. He looked around; all the muted visitors were gone. He couldn't even see the servers. The shutters were up at the

restaurant and the coffee shop. The information stand was just a table. Ella secured Sophie in the baby carrier.

‘My phone’s back on,’ she said.

‘Mine too,’ Dennis replied after he fished it out of his back pocket. ‘With data.’

They got outside the service station. The sun was out, and the sound of the trees swaying with the gentle breeze was like music. The birds, too, were celebrating the feeling. Dennis’s addiction told him to smoke, but for some reason, he didn’t want to. They could see the 991 waiting for them at the bus station. Ella had an urge to run to it. The bus driver grinned at them brightly as they got on, and a twinkle from sunlight bounced from his horn-rimmed glasses. ‘I’m glad you didn’t miss us. This was the last bus.’

Ella and Dennis smiled weakly, thanking him, and touched their card on the reader.

‘What a weird day,’ Dennis said.

‘I know.’ Ella replied, sitting in a chair close to the buggy. ‘For some reason, I feel like I want to go back to church.’

‘Me too.’ Dennis sat next to her. He coughed seven times into a napkin from his pocket. There was blood on the tissue.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Penny Newcombe is a 35-year-old MA student in creative writing at City University London.

Who has the ambition of becoming a traditionally published novelist. When she is not working long hours in the hospital as a registered nurse or taking care of her two small children, she can be found writing in any quiet place that

doesn't throw her out for overstaying her welcome. Her writing tends to be as fast-paced as her ADHD. In Penny's spare time, she can be found haunting museums, archaeological sites, and nature spots, and she constantly has stories on the go. They are her addictive habits.

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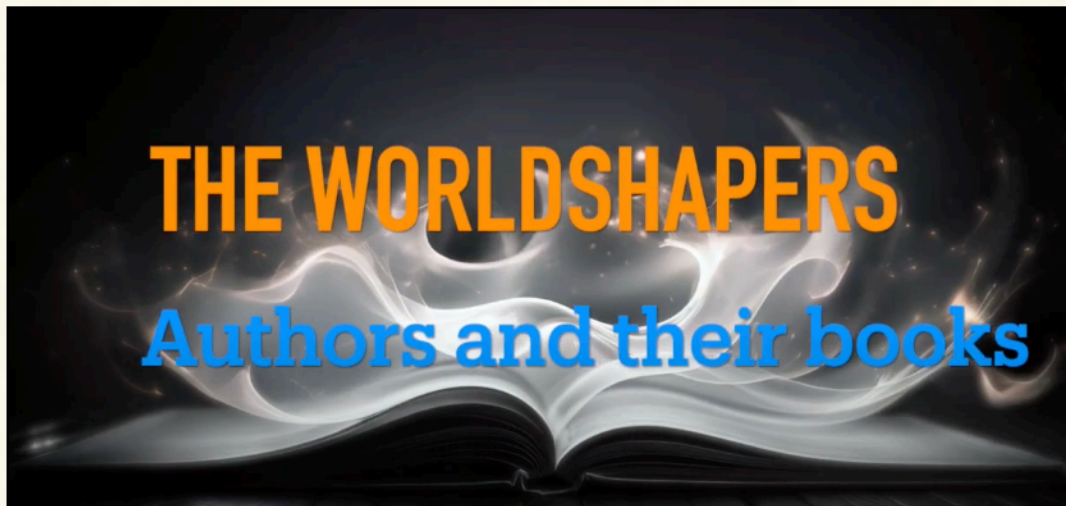
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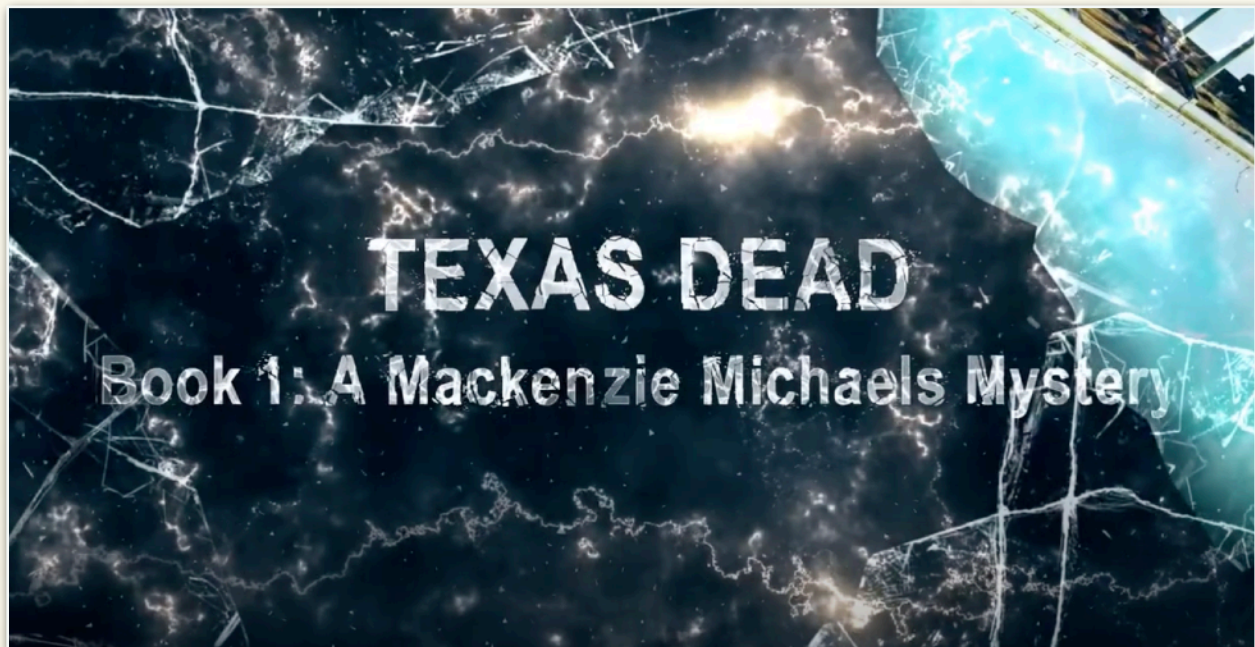
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RANDOM FUNERALS

A SHORT STORY BY R.H. NICHOLSON

The children popped out of their grandparents' Nash like champagne corks with energy bottled up during the long, arduous ride. Great Aunt Millie stood on the front porch steps in a cotton house dress, her arms folded, clearly displeased as they pulled onto the gravel driveway of her shady bungalow. "I expected you hours ago," she fumed as Tell and Tandy sprinted past her and toward her newly installed indoor bathroom.

"We ran into some traffic," Grandma answered as she unfolded herself from the front passenger seat and attempted to press out the wrinkles in her dress.

"Why the hell can't your highway department fix those antiquated roads?" Grandpa growled as he adjusted a fedora on his bald head.

"Well, I figured you picked up some misfit who robbed you all and left you along the side of the road to die. Thank the Lord, you made it and you're here now. I'll get supper going while you and the kids bring in your things." She paused dramatically. "They do seem riled up. Did something happen?"

“Nothing happened, Millie. They’ve been in the car for five hours. What did you expect? They are just normal, active children,” Grandma defended them.

“With wild imaginations,” Grandpa muttered under his breath.

After the luggage was ported, everyone sat on the front porch to escape the dreadful heat inside the house. Aunt Millie, in her wisdom, had ordered her handy man, Homer, to nail shut all the windows so burglars couldn’t sneak in and, she said, “Kill me in my sleep.”

“Batshit crazy woman,” Grandpa remarked every summer when they visited. The children swooped back and forth in the porch swing, bored beyond measure, as Aunt Millie rambled on about the comings and goings in Burford, which Grandma had abandoned as a teen, taking the train up North where jobs and worthy husbands could be found. Luckily, Grandma had found both and took an overbearing pride in parading her economic security and her beautiful, immaculately groomed grandchildren all around town, cautioning them, “Don’t touch anything. You don’t know where these people’s hands have been.”

Aunt Millie reported the latest gossip to her sister, births and deaths, marriages and divorces, highlighting the various shootings, a drowning in Scotsman Lake, and the gruesome strangling of a young wife by her jealous husband. Just days before, Freddy’s Bait Shop had been robbed at gunpoint of \$14.65 and some teenagers had gone on

a joyride in a stolen Ford pickup and careened through the county with all three police vehicles giving chase. “Mavis Purcell told me they went right past this very house,” her saggy arms waddled like tent flaps. “And I don’t suppose you heard Arlene Blanchett died?” Aunt Millie’s voice billowed. “Fell off a motorcycle, I heard, while she was runnin’ off with some drifter.” Grandma expressed shock as Aunt Millie added one of her signature phrases: “She was a handsome woman, for an inbred.” Everyone Aunt Millie knew came with a similar disclaimer. “He was a good daddy, for a drunk. She was a nice woman, for a gypsy. He was a good boy, for a colored man. He was a good worker, for a cripple.” She rattled on, “The bank got sold to some outfit in New York. You can bet I pulled all my money out of there. My daddy always said, ‘Can’t trust a Jew any day but Saturday.’” She referred to her late father as if he was hers exclusively, as if he wasn’t also Grandma’s father or their other six siblings. In her mind, she owned him, or at least his memory. “My daddy didn’t suffer no fools. My daddy never told a lie in his life. My daddy was a real wheeler-dealer.”

Grandma (and everyone else in the family) chose to let slide the truth: that their daddy was a hateful, stubborn, ignorant man despised by everyone in the county. But Aunt Millie was oblivious to this and cavorted around Burford like an heiress, not waiting her turn, neglecting her debts, and subverting the very social protocols she foisted on everyone around her.

Tell and Tandy finally ran out of steam pumping their legs in unison on the porch swing and begged to play in the yard until supper. “Alright but stay away from the neighbors. They’re Methodists. And killers. They tried to poison Sassy because she barked at one of their brats,” Aunt Millie warned.

Tell darted off around the corner of the little cement house and made for the sawmill and lumber yard that butted up to Aunt Millie’s property, a half-acre left to her by her third husband. Among other notorieties, she was the most infamous widow in Lee County. Her first husband had been killed in “The War”, meaning World War II, and received an elaborate military funeral. Only months later, her second husband had perished in a train accident traveling from their wedding reception to “The War”. They had been married five hours. Her last husband, a salesman of some sort, departed from a heart attack, Grandpa said, “To escape her any way he could.” He often joked, “Men were lined up to get at her and then desperate to get away from her.” A corruption in the land survey had forced Aunt Millie to co-exist with the lumber yard, but her tenacity had gained her unrestricted access to their water pump. Thus, every day, Homer wheeled four glass milk jugs to the mill and back to fetch potable water, eight whenever her sister visited.

Tandy followed her brother, and they wove through the lilac bushes, around the giant pine trees, and through thickets of witch-fingers that edged the property on one side, looking for adventure.

Grandpa called them T & T because, individually, they were perfectly behaved children, but together, they were what their mother termed “a hand full” and could be exhausting.

In truth, they simply had glorious imaginations and both the energy and chutzpah to live out their fantasies. One might pass by and hear them say, “I’m tired of milking this ostrich. You do it,” and minutes later, “What makes you think the zodar will take a transistor radio as ransom for the Tickle Queen?” They might at any time be on a pioneer wagon train, in a diamond mine, or on a distant planet signaling Earth with a “telesponder” made from a broken baton and bicycle spokes. Another day they might pull out their mother’s entire wardrobe and create a department store or incorporate all the bedspreads and blankets into a clothesline tent where they treated wounded soldiers with contraband Band-Aids and Kool Aid in Dixie cups.

The pair, only eighteen months apart in age, followed the dirt road to the mill and inspected the lengths of vertical lumber in tall stalls along the back of the barn. A circular saw sat in the middle of the ramshackle complex; its serrated teeth poised to chew anything if the dust-covered red button were to be flipped on. What adventures the children could advent here! What tales this exotic place could spin! “Help me with this,” Tell enjoined his younger sister as he attempted to topple a ten-foot two by four. “If we lean it against this tractor tire, we can climb up and then walk the gangplank.”

“How fun!” Tandy squealed as she moved to help her brother. After a while the gangplank morphed into a tightrope, and they became a circus act. Then the slat of wood became a horse, and they rode it into battle, fending off the enemy with oak sticks they had found at the other end of the barn.

“What the hell are you yahoos doing?” Grandpa hollered at them, and they jumped like June bugs. “I’ve been calling you to supper at the top of my lungs,” he cupped a freshly lit Pall Mall in his hand. He stood in the amber sunlight that slanted through the trees, an imposing man, a regal man in perfectly pleated slacks and a stripped short-sleeved knit shirt, his official vacation attire.

“You shouldn’t be here. This is private property. You know, your great aunt thinks the owner will shoot you with the slightest provocation” he chuckled, pleased with his own wit. “Now, move it!” he called, and they scampered back to the house.

Supper was always an event: sliced ham, mashed potatoes, green beans from Aunt Millie’s garden, pickled beets, cucumber and onions, and homemade biscuits with butter and honey. Aunt Millie had conjured a sugar cream pie, which they ate on the front porch on blue and white Delft china, or Piggly Wiggly’s version of it. T & T had made accordion fans out of notebook paper to cool themselves while they gulped sweet iced tea. As the night fell upon them, Aunt Millie tuned her radio to the Grand Ole Opry and turned up the sound so that it drifted like undetectable smoke through the wide-

open front door and out onto the porch. The Carter Family, Little Jimmy Dickens, and Loretta Lynn floated out into the yard, recounting their pain and losses, their faith and devotion to God, fireflies flitting about, the crickets joining in, Sassy panting from the top step. Minnie Pearl shouted “Howdy” at them like a neighbor visiting from far away. Tell and Tandy played War with a deck of cards with birds printed on the backs. Grandpa smoked, Grandma sang along, and Aunt Millie grumbled about the clerk at the grocery. “You know, the more I think about it, the more I believe that shifty girl shorted me a nickel. Flour was on special this week.” No one answered her. “Lordy, it’s so hot I think I’ll die before mornin”.

“Too bad there aren’t any windows in this house to open,” Grandpa mumbled.

“Oh, Ezra, hush up! What’s done is done,” Grandma chastised him.

“I’m just saying, what kind a nut job nails their windows closed in the American South?” The music concluded and Grandma announced bedtime.

“Yes,” Aunt Millie agreed. “I’ve got to look over my funeral clothes before bed.”

“Who died,” Grandma asked?

“Lordy, I won’t know until I hear it on the radio Monday morning. Elmer Ainsley announces all the services at 6:00 and I’ve got to be ready.”

“You mean you go to random funerals?” Grandpa inquired, organizing his laughter already.

“I listen for the best one. You know, who was the most important person to die over the weekend, whose family will put out the best spread. I go and represent the Tipton family. As one of the most prominent names in this valley, I think someone should, you know, pay our respects.” She pursed her lips and tilted her head in annoyance.

“But you don’t know yet who you’re paying these respects to?”

“Let it go, dear,” Grandma grabbed his shirt sleeve.

Tell and Tandy washed their necks and faces in a metal bowl, brushed their teeth, and slid into their matching cotton pajamas, another gambit in their grandmother’s constant campaign to show Lee County that she had left Burford a poor farm girl and returned a proper wife, mother, and grandmother and was, in every way, better than them.

The children always slept in the screened in back porch, which they called a breezeway, the only part of the house with any hope of fresh air. Two cots were erected, one down the side and one across the back, with the heads touching so the children could feel the night breeze, gaze at the stars, and listen to the glorious nocturnal concert that did not exist at their home in the city. They padded across the cool linoleum floor, past Aunt Millie’s garden supplies, her potato and onion bins, and a load of laundry to be washed and hung out to dry.

Grandma kissed them goodnight, requesting they “give me some sugar,” and disappeared into the kitchen where Aunt Millie was already prepping for breakfast.

Tell pulled out a contraband flashlight from under his cot and Tandy removed a surreptitious teen magazine from under her pillow. Tell shined the torch her way as she flipped through pages of young celebrities revealing their innermost secrets to the world, such as their favorite color and the particulars of their first kiss. Tell produced an Archie comic book from his suitcase and the two settled in, stealing a shaft of light from the kitchen. As the moon moved over them and the katydids pulsed, the pair began to doze off. The house fell silent as a crypt. Tell thought he heard a noise, or a movement, or a stirring. Then he heard it again.

“Tandy, did you hear that?” he whispered.

“I know,” she agreed and flipped over on her stomach. “It’s outside toward the mill,” she surmised.

“Look!” Tell tried to keep his voice low. A small light glowed in the dark before the lumber yard. It swung back and forth like a railroad lantern but was much smaller.

“Someone’s back there,” Tandy said.

“That’s the tip of a cigarette,” Tell determined.

The light moved across the lumber yard toward the saw, its jagged teeth poised for destruction, and close to the security light on the other end. In the combined illumination with the moon, the

children could make out the figure of a man, in a hat, his face hidden by the shadows.

“What’s he doing back there?” Tandy worried.

They watched in stunned silence as the man roamed around the facility.

“I betcha he’s robbing the place,” Tell surmised.

“How’s he’s gonna steal lumber without a truck, dummy?”

Tandy charged. “Maybe it’s parked on the other side.”

“He would need other men to help load it.”

“Well, he’s up to something,” Tell was defensive. “I’ll bet it’s the owner and he saw us playing there today.”

“Oh, my God, he’s coming this way,” Tandy squealed as the figure turned and began to move through the yard, past the pine tree line, the lilac bushes, and the witch-fingers. Suddenly the glow of the cigarette was extinguished. But they could see in the moonlight that he held an object in his right hand. “He’s got a gun!” Tell shout-whispered! Its silver barrel reflected in the ghostly light. He moved slowly but steadily toward the breezeway. Tell and Tandy rose and grabbed each other’s shoulders.

“Does he see us?” Tandy whispered.

“Be quiet.” Tell stilled his breath. “Lie down. Play like you’re asleep.”

The man wove himself through the yard until he came up to the corner of the house and walked directly past the breezeway, so close

the children could hear him breathing. They heard the swoosh of his khakis, the shuffle of his shoes in the dirt and grass. Tandy closed her eyes as tightly as possible. She did not wish to look upon her own death. They lay, arms at their sides, fingers clutching the bedsheets in terror. Tell's world froze on its axis, his mind escalating like a movie in fast forward mode, all his wrongs churning before him. He caught snatches of the times he had disobeyed his parents, secreted his peas to the dog, cheated his sister, lied, exaggerated, and equivocated like the sinner he was, and he was awash with the kind of guilt one cannot overcome in the mere moments before one's demise. Then he lifted his eyes to face his fate and froze at the glint of a gun. They heard the trigger cock, although it sounded more like a twig snapping in half. Then, silence, except for the chorus of chiggers. They lay very still for a full minute before Tell surmised, "I think he's gone."

"I thought we were gonna die," Tandy confessed.

"Me too."

They realized they were holding hands so tightly their fingers were pink and white, nails digging into each other's skin. They lay speechless on their cots, bathed in sweat and dried tears. A mass of clouds obscured the moon, and they slept.

As the sun spilled into the breezeway the next morning, the aroma of sausage gravy and biscuits and fried potatoes awakened them.

"About time you sleepyheads got up," Aunt Millie grumbled.

“Good morning, angels,” Grandma chanted. She wore her bright floral A-line dress with a belt to accentuate her trim waist and new shoes from Marshall Fields. “After breakfast, you’ll find your church clothes laid out on my bed. I want you to look your best today.”

“Amen,” Aunt Millie added. “We want everyone to see how pretty you are.”

“I, for one, plan to thank God today for our safe journey here and home,” Grandma announced.

Aunt Millie chimed in, “I will pray that heathen Edna Hareton doesn’t sit in my pew. Otherwise, God will have a bloody mess on his hands.” She did not smile, her jowls hanging down, her eyes peeping through the top of her wire rimmed spectacles like a scold.

“How about you two? What will you pray for at the big to-do?” Grandpa, who would not be attending church, asked.

“I just want to thank God I’m still alive,” Tell replied.

“Yes, that we weren’t murdered in our beds,” Tandy added.

“That’s oddly specific and morose,” Grandpa commented.

T & T conveyed their night of terror, omitting no detail, and found that simply retelling the story agitated them all over again.

“Oh, don’t fret,” Aunt Millie directed them. “It was probably just Marvin Henderson. He’s a crazy man who’s feuding with the man who owns the lumber yard. They had a scuffle, and he isn’t allowed on the property, so, when he gets riled up on Saturday nights, he

wanders over waving his pistol just to spite them. He's perfectly harmless."

Grandpa fought an urge to contain himself but lost. "So, you are worried the milkman, the mailman, and door-to-door salesmen might murder you on sight, that people cheat you regularly, that the people at church are heathens, that the world is full of evil lurking around every corner, that we are surrounded by death and violence, but a crazy, onery drunk with a gun who wanders around in your backyard on Saturday nights is not a concern?"

Aunt Millie poured a cup of coffee, unfolded her napkin, placed it on her lap, and replied, "Ezra, don't be so suspicious of everyone."

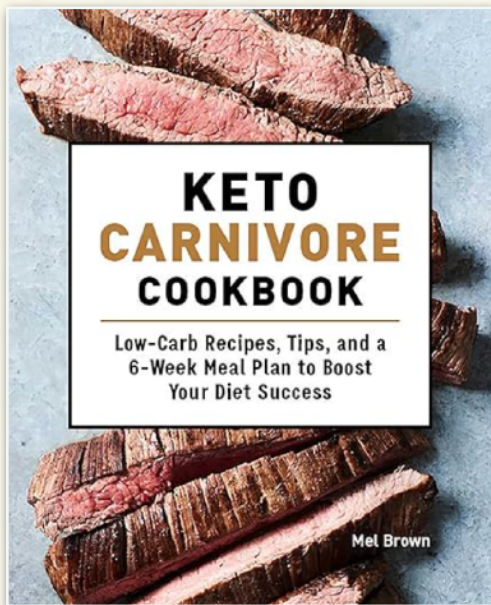
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



R.H. Nicholson taught writing for forty years but is now (finally) focused on his own work which has appeared in Cool Beans, Ignatian Magazine, Adelaide Literary Journal, Echo Ink, The Blue Lake Review, The Back Porch, Big Window Review, and elsewhere. He and his wife live in a small Ohio River Valley town with their geriatric cat Fezziwig.

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~ William G

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "W. G. MAW". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned to the right of the typed name "William G".

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