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BOOKS & PIECES MAGAZINE

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

IN THIS ISSUE JAMES CROAL JACKSON BRANDON NATUSCH,
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EMIL REM
INTERVIEWS WITH JOEL MCKAY, DIANN FLOYD BOEHM,
BRIAN D. ANDERSON

"A walk on the beach is worth a thousand words."

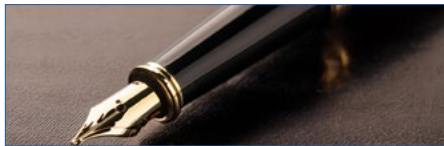
~Unknown Author



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

February 15, 2025

Dear Readers,



Enjoy this issue of the magazine.

NEWS:

This is the last magazine style issue. Starting March 1 stories will be published on our website only and we will be discontinuing the flip-page magazine.

You will still have exposure on the website and social media. This part will be the only difference. We will still have video and more.

Our goal is to increase our reading audience by making it more streamlined and simpler to use.

Cheers and happy reading!

~William Gensburger, *Publisher*

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Questions to editor@BooksNPieces.com

TRAUMA

A SHORT STORY BY DOUG HAWLEY

I was going to college and hung out at a hamburger stand a block away from school. Adams had good burgers and I liked the personnel. There was a young male cook that I kidded with. He called me Maynard because of a character played by Bob Denver in the TV show “Dobie Gillis”. I called him “Archie” the typical teenager. A young woman was called bird woman because of her flighty nature. The cook was an older woman who also kidded around. The last one was the one that interested me; Jane was a beautiful and charming woman.

I was surprised when she agreed to go to a movie with me and it went well. Other than a fairly long relationship which started in high school and ended in college, I had not previously had any luck with women or girls. No need for a long list of my disadvantages at romance.

Her parents both taught at my college and we got along well. The families met. Sometimes she visited my hovel. She was smart as well as beautiful. I thought that we were the real deal and I was ecstatic. One time she asked me if I would love her is she was seven feet tall. She could be charming.

It didn't last long. She was very erratic. There were periods of time I couldn't contact her. She stayed with my parents one time when for some reason she didn't want to go home. What I thought of as little things seemed to set her off. She asked what my image of a wholesome girl was. When I said blonde and blue-eyed, she erupted because she had an adopted Indian sister. When I was taking her home from a date, she insisted that I let her out on the street in the dark instead. One night a guy came to my hovel asking about his wife meaning Jane. I never found out if she was really married to someone else.

I got a summer job on the coast. She came down to visit and we had a good time, but that same summer I was visited by the police. He said Jane was raped that night that I had dropped her off from the date. She never mentioned it to me, and I didn't want the details.

Because of her behavior and my insecurity, I tried to not say anything upsetting, so I didn't find out what the problem between us was.

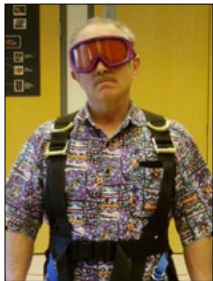
Towards the end of college, we were getting along well. I went off to graduate school, but visited home a little later. When I called her she told me to leave her alone. With the tumultuous nature of our relationship, I wasn't shocked and that seemed to be the end of it. I wished her well.

Fifty years later I was back living in my home town with my wife. Proximity to the earlier affair led me to wonder what happened to Jane. I did some cyber stalking and found her address. Because both of us were married, I wrote a letter to her that referred to the abrupt ending to our friendship rather than romance.

She wrote back to tell me that she had suffered from a past trauma and needed to take a complete break and it wasn't anything I had done. Later I found out from her brother that it was a car accident that she survived but in which an earlier adopted Indian sister had died.

I saw her one more time at the memorial service for her mother. I hope that she is happy now, as I am. //

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Doug Hawley is a little old man who lives in Oregon USA with his editor. After working with numbers as an actuary, he turned to words in retirement. He now has stories in most genres on four continents.

Website:

<https://sites.google.com/site/aberrantword/hello>

Blog <https://doug.car.blog/>

THE JAR TRADITION

A SHORT STORY BY CARLA WARD

“Honey?”

Oscar Wakefield opens his eyes that afternoon and finds his wife, Judy, standing over his hospital-style bed, the one hospice delivered a few weeks ago. She's wrapped in a fuzzy pink robe, her auburn hair pinned up in hot rollers. She hasn't put on makeup yet, but he thinks she's beautiful without it.

“Good nap?” she asks.

He nods. “What time is it?”

“Four-thirty.” She presses a button on the bed's control panel, located on the plastic side rail that fences in his upper torso. The whirring motor hums as the bed moves to an inclined position.

On the ride up, Oscar glances across the guest room to the collection of thinking of you cards on top of the dresser. No one thought he'd make it past August, let alone to this day in mid-September, but he has a promise to keep, and not even Death can make him break it.

Once upright, he turns his attention to Judy. A worry dimple blemishes the space between her brows.

“I won’t,” he says.

“Won’t what?” Judy peels back his blankets.

“I won’t die during the ceremony.” Their daughter, Lily, is getting married this evening. “That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it?” He hacks a few times.

“Of course not.” She slides a hand under his knees and pivots his legs toward the floor. “You’re too stubborn to let that happen. Now, let’s get you to the bathroom.”

After a long journey down a short hall, Oscar does his business. Judy escorts him back to bed and helps him sit comfortably.

“Would you like a snack?” she asks.

He requests the usual, saltines and juice.

While she’s in the kitchen, Oscar’s son, Kyle, peeks in the guest room door. “Hey, Pop. Mom said you were awake.”

Kyle, his wife, Sarah, and his daughter, Ava, arrived yesterday for the rehearsal dinner. The three of them have taken over two of the bedrooms upstairs, rooms that belonged to Kyle and his sister, Lily, when they were children.

Kyle steps forward and offers a half-watt smile. Faint crinkles appear at the edges of his eyes, making him look his age. Oscar still struggles to believe his son is thirty-two.

Wasn't it just yesterday the boy was climbing trees in the backyard?

"Hello, son." Oscar crooks a finger at him, beckoning him closer.

Kyle takes a seat in the overstuffed chair beside the mechanical bed. "What is it?"

"I need a favor." Oscar keeps his voice low. "In the garage, by the back wall, there's a metal shelving unit loaded with tin cans of screws and bolts and such. On the second shelf, there are a couple of glass jars. Bring me the one with my name on it, would you?"

His son looks dubious but says, "Alright. Be right back."

When Kyle's in the garage, Judy returns with Oscar's snack. He doesn't usually eat much, but today is different. He's going to need all his strength to get through it, so he chokes down every cracker on the plate and chugs all the orange juice. His wife's face lights up with surprise.

"Someone has an appetite," she says, collecting his dishes. "I'll go grab your tux."

"Okay." He closes his eyes as she plants a kiss on his forehead, savoring the feel of her soft lips.

Judy leaves the room, and a few seconds later, Kyle returns with what appears to be an empty mason jar.

Oscar Wakefield is scrawled in childish handwriting on an ancient strip of masking tape adhered to the side.

“Thank you, my boy,” Oscar says.

“What’s this all about?” Kyle asks, handing the jar to his father. “I saw two other jars next to yours. One had my name on it. The other had Lily’s.”

“You don’t remember?”

“No. Should I?”

“Do you recall winning the Turkey Trot Race when you were in first grade?”

“Sure. I set a new school record.”

Oscar grins, stretching his dry lips to their limit. “Well, when you came home that day—”

“Daddy?” Ava’s tiny voice comes from the hall, interrupting Oscar’s tale. The four-year-old pokes her head in the doorway, her adorable face framed by a bob of brown curls. When she sees Kyle, she runs and tackles her father’s legs. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“You found me.” Kyle hoists her into his arms and turns her toward Oscar. “Say hello to granddad.”

“Hello to granddad,” she echoes, then throws her head back and giggles.

“Hi, Ava,” Oscar says. “Are you enjoying your stay?”

She nods, then buries her face in her father’s shoulder as if she’s dying of embarrassment.

Judy walks in then, holding a garment bag. She smiles at Kyle and her granddaughter. “Pookie Bear, did you tell your dad about our game of Candy Land?” she asks in her mommy voice, the one she used with Kyle and Lily when they were small.

“No,” Ava says, then whispers in Kyle’s ear loud enough for all to hear, “I won, Daddy.”

Kyle chuckles. “Way to go, champ.”

Judy glances at her watch. “Okay, everyone, we need to get ready. Kyle, why don’t you head upstairs, please? I need to help Granddad into his monkey suit.”

Ava’s head pops up, her big brown eyes wide with curiosity. “Monkey suit? But he’s not a monkey.”

“Not yet,” Oscar says and laughs. The laughter triggers a round of dry hacks, but he doesn’t lose his grip on the mason jar in his lap.

“When do we leave?” Kyle asks.

“In an hour.” Judy unzips the garment bag and pulls out the tux by the hanger. “Your sister will have our heads if

we're late, so no dillydallying.”

“Of course not.” Kyle flashes a mischievous grin. “We wouldn't want her to vamp into Bridezilla and destroy the town.”

“It's her special day.” Judy lays the tux over the footboard of Oscar's bed. “The least we can do is be there on time.”

“I know.” Kyle glances at Oscar, then at the jar in his father's hands. It doesn't take a genius to see he still wants an explanation.

“Later,” Oscar murmurs.

Kyle looks disappointed, but he moves on quickly, turning his attention back to his daughter. “Want to fly like an airplane?”

Ava nods emphatically.

“Okay. Spread your wings.” He supports her weight as she leans forward and extends both arms. “Prepare for takeoff.” He whisks her out of the room, leaving his parents alone.

Judy folds the limp garment bag and sets it on the overstuffed chair, then turns to face Oscar. “What is that?” She points to the jar in his hands.

“Nothing,” he says. “You can go. I'll dress myself.”

“Right,” she scoffs. “And just how do you intend to do that?”

“I’d like to try at least, okay?” He can see she isn’t having it, so he adds, “Give me ten minutes. If I haven’t managed it by then, I’ll let you help me.”

That appeases her. “Fine. But stay close to that call button,” she says, pointing to the control panel on the side of the bed. “You hear me?”

“I hear you.”

After she closes the door, Oscar stares down at the jar. It’s a long shot, but what can it hurt?

Gripping the silver lid, he gives it a twist. Doesn’t budge. He tries again—fails. Closing his eyes, he thinks of his daughter. If this doesn’t work, he won’t walk her down the aisle on his own two feet. He’ll ride alongside her in a wheelchair pushed by an usher. Guests will stare at the living skeleton instead of the beautiful bride.

Grunting for all he’s worth, he strains his remaining muscle, and the lid comes loose. He sticks his nose in the mouth of the jar and inhales as much stale air as his lungs will allow, then holds it until his body forces him to cough and sputter it out.

Hoping for a miracle, he waits.

Five seconds.

Ten.

Nothing happens.

He curses as he replaces the lid and sets the jar on the nightstand. Apparently, his deceased mother's instructions were nothing more than the rantings of an old hippie. Looks like he'll be needing Judy's help after all.

When he's about to press the CALL button, every hair on his body stands on end. He freezes. A tingling sensation spreads over him as if he's coated in static electricity. The tingles penetrate deeper into his flesh, causing every molecule of his being to vibrate like the tines of a tuning fork.

Energy swells inside him, crescendoing to a peak, and for a moment, he worries his shriveled carcass will burst like a popcorn kernel. That's when he notices the pinpricks of light meandering under his skin. Holding out his arms, he stares in disbelief as tiny blue embers travel along the networks of his prominent veins. When the mysterious glowing particles crest the ridge of his knuckles, they wink out and disappear.

Wondering where they've gone, he examines his hands and startles when blinding white beams shoot from his

fingertips. A gust of wind rears up, knocking over the greeting cards on the dresser. They land on the floor, skittering about like leaves on a blustery fall day.

After a few beats of his thundering heart, the flurry dies down, and the room is quiet. Oscar places his feet on the floor and slowly rises to his full height. There's no dizziness. No weakness. No nausea. It's as if he's never been ill.

Maybe his mother wasn't a ranting hippie after all.

He reaches for his rented tuxedo and takes the various pieces off the hanger. As he slides an arm into the starched shirt, he whistles a happy tune. He's fairly certain today is his last, but he refuses to be sad about it. Thanks to the jar tradition, he can go out on a high note.

When he is fully dressed and about to fasten his tie, Judy knocks once before opening his door.

"Time's up. What in the world?" The dismay on her face is amplified by her disheveled appearance. She's taken out the hot rollers but not yet styled her fresh curls, which jut from her head and point in all directions. Oscar tries not to laugh, but he can't help it. Even her hair seems shocked by his accomplishment.

"I told you I could do it myself," he says proudly.

"What's going on?"

“I’ll explain later.” How can he tell her? She won’t believe him. “All that’s important is that I’m strong enough to get around on my own. At least, for a little while.”

Her green eyes narrow with suspicion. “Did you steal drugs from Heidi?” she asks, referring to the hospice nurse who visits every morning to check on him.

“Of course not.” He takes a few steps to close the gap between them and places his hands on her shoulders. She stares up at him, the epitome of bewilderment. “You know me better than that.”

“Was it something in that jar?” she asks.

Oscar shakes his head. Nothing gets by his wife.
“Perhaps. Now please, get ready. We don’t want to be late.”

#

Oscar rides in the passenger seat as Judy drives them to the church. Gazing out his window, he studies the horizon. The sinking sun casts shades of tangerine and gold on the striated clouds above, transforming them into shiny ribbons adrift in a deep blue sea. Oscar concentrates on committing this postcard picture to memory.

It’s his last sunset, after all.

Minutes later, Judy parks in a handicapped space near the church’s entrance. The required permit hangs from the

rearview mirror, the sole perk of terminal illness. Oscar feels good enough to walk for miles and almost tells her not to bother taking such a prime spot, but he isn't sure how long this reprieve will last, so he keeps quiet.

Judy comes to his side of the car, opens the door, and offers him a hand as she always does.

Oscar waves her off. "I've got it."

She steps back, eyes wide with wonder as he extracts himself from the seat with little effort.

"Now," he says, offering her his elbow, "shall we watch our daughter get married?"

When they enter the church, they are immediately greeted by an usher who wants to show Judy to her seat.

Judy turns to Oscar, visibly distressed. "I can't just leave you here. What if you get lightheaded?"

Oscar sighs. "I'm fine. Really. I'll be sitting with you in less than twenty minutes."

She presses her lips together and exhales through her nose. "Alright, but be careful." Reluctantly, she turns, takes the usher's arm, and strolls into the church.

Behind him there are low voices and the clickety-clack of dress shoes on the tile floor. He turns to find the wedding

party filing in. Men in tuxes enter from one side while women in identical lavender dresses parade in from the other.

Following the bridesmaids is his daughter, Lily. A hard lump rises in Oscar's throat when he sees her in her wedding gown. His little girl is all grown up.

She has her mother's red hair and green eyes. A faint spray of freckles dots her nose and cheeks, making her look younger than she is. He swallows, trying to free his tangled vocal cords. It seems impossible his child is old enough to begin a life and family of her own. Someday she will have children. He'll never get to meet them, a painful fact, but his gratitude for this moment outweighs that loss.

Lily glances across the vestibule. When she sees Oscar, her jaw goes slack, and her eyes bulge, showing more white than green. She rushes forward with her bouquet of tulips in hand, forcing the lavender sea to part as she charges through.

“Dad?” She wraps her free arm around his neck and hugs him. “I thought you were going to use a wheelchair. How are you—how is this happening?”

“Magic.” He hugs her tight and breathes in her scent, a mixture of vanilla perfume and hair spray.

She releases him and looks him over. Tears glisten in her eyes.

He pats her cheek. “Don’t you dare cry. You’ll ruin your mascara.”

“I know.” Her breath hitches as she stifles a sob. “It’s just, I can’t get over it. You look great.”

“So do you,” he says.

The minister saunters over and announces it’s time to begin. Groomsmen and bridesmaids line up, two by two, and Lily and Oscar take their place at the back of the line. The organist strikes the opening chords of the processional hymn, and the first couple begins their trek toward the altar.

When it’s Oscar and Lily’s turn to walk down the aisle, he offers her his arm. She takes hold, and together, they stroll between the pews. Lily smiles at her guests, whispering greetings to a few. Oscar doesn’t bother looking at the congregation. He only has eyes for Lily. This is a moment he never wants to forget—the time he gave away his daughter to the man she loves.

At the altar, Lily kisses Oscar’s cheek, and he shakes hands with Matt, his soon-to-be-son-in-law. Matt hasn’t seen Oscar since earlier this week, and the astonishment on

his face is almost comical.

“Take good care of her for me, son,” Oscar whispers.

“I will, sir.”

Oscar slides into the first pew and sits beside Judy. Together, they listen to their daughter say the vows they took thirty years ago.

When the minister pronounces Lily and Matt, man and wife, Judy snuffles and dabs her eyes with a tissue.

Oscar wraps an arm around his wife and murmurs, “I love you.”

She gives him a watery smile. “I love you, too.”

At the reception hall, Oscar makes short work of his prime rib dinner. It’s been a while since he’s eaten this much food in a sitting, but his stomach doesn’t balk one bit. When a cummerbund-clad waiter comes around pouring champagne, Oscar nods like the other guests at their table when asked if he’d like some.

Judy gapes at him in horror. “You can’t drink.”

“Sure I can,” Oscar says. “It’s my farewell tour. I can do whatever I please.”

Her green eyes darken with concern, and he knows he’s

stepped in it. Just because he's at peace with dying today doesn't mean his wife is.

"Sorry, dear," he says. "Come on. Drink up. It's a party. Let's live a little."

Worry still lingers in her expression, but she motions for the waiter to pour her some champagne. "Alright. I guess I'll join you."

Oscar raises his glass and offers his wife a private toast. "To the love of my life—thank you, for everything."

"Thank you." She gets the words out, but her voice wavers with emotion. He clinks his glass against hers, and they both take a sip.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the DJ announces over the sound system, "it's time for the bride and groom's first dance. Let's give it up for Matt and Lily."

Oscar claps with the rest of the guests as his daughter and son-in-law journey to the dance floor. He and Judy watch with rapt attention as the young couple begins to sway to Sinatra's "The Way You Look Tonight."

"Seems like just yesterday that was us," Judy murmurs.

Oscar reaches for her hand, interlocking his fingers with hers. "I hope they share as many good times as we have."

She leans her head against his shoulder. “Me too.”

When the song ends, the DJ asks the mother-of-the-groom and the father-of-the-brid to come to the dance floor.

“Showtime.” Oscar scoots his chair back. “Is my bow tie straight?”

Judy nods. “You look great.”

The DJ plays another vintage tune, Perry Como’s rendition of “Moon River.” Oscar takes his daughter into his arms and flashes back to another wedding—his youngest brother’s—nearly twenty years ago. Lily was six at the time, and it was the first wedding she’d attended. When they went to the reception, Lily asked Oscar to dance, and when he took her for a spin on the parquet floor, she’d stared up at him as if he were her hero, melting his heart and not for the first time. Now, in the blink of an eye, he’s dancing with her again, but this time she is the bride.

Lily smiles up at him as Perry croons about his Huckleberry friend. Oscar can’t be certain, but he thinks there’s a flicker of admiration in her eyes. Perhaps, after all these years, she still sees him as her hero.

“I don’t know what meds you’re on today,” she says, “but they’re amazing. I didn’t think we’d get to dance.”

“I pulled out all the stops,” he says. “Couldn’t pass up the chance to dance with my best girl, now could I?”

All too soon, the music starts to fade, and their moment is over.

Lily kisses Oscar’s cheek and hugs him fiercely. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you, kiddo.”

“Now, let’s get this party started,” the DJ says. “Grab your loved ones and get on out here. We’re going to Jump Around.”

The nineties hip-hop classic pours from the sound system and dozens of kids and a handful of adults flood the dance floor. Oscar spies Kyle, Sarah, and Ava among them and heads their way. He has a memory to make with his granddaughter.

“Hi, Granddad.” Ava jumps around as the song suggests, then twirls, making the hem of her purple satin dress flare. “Are you going to dance with us?”

“You bet I am.” Oscar extends his arms away from his sides. He wiggles one, then the other, as if the wave of motion carries over from one side to the other, a little pop-and-lock action.

“What else can you do?” she asks.

“How about this?” He backpedals his feet in a smooth display of the moonwalk. Oscar laughs when he sees Kyle and Sarah stop stone dead to watch.

“How . . .?” Kyle stammers, too stunned to finish his thought.

Oscar glides backward toward his son. “Ask Mom,” he says, projecting his voice to be heard over the music. “But not tonight.”

Kyle and Sarah exchange a look, then slowly resume their timid toe-tapping shuffle.

The DJ spins another fast-paced jam, giving Oscar the chance to perform the running man, the sprinkler, and the robot.

Ava claps and cheers. “You’re the best dancer.”

Just as Oscar breaks a sweat, the DJ slows the party tempo with Louie Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World.” He offers his hand to Ava. “May I have this dance?”

“Okay,” she says in that chipper tone only four-year-olds possess. “Can you pick me up?”

“You bet.” Lifting her is easy. She’s a wisp of a thing.

The child drapes her tiny arms around his neck. “Can’t wait ‘til I get married. I want a fancy dress like Aunt Lily’s.”

“Don’t let your daddy hear you say that,” Oscar teases.

He glances over at Kyle, who's talking with Sarah near the cake table. His son is blissfully unaware that time is fleeting. One day, which will arrive quicker than he knows, Kyle will wake up and be responsible for walking Ava down the aisle. With any luck, he'll take after Judy and be healthy enough to do it.

Louie's melodic voice paints a portrait of red roses and fields of green. Oscar sways back and forth with his granddaughter, cherishing every second and thinking what a wonderful world it is indeed. When the song draws to a close, she asks to be put down. Oscar obliges.

"Twirl me, please," Ava says.

Oscar takes her by the hand and turns her in circles.

"Whee!" she squeals. "That was fun."

"It was. Thanks for dancing with me." He bends at the waist and plants a kiss on top of the girl's head. "I love you, little one."

"Love you, too."

"I'm going to dance with Grandma next, okay?"

"Okay. Bye." She skips off toward her parents.

The DJ plays another retro ditty, "My Girl," by The Temptations. Oscar winds his way through the tables and

finds Judy chatting with an old friend.

“Sorry for interrupting,” he says, “but I need to steal my wife.”

Judy smiles and excuses herself. “Are you feeling alright?” she asks as they walk away.

“I feel fine.” He takes a moment to admire how attractive she is in her silky emerald gown. She doesn’t look a day of her fifty-five years. “I wanted to make sure I danced with the prettiest woman in the room.”

She smiles and pats his arm. “Oh, Oscar.”

Taking her by the hand, he leads her to the parquet floor and gathers her into his arms.

“I’ve always liked this song,” she says.

“Me too, and so apropos.” He tightens his hold on her, bringing her body closer to his. Even after three decades, they still fit together like puzzle pieces. For a few minutes, it’s as if they are those same college kids who got married a month after graduation.

Then Judy breaks the silence. “I saw you do the moonwalk earlier. Must’ve been some strong stuff in that jar of yours.”

He chuckles. “Nice try. I promised I’d tell you about it later, and I will, but let’s just enjoy the moment, alright?”

“Alright.”

She rests her head on his shoulder and time stands still.

Eventually the song ends, and the DJ announces the next tune. Oscar doesn't register the title because his energy is waning. He doesn't need help walking, but that level of fatigue is not far off. It won't do to unravel here.

A forlorn note in his voice, he murmurs, “I need to go home, my love.”

She doesn't say a word, just strides to their table, grabs her purse, and walks him to the dark parking lot. When they get in the car, he touches her arm to stop her from starting the engine.

“Wait,” he says.

She turns to face him, her eyes dark with worry. “What is it?”

“I want to do something before I'm too weak to do it.” He leans across the console between them, places his hands on either side of her face, and presses his lips to hers. The contact fans a dormant flame and before long, they are making out like teenagers, hands all over, with no regard for their surroundings.

When they finally come up for air, Judy is breathless. “Yowzer. You've still got it, Oscar.”

He brushes a stray hair from her cheek. “Promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“When I’m gone, remember me this way, not how I’ve been—like a living corpse.”

Her smile fades. “Don’t say that.”

“Promise me you’ll think of me as I was tonight, dancing and kissing the daylights out of you, not lying in that damn mechanical bed.”

She nods. “I promise.”

“We should get going.” He slumps back in his seat, too tired to sit up anymore. “I think the reprieve is over.”

#

They ride home in silence. Death is on the way and talking about it would only spoil their lovely evening.

At home, Judy escorts Oscar to his room and helps him undress. After he’s stripped to his boxers and undershirt, she eases him into bed, pulls the blankets over his thin body, and adjusts the pillow under his head.

“Comfy?”

He nods, appreciative of her attention to detail. “Tonight was perfect, wasn’t it?”

“It certainly was.” She sits on the edge of the mattress and places a hand on his gaunt cheek. “Are you going to tell me about the jar now?”

He chuckles and starts to cough. When he catches his breath, he says, “An elephant never forgets.”

“Nope. I sure don’t.”

Oscar pauses, thinking of where to begin. “When I was about seven, I was outside playing tag with the neighbor kids. My mother called me inside and asked me to do the strangest thing. She had me talk into an empty mason jar about how fast I could run and how much energy I had. I was to list all the things I could do easily—jump, ride my bike, turn cartwheels—you name it I probably said it. I didn’t think much of it though. My mother was always a little woo-woo in her hippie ways.”

“I remember her being a little out there,” Judy says.

“When I was through listing all my youthful talents, she sealed the jar and had me write my name on it. The jar went into storage, and I didn’t see it again until she gave it to me the day you and I got married.”

“I remember a lot about our wedding day, but I don’t remember that.”

Oscar sighs. “She cornered me at the reception and gave

it to me. When she explained everything, I dismissed it as hippie gibberish. It seemed silly to tell you.”

Who could blame him? At the time, his mother had been terminally ill with the same disease ravaging his own body. She wasn't expected to live long enough to attend Oscar and Judy's wedding, let alone show up touting nonsense about a jar. Much like Judy had assumed Oscar had stolen drugs, Oscar assumed his mother had taken something illicit that day.

“According to my mother,” Oscar went on, “the jar tradition has been in our family about as long as our tradition of dying young.”

Judy stifles a sob.

“I'm sorry, dear,” he says. “I know this is difficult, but I need you to understand. Someday, you might have to explain it to Lily and Kyle.”

“Alright.” She sits up straighter and snuffles. “I'm listening.”

“Their jars are in the garage—”

“Their jars?” Judy shakes her head. “You did this breath thing with them when they were little?”

He nods. “Yes, I promised my mother I would. Kyle didn't seem to remember anything about it though. I

don't know if Lily does. I didn't bring it up tonight. I didn't want her to think I was stoned." He takes his wife's hand and skims the pad of his thumb over her knuckles. "Tell them that if they are ever sick like me, to open their jar and inhale their childhood breath. They'll be given a few healthy hours to accomplish whatever they need to."

"I can't believe this."

"Promise me you'll tell them." He holds her gaze intently.

"It's crazy."

"I'm living proof it works," he says. "I pray by the time my faulty genes turn traitor on our children, there'll be a cure. But if not, they at least have a shot at a last hurrah." He coughs and this time it's harder to catch his breath. "Speaking of which, I think mine is almost over."

Judy's chin quivers. Pain haunts her moist eyes. "What am I supposed to do without you?"

"Play with Ava. Keep tabs on Kyle and Lily." His eyelids droop, but he fights to keep them open. He wants to see her face until the end. "And when you're ready, date a little if you like." He struggles to draw breath. "Whatever you do, keep living."

She leans forward and kisses his cheek. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Then Oscar closes his eyes and lets go.

Judy lays her head on his chest. Tears stream down her face, soaking his undershirt with grief. When her sobs finally subside, she stands and gazes down at the love of her life. At least he's no longer suffering. She can take comfort in that.

She wanders out to the garage, and after a bit of searching, finds the jars labeled Kyle and Lily on a shelving unit near the back wall. Hopefully, her children won't fall ill like her mother-in-law and Oscar, but if they do, she'll honor her husband's last request and tell them all about the jar tradition.//

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

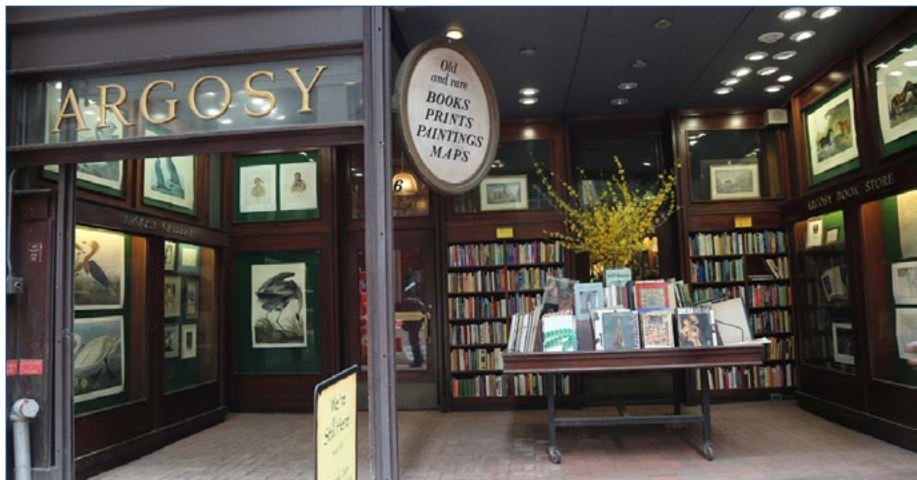


Carla Ward was born on a Friday. A Friday the thirteenth that is. This, along with the fact she saw every *Twilight Zone* episode before the age of ten, might explain why her stories gravitate toward the strange or fantastical. No matter the explanation, her speculative work captures readers' curiosity as much as their hearts.

Her magic-infused fiction has appeared in publications like The [Saturday Evening Post](#) (online), *Night Picnic Journal*, *Dark Horses Magazine*, *Modern Magic Anthology*, and *Penumbra: A Journal of Weird Fiction and Criticism*. She was also a semifinalist in ScreenCraft's 2024 Cinematic Short Story Competition.

ARGOSY

AN ARTICLE BY EMIL REN



The Argosy Book Store on 59th Street in New York reeled me in, not with a siren call but with the only book title that would have drawn me like iron filings to a magnet—Hyman Kaplan by Leonard Q. Ross, exhibited in its window.

I entered an Aladdin's cave of rare and precious books—a pantheon of the world's most renowned writers. To me, trawling second-hand bookstores all my life, it was like entering the Louvre to gain access to the Mona Lisa.

Remarkably, there was no sign of dust. No musty smell. The antiseptic wooden bookshelves seemed to have been polished daily. A framed and autographed photo of Ernest

Hemingway stood on a stand, presumably for sale.

I grabbed the nearest Kaplan book, anxiously exploring its pages. Yes, it was the edition I had devoured as a boy in Dar-es-Salaam.

A set of short stories depicted a harassed Mr. Parkhill, a New York night school teacher in the 1930s and his class of Eastern European immigrants seeking to improve their rudimentary English. His ‘star’ pupil insisted on displaying his name as H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N in green stars between red letters outlined in blue—an ever-respectful student who contorted the speech and grammar of English into his own perverse logic. Mr. Kaplan’s favorite Shakespearean character was Julius ‘Scissor’. One Christmas, he presented Mr. Parkhill, who was always referred to as Mr., with a gift from his pupils of a briefcase, bearing the initials M.P. It took Mr. Parkhill a while to realize what the ‘M’ stood for.

As a teenager, my summers were spent in Africa visiting my family—a haven from my yearlong schooling in England.

The 1970s were a hotbed of Socialism in Tanzania, governed by an ex-schoolteacher, Julius Nyrere. Ujamaa was introduced as a system of self-sustaining village cooperatives for the economic development of the country.

European governments loved Nyrere, donating billions to his cause, infesting Tanzania with hordes of idealistic aid workers. They would come on three-year contracts, laden with enough books to last their sojourn, for Dar-es-Salaam had none. On their departure, the books were donated to Khan's Secondhand Books and Photocopying store, established for a generation beside The Empire Cinema. I became their grateful beneficiary.

The discovery of a brightly chalked cover of 'Hyman Kaplan' captivated me as a boy who, at the age of five, had been shipped off to England with no knowledge of the language, to be raised by an English working-class family who knew no other tongue.

Each chapter of the book saw Mr. Kaplan set a torch to the English language, while all the time trying his best to master its inexplicable rules of spelling and pronunciation. Each story saw Mr. Kaplan get the better of Mr. Parkhill as the perplexed teacher tried in vain to explain the arcane intricacies of his subject.

In one sentence Mr. Kaplan wrote on the board for class scrutiny, his fellow learners found a dozen mistakes. Instead of leaving him embarrassed, Mr. Kaplan gazed at his masterpiece in awe at creating such a puzzle for the class to solve.

As a five-year-old, beached upon an island of English kids in a classroom, I had neither the bravado nor the belief to question the puzzling syntax of sentences. Unlike Mr. Kaplan, I could not withstand the perpetual slings and arrows of his classmates. I developed an admiration and affection for the character whose travails I too shared. Besides, the stories were funny.

Summer vacations inevitably drew to an end. I would return the books I had read to Khan's—save for the dissertations of Mr. Kaplan. These volumes were stored in a hallowed, glass-fronted bookcase until my return or, as it happened, until my family fled their home under political strife, abandoning everything including my precious memorabilia... until they surfaced in Manhattan.

A glutton, I requisitioned all three books in the series, not daring to ask their price, handing over my credit card at arm's length.

ABOUT EMIL REM



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.



3 POEMS

BY JAMES CROAL JACKSON

Waiting for Summer, 2021

Summer was made for slow mornings on the porch. If I ever fell asleep, I am not sure.

White marsh. Green veins.
Violets and blue.

The backhoe is parked on the hill.
The trail is a rail. Vernal cascades on the left
and trilliums on the right.
An untraceable purple. Chorus frogs, forest kitten,
fox.

Chirp, chirp. Birdsong is noise is noise. My foxes
sleep in snowdrifts.
Red dogs, blue dogs. Litter boxes in the back.

Every dog needs a warm bed.
Tomorrow comes the next load, the next burn.

Fire being not as we perceive.
Another pine tree lost.

Potential / Kinetic

I eat fries at park place
a bundle of sticks inside
potato kindling doused

in grease how slick to
become one with energy
death crystallizes inside

Every Time The Door

every time the door
opens a burst of frigid
air gobbles the field

whole milk in my
mocha latte to
fight winter sadness

defines the palette
of the room monotone
grays beside the fire

extinguisher sign
points to a cheap
Hewlett-Packard ink-

jet no one has used
since being on this planet
I have grown purple

grapes of jadedness
thorny arms hug nothing
I have to say

ABOUT THE POET



James Croal Jackson is a Filipino-American poet working in film production. His latest chapbook is *A God You Believed In* (Pinhole Poetry, 2023). Recent poems are in *ITERANT*, *Skipjack Review*, and *The Indianapolis Review*. He edits *The Mantle Poetry* from Nashville, Tennessee.

Learn more at jamescroaljackson.com

THE BRAMBLEWOOD SONATA

A SHORT STORY BY BRANDON NATUSCH

Recently, in my freshman year of high school, I, Lucas Whittaker, was able to land a job at one of the most well-respected places in our small, southern town: Mr. Abernathy's Afternoon Daycare. Well, the phrase "land a job" might be a bit misleading, because fourteen sits right in the middle of the great divide between childhood and adolescence, where you're old enough to start working, and yet not old enough to take up any actual jobs. There are, however, at least a dozen types of work (pseudo-jobs, you could call them) that many people can offer you around this age. If you're the football type or a freshman runner on the high school's track team, it's actually pretty easy to find a quick job doing lawn work. Are you good with children ten years younger than you? Awesome, babysitting it is. Are you not good with children, but have a weirdly specific piano skill and are the type to be easily persuaded with money? Then eventually you'll find yourself in my position.

Completely unknown to me, while performing a piano piece for my high school's talent show, a certain Mr. Abernathy had been amongst the crowd. Mr. Abernathy,

who had been teaching Pre-K for nearly twenty years, had a routine, where every Friday, he would roll out a smaller console piano onto the foyer of the daycare, and play music for the class. He had called it “Classical Fridays” and it was seen by all the parents of the Pre-K kids as a “wonderfully refined way to shape the musical palettes of their little ones.” It seemed pretty traditional, but the kids loved it, and Mr. Abernathy really was a great player.

That was, until he went tone-deaf. Receptive Amusia is the medical term, and it’s actually not as uncommon as you’d think, but of course it’s absolutely devastating when it happens to a musician. It can stop you from being able to hear the difference between two different notes, or to be able to recognize melodies that used to be familiar, and can even stop you from being able to properly read musical notation. It’s a real deal-breaker.

But Mr. Abernathy cared about his daycare, and certainly about his Classical Fridays, which had turned him into somewhat of a well-liked figure locally. Because of all this, he had decided that if he wasn’t going to be able to continue the shows himself, he would hire someone else who would be able to.

That’s why he approached my mom and me after the talent show with his offer, an offer which I was hesitant to

take up. To be honest, when he first told me about the job? I... felt a bit like a poser, a fake, because Mr. Abernathy could've gotten a real piano player to play really, really good music for his class, but instead, he went to me. I didn't understand why, because I seriously didn't think my music was special, in any way. He said he felt "really confident about me" though, so with no reason to object, I did. But it still didn't feel right.

And that's how I began playing piano for Mr. Abernathy's Afternoon Daycare.

These "Classical Fridays" all began somewhat the same, with my mom picking me up after school and driving me straight to the daycare, an older white church sort-of structure that had since been repurposed. Inside, the piano would be waiting for me in the foyer, a long and wide hallway with tall ceilings and windows that let the afternoon sunlight in from each end. Soon enough, twenty or so children would be sitting right beside me, crisscrossing on the wooden floor as Mr. Abernathy pulled up a chair to sit on just across from me. And then, starting nervously, hands shaking with my palms sweaty, I would begin.

The type of pieces that I would play, and the composers who I was allowed to play from were actually not curated

by Mr. Abernathy, but by his wife, Mrs. Abernathy. She loved her husband's music, and made sure that whatever I ended up playing for the kids, it would be something she could see her husband having played years ago. Usually, it was something light - the type of music that gives a really springy feeling, warm, like the sun on your face when you lay on your back on a freshly mowed lawn, and you can smell the grass, and the leaves of nearby trees rattling in the wind in your periphery.

It's the type of music that would play if you were in a large garden, and in the midst of all the different things that a person would probably see in a garden, you spot a family of rabbits, just going along with their day, hopping across and wriggling under the hole in some broken fence into the nearby forest.

It's the type of music that would play during recess, on a freshly mulched playground, where the wooden pellets below you still have their golden color, and the trees twist and reach their canopies, creating pockets of shade. You get a rush of heat down your back, almost a burning sensation as you go down the slide, its old metal construction having absorbed the heat of the day, but that doesn't matter to you.

It's the type of music that would play, if you were three, and had no worries in the world, and you were sitting in

a bright, light hall surrounded by your friends, listening to someone much older than you play these really nice classical melodies on a piano. It was that kind of music.

And, when I thought about it that way? My nervousness began to disappear.

One day, when I had been playing for about half an hour, I wrapped up the piece, and the kids watching me from the floor began clapping very politely and on-sync. I could sense some rustling in the crowd as Mr. Abernathy rose from his chair.

“Alrighty, everyone.” He grinned widely, creasing the sides of his cheeks as he clapped his hands. “Let’s go back to the classroom for reading time. I’ll be there in just a moment,” He began guiding the children back into the nearby classroom with small gestures of his hand. I could vaguely see the figure of Mrs. Abernathy just through the shaded window, ushering them into various seats as they began to crowd around her. Soon enough, the hall had been emptied. Mr. Abernathy grinned at me.

“Great work today, Lucas.” He reached a hand into his coat pocket. “How much do I owe you-?”

“-Twenty, right?” He finished his sentence without waiting for a response from me.

Mr. Abernathy then took out a large wad of cash that had been folded in on itself and was held together by a thin rubber band. He shimmied out a single twenty-dollar bill from the roll and handed it to me. I tried to take it with some grace, as if not to ogle at the rest of the enormous money stack that was very clearly in plain view.

“Yes sir, thank you,” I said as I pocketed the bill.

“You know,” Mr. Abernathy began, as he sat back down. “My ears don’t allow me to gauge music quality real well no more. But - when I look at the faces of the audience, and the face of the person playing? I tell you what son, that conveys a whole lot.”

“Really?” I replied shyly.

“Oh yeah. You know, when you first came in, about a month ago, and I watched you play? Boy, you looked downright terrified at points.” He laughed quietly. “But... after a while? I didn’t see that look on your face no more. Nah, in fact this session was probably your best one. It seems you’re settling in.”

I smiled, considering his words. “Yeah, that’s probably true. Honestly, I think it’s gotten a lot easier these last couple of times.”

“So let me ask you this-“ Mr. Abernathy leaned forward,

arms crossed. “What do you think changed for you?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Um, well, I guess there’s this thing that happens whenever I play, where like, I kind of just get absorbed into what I’m playing? Like the music will remind me of different memories, experiences, just, good things, I guess. It takes my mind off the idea of being worried.”

Mr. Abernathy smiled, like he knew exactly what I was talking about. “Yeah... same thing used to happen to me when I played.”

He sort of looked down to the floor, and his smile was gone, so I felt awkward about continuing the conversation.

“Ah - you know, here’s a word of advice.” He sprang up again. “Whenever you feel scared, just - downright shaking in your boots type-a-scared, and you don’t even want to press the keys? Do the same thing you do when you’re on a roll and everything’s going great - go to that happy place.”

“If you can do that, and you can distract yourself from all the evil, unhelpful thoughts buzzing ‘round up in there?” He smiled. “Man, there won’t be a thing you can’t play.”

I grinned, feeling my cheeks warm up from Mr. Abernathy’s words. It made me feel better about my piano skills, that a musician much older than I was knew exactly

what I was going through.

There was a rhythmic click-clacking sound on the wooden floor, and out from the adjacent classroom from across the hallway came Chloe, Mr. Abernathy's daughter who was the same age as me, who looked like she had been in a hurry to reach us. She beamed when she saw me, her curly hair dancing around her shoulders.

"Lucas! I was seriously worried I was gonna miss your session or something."

"Hey, no, I was just about to leave so you got here like, right on time," I responded.

Mr. Abernathy smirked as he got up and began walking to the classroom. He put up a hand as a goodbye wave.

"I gotta go help the missus with afternoon reading time. I'll see you next Friday, Lucas."

"Thank you again, sir!" I waved back hurriedly. Chloe smiled.

"So, what's up?" She asked. She had on this round sort of sun hat with a flower pattern sewn in around it.

"Not much, honestly," I said. "Just, you know... school."

"Ugh, school." Chloe sighed. "I hate school. School sucks. Like, homework, right? I wonder whose idea that was."

“You can’t actually dislike school that much,” I responded.

“Probably not.” She giggled. “I was just trying to relate. But yeah, no, I get it. Freshman year’s been hard, it’s like school’s becoming my entire life. I haven’t had much time for anything else.”

“Yeah, exactly.” I nodded. “I’m already waiting for summer.”

“Right?” She said as I zipped up my bag. “Are you going to wait for your mom on the patio or something?”

“Probably, yeah,” I replied.

“I’ll walk you out, c’mon.” She said warmly.

Chloe went ahead of me as she pushed the door out onto the front lawn, where large Willow trees sat in front of the daycare, their leaves and branches looking like they had been perpetually trapped in a melting state. A gravel driveway cut in from the main road, where I looked out for my mom’s car.

“So, how’s playing for my dad been going?” Chloe asked, leaning on the patio fence.

“Good, honestly,” I said. “It was nerve-racking at first, but I think I’m at the point where it’s not really getting to me anymore.”

“That’s good...” She smiled. “You’ve got no reason to be nervous, you know. Your piano skills are awesome.”

I laughed softly. “No, seriously.” She giggled. “Honestly, I was kinda bummed that I didn’t get to see you play today. You’re like half as good as my dad. That means a lot, in case you couldn’t tell.”

I lit up. “Really? I never got to see your dad play, I heard he was great though.”

Chloe looked off somewhere past the trees. “Yeah... you know, my dad never did anything professionally with his piano stuff. He was seriously great, but always just kept it to the daycare sessions and private family parties. It never made sense to me.”

“You mean, like, he was only ever focused on this place?” I said, talking about the daycare.

“Yup, pretty much.” She looked off again. “I guess it ended up being for the best though. It means his entire career didn’t like, sink, whenever he went tone-deaf.”

I looked off for a moment, taking in her words. “Yeah, I guess that would suck.”

“Totally.” She responded.

We didn’t say very much for the next few moments, since I think we both felt sort of awkward. Suddenly though,

Chloe lit up again.

“Oh! I almost forgot.” She turned towards me. “I was wondering if I could, um... ask a favor of you?”

I perked up in curiosity. “Oh, I mean, sure, I guess it depends what it is?”

She smiled. “So, my dad’s birthday is coming up in a couple of weeks, and I wanted to do something special for him, that isn’t like, mom’s tenth present of new socks in a row.”

I giggled. “Totally. That’s nice of you.”

“Right? So, I was trying to figure out what I could do, when I found these-“ She pulled out a couple of folded pieces of wrinkly, yellowed papers from her back pocket. She handed to them me. “They were in a box with a ton of my dad’s old paperwork that he asked me to throw out.”

It was a handwritten composition. On the very top of the first page were the words “Draft: The Bramblewood Sonata.” The wavy hand-done lines that made up the staff were filled with inked notes and symbols. It went on to the second page, where only a single staff had been drawn. The rest of the page was blank.

“Woah... Mr. Abernathy wrote this?” I asked.

“Yeah, I had no idea he ever composed music,” Chloe

said.

“So... what’s your plan with this old song of his?” I questioned.

“Well...” She started. “It’s unfinished, and obviously, he’s not going to be working on it anymore, with, you know-“

“Yeah, I know.”

“Right. So, I was wondering, since you’re a musician and all that, if you could, um... Ugh, never mind. This is so dumb. I’m sorry.” She waved her hand as if to disregard everything she had said.

“What? No...” I said. “It’s not dumb, seriously.”

She let out a big, big sigh and looked straight towards me. “Lucas Whittaker, I was wondering if you and me could finish the piece in time to play it for my dad’s fiftieth birthday.” She had let it all out in one long breath.

“Stupid?” She asked, almost like she was waiting for confirmation that it was stupid.

Disclaimer: I didn’t think it was stupid at all. Honestly? That sounded super fun to me. And honestly, if it meant I would get to do something with my time besides schoolwork...

“It’s not stupid at all. I’d be really happy to help you with that.” I said.

“Really?!” She replied.

“Yeah! I mean... when would you like to get started, and stuff?” I asked.

“Ooohhh, good question.” She wondered.

At that moment, I saw my mom’s blue SUV slowly turn onto the gravel driveway, stopping in front of the patio.

“Is that your mom?” Chloe asked.

“Yeah, it is,” I said.

“Then here,” She quickly took one of the papers from my hands and snatched a pencil from her pocket, scribbling something on it. She quickly handed it back to me.

“It’s my phone number. Call me whenever you’re available, OK?”

I looked at the paper, somewhat flustered to where I had forgotten to respond. The fact she had a pencil on hand probably meant she had been planning on this.

“Oh... uh, yeah - totally.” I played it cool. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Really? Alright.” She said. “You better get going now. But, Lucas... seriously?”

“Yeah?” I turned around.

“Thanks a lot, I appreciate it.” She smiled as she threw

two thumbs up.

And just like that, boom. Butterflies.

It didn't take very long for Chloe to call me - I had planned to call her when I got the time that Saturday morning, but ended up waking up to a loud ringtone from my bedside. I answered, not exactly awake but not asleep either.

"...Hello?" I said.

"Heyyyyyy, Lucas, sorry if this is like, a bad time. Did you just wake up or something? You croaked that 'hello' out like a frog." Chloe replied.

"Uh, yeah, actually." I rubbed my eyes. "It's cool though."

"Well, I'm gonna be at the daycare with my mom today. She's just cleaning up and stuff. If you're free to come over, you're totally allowed to use the piano."

I perked up, remembering The Bramblewood Sonata immediately.

"Would we be able to practice your dad's piece while your mom's around...?" I questioned.

"Oh, yeah." She audible giggled. "I told my mom all about you, and the piece, and just the plan, generally. She's in on it."

I asked my mom to drop me off in front of the daycare about an hour later, heading up the wooden stairs onto the patio and tapping on the door. Through the window, I could see Chloe appear from a room, for some reason on roller skates, breezing through the large hall towards the door. That honestly seemed kind of cool, but... she didn't know how to break? Which was made evident when she flailed her arms and ended up being stopped by the wall instead. She slid more carefully towards the door, opening it.

“Hey!” She grinned. “Glad you could make it.”

“Totally!” I responded. “Um, what's with the skates?”

“Ohhhh, I like to put them on when helping mom clean.” She stated. “Skates and a Swiffer mop make dusting, like, twice as fast. Come in!”

The dark wooden floor of the hall was glossy, and still wet in some spots, not having dried yet. Chloe led me through the middle, trying not to slide across any of the soapy parts.

“We rolled the piano onto the back porch so we'd have an easier time cleaning,” Chloe said. “These skates made it sooooo helpful. The only thing is that I'm still working on braking-“

I hurried as Chloe was just about to knock into the back window, when I quickly reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her back to a stop.

“Woah, you good?” I giggled.

“Yeah, thanks.” She laughed.

I quickly let go of her after I realized I was holding her arm, feeling embarrassed. I could see her noticeably blushing.

“Um, maybe you should, like, take the skates off for now,” I suggested.

She nodded, still smiling awkwardly. “You know what? Good idea.”

Sliding the door open to the back porch, I saw the piano from yesterday. Chloe dropped her skates by the door and took a seat on the stool.

“Thanks again for helping me out with this, by the way.” She said. “It’s not, um, you know... easy for him? Like the whole going-tone-deaf thing. He seemed so disappointed afterward, always beating himself up about it like it was his fault or something. He kept swearing he wished he hadn’t postponed the piece so much.”

When I had first started the job for Mr. Abernathy, I had heard about his condition, but I had never really taken the

time to imagine what it would be like living with it. And honestly, hearing Chloe talk about her dad, it made me understand what he was going through.

I honestly really liked playing the piano, even though I wasn't any good at it, and I liked the way it made me feel. So for a person to lose all of that, to something they have no control over? You wouldn't be able to believe it. It's the type of thing you'd make yourself into a scapegoat for, even if it hurts you - because at least that'd feel like some sort of answer.

"I'm sorry your dad had that happen to him." I sat on the stool next to her, in front of the piano. "I feel like I'd probably react the same way if I was in his shoes."

"Yeah... I guess any musician would, huh?" Chloe responded.

"Probably..." I trailed off. Trying to shift the conversation, I thought it would probably be a good idea to figure out how we were going to finish a half-written song all by ourselves, anyways.

"So, like... how do you wanna go about this?" I started.

"I'm not sure, honestly." She put a finger to the corner of her mouth. "Hey, maybe we could start by trying to play what's there so far?"

“Yeah, that’d be great, actually.” I pulled the wrinkled papers from my pocket, unfolded them, and placed them on the sheet rack. I squinted. Trying to read Mr. Abernathy’s handwriting through the uneven lines and mess of symbols was like deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics.

“Um... OK...” I scrunched my nose. Chloe audibly snickered.

“Huh?” I murmured.

“You can’t read my dad’s handwriting, can you?” She asked.

“Oh, well, no, it’s not that... well, yeah actually. It’s difficult.” I confessed. It was all penciled in, with thick strokes of graphite that kind of made you question whether a note was an A or a B. Also, some of the lines just liked to converge together, reappearing later down the notation, and then when I looked further, some notes had been partially erased, scratched out, or glazed over with white-out, which did not fit the color of the paper. It was the gross, goopy white out too. My mind began to spin.

I shoved aside all my racing thoughts, determined to get somewhere with the piece. I started at the very beginning, interpreting the first few notes.

“I think the beginning goes something like this?” I played carefully, following along with the notation the best I could. As I continued, I picked up speed, learning to interpret the scratches and scrawled notes.

It was slow, but a melody was starting to form, and it wasn't like any of the pieces Mrs. Abernathy had curated for me at all... it wasn't light, or airy, but it was exciting, like the soundtrack to an old movie. It had an uplifting feel, something that made you proud.

It was the type of music you'd hear when you finished the first day of a new school year, and even though you had been terrified for every single reason your mind let you think of, it had actually gone really well, because while it hadn't exactly been fun? It was way less worse than you originally thought it would have been.

It was the type of music you'd hear the evening of said day, where you're with your family and relatives at a restaurant, and everyone's so 'proud of you' for 'growing up so fast' and doing 'so good' and a ton of other things with the word "so" in them that you don't exactly process it all, but it adds to your growing sense of happiness anyways.

It was the type of music you'd hear when you're playing the piano on a Saturday afternoon, and a friend of yours that you met not too long ago is sitting really, really close

to you, which kind of makes you nervous because you're not used to them doing that, but you don't really mind it either, because they're cool, like the type-who-roller-skates-indoors sort of cool, and honestly, like, who does that?

It's the type of music you'd hear when you're playing piano, and you're in your happy place.

I reached the last line of the second page when the notes trailed off and the piece came to a stop. There was clapping from behind me, not from Chloe, but from someone who had just walked onto the patio. I turned around to see Mrs. Abernathy, wearing an apron with work gloves, had a proud look on her face.

"That was wonderfully done, Lucas. Were you playing my husband's sonata just then?" she asked.

Chloe butted in before I could say anything. "Yeah! We've been starting on the whole sonata-project-thingy."

"I smiled, looking over to her mom. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, ma'am."

"It's the first time I've managed to hear it." Mrs. Abernathy went on. "You know, Alex first started the piece as a gift to his mother. He wanted to play it for her birthday."

She crossed her arms, gazing across the yard. "It's a

shame he could never finish it.”

Chloe looked at her mom. “You mean... he wrote it for Grandma?”

Mrs. Abernathy smiled sadly. “He sure did. Did I ever tell you why he named it Bramblewood?”

Chloe shook her head.

Her mom opened a wooden folded chair that had been resting against the wall and sat down cross-legged right next to us.

“He only told me about it when your Grandma passed.” She started. “He said - and this is paraphrasing it- that back when he first picked up playing the piano, his mother would tell him stories about a forest monster that hid deep in the woods, far away from any sort of people. That monster was Bramblewood.”

“Really?” Chloe murmured.

Mrs. Abernathy smiled and continued. “Grandma would tell him that Bramblewood was scared of people. Didn’t want to be around them. But, if you played an original melody, that had never been heard before, close to the woods, just close enough for him to hear it, you might be able to catch a glimpse. Bramblewood loved music, according to Grandma.”

I thought about what Mrs. Abernathy had said. The name of the sonata sounded weird to me at first. But now, I could imagine Mr. Abernathy writing a piece for his mom, wanting to bring up old memories between them.

“It’s funny.” Mrs. Abernathy began again. “You know, when he got older, my husband had actually planned to play the song for her by the woods near her house on her birthday. At first, I thought it was some sort of way to joke about the old tales and all that, but you know, when he explained it to me? Gosh, Alex sounded so... terrifyingly serious.”

She giggled, continuing. “It was almost like he actually wanted to see the darn thing.”

Mrs. Abernathy got up and shuffled back into the daycare, leaving us with a few obligatory messages like “I’ll get out of your hair now,” and “Chloe, hun, please be more careful on your roller-skates, mm-kay?”

Chloe leaned over, resting her head and arms against the piano.

“You know... our house has a bunch of woodlands in the back too. Just behind our backyard.”

“Woods, like... are you thinking...?” I asked.

She smiled. “About rolling the piano out to the forest?”

Yeah, I might be thinking about that.”

I soon went home, thinking over the piece again and again, and about how I could possibly finish it. It didn't seem too difficult, since after all, a lot of what I would be writing would just be repeated melodies. I mean, the majority of the song really was finished, but then, playing it for Mr. Abernathy... and the story of Bramblewood? The entire thing seemed so silly, honestly.

A few days later, I had just finished printing out a new and complete sheet notation for The Bramblewood Sonata when I got a call from Chloe.

“Lucas, hi!” She started. “So, big news, my dad's coming home early tomorrow, so we'll be celebrating his birthday probably around two o'clock or something like that. My mom knows you'll be there, but my dad's still clueless.”

“Totally, so be there at two?” I replied.

“Yeah! Ah, well, maybe one-forty-five, just so we have time to get everything prepared. Actually, do you know how to move a piano... quietly? As in, no one in the party can see or hear us do it, and it's a huge secret until I drag my dad out to the backyard, and you're just sitting there, by the woods... uh, with the piano?” She sounded breathless.

“Is that possible? Is that something we can do? Because that would be great. Like, perfect, actually.”

“Um...? I mean, to be completely honest with you, no...? Well, OK, I don't think so,” I said. “Unless you can like, tell your dad not to go into the backyard?”

“Got it, I'll tell him we have a surprise but he'll have to wait. He loves surprises. Then you know what? Come at like, one-thirty. And be ready to help me move a piano across our back lawn. Don't worry, it's smaller than you think.”

I gulped. “Yeah, got it.”

So around one-thirty that afternoon, my mom dropped me off in front of Mr. Abernathy's house. It was a large older-looking farmhouse, with an even larger amount of land, and, if you looked across towards the back, a densely wooded forest. The home of Bramblewood.

I rang the doorbell, and almost immediately Chloe came to answer. She poked her head through the nearby curtains to check who it was, and then slowly cracked open the door. Wordlessly, she gestured for me to come in, so I stayed silent, assuming that she wanted to keep the whole thing secretive.

We walked through the back halls into the dining room,

avoiding the living room where a large group of people were already gathered. I could actually recognize a few faces from the daycare, parents of children who attended Mr. Abernathy's school and would arrive for pickup. Mr. Abernathy himself, though, was nowhere in sight.

"Hey, glad you made it," Chloe whispered. "You feeling good about this?"

"Yeah." I lied. "Well, sort of." Partially lied.

"No, actually." That was the truth.

Chloe looked at me. "Yeah, I can't expect you to." She smiled sadly.

"Hey, I'm sorry if I've been, like, super demanding or whatever. I just, well..." She trailed off. "I was just really happy when you said you would do it."

I smiled, awkwardly. "Why's that?"

She blushed. "Because it was you. And also because I suck at playing the piano and wouldn't be able to do this on my own." She snickered. "But mostly because it was you. AKA, this really cool person who knows how to play the piano, and cares about me enough that they'd be willing to help me with a stupid project like this. I think that's cool of you."

My cheeks felt warm - too warm. I was probably

blushing.

“I guess I said yes also because it was you? AKA, this really cool person who skates indoors? Like, who does that?” I laughed quietly. I was definitely blushing.

Chloe giggled, looking away awkwardly. We kind of just fell into silence as everything around us filled my senses - the voices, the people, the distant clapping and laughter. And a very sudden realization that we still had to move the piano.

“Hey, uh, so what’s the deal with the piano?” I asked.

Chloe grinned, embarrassed. “Oh, so, funny thing, my mom had it moved outside just before you arrived. I told her about the plan and she said she didn’t want to put any pressure on us, so she got it moved with the help of a few of the people at the party.”

I suddenly felt so much more relieved. “That’s really nice of her.”

Chloe smiled. “You ready to get out there now? You can take your time and get ready and everything. Like, go to your happy place, or something.”

I smiled. “Yeah, something like that.”

It was a bright, slightly windy day. I sat in front of the piano, which looked extremely funny and out of place

having been dragged across the yard towards the edge of their property, where it rested, silently, by the trees. It wasn't too far off though, and I could still see the bustling and commotion of people inside the house, just through the windows. I soon made a habit of checking my watch for the time, then looking over to the back patio, then to the piano keys, as my heartbeat ramped up and up, and back to my watch.

I had laid the new, finished notation sheets in front of me, and was now just waiting for people to funnel out into the yard, so I could begin. And yet, I felt this really nauseous, sort of queasy feeling, like the type you get when you're at the top of a roller-coaster, and there's no way you can back out, so you just have to hold on and brace yourself. Missing a note, or even losing my focus in the middle of the piece, were just a few of the many possibilities that awaited me.

And then, I heard some noise, and looking over to the patio, I saw Chloe come out excitedly, followed by Mr. Abernathy. There was Mrs. Abernathy too, and a few others whose faces I didn't recognize. The crowd was a lot smaller than I thought it would be, only six or so people. But then, I looked at Mr. Abernathy - he seemed ecstatic.

“Lucas!” He exclaimed happily as he approached. “You’re

one heck of a surprise birthday present, you know that boy?”

I smiled timidly. “Happy birthday, sir. Um...”

I looked to Chloe for some sort of signal of when to start. As the others crowded around, she smiled and gave me a thumbs-up.

“You got this.” She mouthed quietly.

“This project was put together by Chloe,” I stated. “Mr. Abernathy, I hope you enjoy it.”

He grinned. “Ah, man, of course I’m gonna enjoy your work! What’s this, Beethoven, or an original song?”

“It’s an original song - not by me - but, I think you might recognize it.” With that, I began.

My hands were trembling, and I wasn’t sure if I would be able to focus over the dozens of voices in my head telling me otherwise. But I pushed them all away, because I was at the piano, and people were watching me, and it was way, way too late to back out. So I played.

I kept my eyes trained on the notation and the keys, not paying any attention to Mr. Abernathy or the others. Soon enough, actually, I started to feel like I was in a vacuum - like me and the piano were the only things around. That, and the music, the notes, and the melody.

I felt more and more confident as I played, not really worrying about the judging eyes or facial expressions of the people watching me or even about impressing Mr. Abernathy or Chloe. I was just listening to - no, feeling the music - as I played.

It was the type of music you'd hear when you find yourself getting to know someone, a person who you think is really cool in every sense of the word, and you feel just really happy because you've gone on kind of an adventure with them, and you're finally at the end of it, the most stressful part - but contrary to all your fears, it's actually going well.

It was the type of music you'd hear when suddenly, out of the corner of your vision, you swear you can see a creature through the trees in the forest.

He was hard to make out. Two glowing eyes, bright and amber in color, with greenish robes draped loosely around a body made of tough, raw wood - stiff, creaking, and covered in bark and moss. Above his head sprouted two long, winding horns, which branched off into smaller twigs, that held berries, black and red. Bramble.

I came to the end of the piece. I heard a large applause and cheers of delight, but I wasn't paying attention, because I could have sworn that I saw Bramblewood clapping for

me, too, before slowly walking backward into the dark of the woods, the final sight that I got of him being those large, amber eyes.

I looked over to see Chloe giving me an OK sign with a large grin on her face. The others exclaimed a few words of approval before talking amongst themselves. Mr. Abernathy, though, walked over to me with a warm, bright smile.

“You know, I thought to myself that it was silly y’all had the piano all the way out here.” He said, gesturing to the forest. “But as soon as you began, I knew exactly what it was all about. Thank you, Lucas.”

That “thank-you” from Mr. Abernathy meant a million words to me.

“You’re welcome, sir.” I smiled awkwardly. “It’s not much though, really, honestly it was Chloe’s plan from the start-“

“You’re too humble, kid. You know why?” He bent forward, lowering his voice to a whisper. “I saw Bramblewood out in the trees.”

I was shocked. “You- you saw too...?” So it wasn’t just an illusion, he was real!

He smiled. “Sure did. That’s one rare opportunity, son.”

I smiled as we both took one more look towards the

woods. I remembered those eyes, glowing out from all the trees and shrubbery. I guess he really had been a part of my audience, after all.

I stayed at the party for a while afterward, watching along with a crowd of serious-looking adults in flowery dresses and nice suits as Mr. Abernathy blew out the fifty - yes, fifty individual candles - on his birthday cake. Mrs. Abernathy always liked to put exactly the right amount of candles, she said, no matter how silly it looked, which is an awesome idea. Like, honestly, imagine being a hundred, and you get a cake with a hundred individual little candles on it. That's just cool.

It was around five or so when people began to leave, and Mom texted me that she'd be picking me up soon.

"Hey," I said to Chloe, who had just finished stuffing a third piece of cake in her mouth. "My mom's gonna be here in a bit, so I'm probably gonna go and wait outside for her."

Her eyes lit up enthusiastically. "Oh! I'll walk you out."

The weather had gotten a bit cooler since I first arrived, and now a gentle breeze swept over everything. The sky was cloudy, and rain looked close behind, so instead we sat on the steps of the patio, protected by the roof overhead. There was silence for a moment, as we just watched the

clouds roll by. I shifted my gaze to Chloe slightly, and saw her catch it, but we both kind of just looked away, embarrassed.

“Hey,” She began with a timid smile. “Honestly, thank you for everything you’ve done, for like, me, and my dad, and just, you know, all of it.”

I smiled. “Of course, it was really fun.” Fun was a simple word to use for it, because it had been a lot of things. Fun, funny, weird, interesting, rewarding, nerve-racking - all of those words could have described it pretty well. But honestly, I don’t know if there’s a single word in the English dictionary that could mash all of those things into one.

“I’m glad.” She said. “You know... I kind of realized something through all of this.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

She smiled. “I feel like, now that I’m in high school, all that I’ve been thinking about is myself. Like, schoolwork, homework, trying to balance my social life and fit in somewhere in all the groups and weird cliques, and even the future. What college will I go to? What job do I want? It feels like I only get the time to think about myself.”

“But...” She continued. “As soon as you get the chance to do something like this, you suddenly relearn all over again

how awesome it is to do things for other people. To think about others, to put effort into other people and their lives. It's so underrated."

I smiled with a realization - that's exactly what I had been feeling, too. All this time, I had been spending so much effort on myself, on school, homework, and pretty much all the same things. Heck, even playing for Mr. Abernathy had started out as a way for me to earn money - another thing I was doing, originally, just for myself.

That day, I hadn't played for Mr. Abernathy for money, or to impress my parents. No, I played for him because I wanted to - because I wanted to help him finish something that he never could. And that felt really, really nice.

"I get it now, too," I said. "Playing for your dad felt good because I was able to be a part of his life in a positive way. I wasn't thinking just about myself for once, because I was spending so much time on someone else."

She grinned warmly. "It's great, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"I'm glad I was able to get your help with this. You're a really cool person, you know that Lucas?"

I smiled. "Hearing that come from you of all people, like, the queen of coolness? Is crazy."

Chloe laughed, harder than I had ever heard her before. “You’re funny.”

There was a flash of headlights, and I soon saw my mom’s car begin to roll into the long, gravel driveway.

“That’s your mom, isn’t it?” She noticed.

“Yeah, it is. I guess, um, I’ll be seeing you around?” I asked, hesitating as we both got up.

She smiled. “For sure.” And, as quick as the thunder that sounded from a distance, she leaned forward, planted a kiss on my cheek, and walked to the door.

“Call me sometime, Luc!” she exclaimed as she went back inside.

I could have sworn I saw her wink. Like, wow. Wow!

On the ride home, I thought about a lot of things. Like the piano, and Mr. Abernathy, and Chloe, and how nice kisses are. But most of all, I thought about Bramblewood - the mysterious forest creature that didn’t like being around people, but could bear it for just that split moment.

Who knows why Bramblewood kept himself hidden? Maybe, he knows that he’ll be hunted, or caged, like some sort of circus animal. But there’s also plenty of people out there who would love to be his friend, and would even protect him - I know I would.

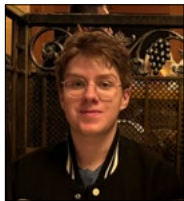
Or maybe, just maybe, he's never given caring about other people a shot.

I just hope that I get to see him again one day. Make an original piece, drag a piano out to the forest, whatever it takes.

Because I would like to be able to prove to him that thinking about, caring for, and putting effort into other people is a really nice experience.

Because everyone deserves a friend - especially Bramblewood.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brandon Natusch is a recent high school graduate, having been vice president of his school's writing club. He first started writing in elementary school and has since fallen in love with telling original stories. He hopes to one day have his work seen by other people, and not just his overly-supportive friends and family.

HER/HIM/OTHERS

A SHORT STORY BY G.W. MCCLARY

It was a tough decision to make, but when I got pregnant again, I knew I couldn't handle a third kid. The thought of terminating the pregnancy was too much, so I looked into adoption. I didn't want to ask anyone and give away my intentions, so I just researched it myself. I called a 1-800 number, and they put me in touch with an adoption agency.

I had to clean up before they came. Dishes had piled up in the sink, dirty clothes everywhere, toys all over the living room. Preston, my oldest, was crying from his pack-n'-play, but I had to ignore him. They would be there in an hour.

I thought of having someone call CPS on me, but that would have been so humiliating, more so than admitting I didn't have what it took to raise another child. Still, I didn't want those people to take one look at my apartment and haul all my kids off right there.

I started with the kitchen counters and cleaned out the fridge. In case they wanted to peek inside, I didn't want any rotten food lying around. Then the living room. I piled up all the clothes in a hamper and stowed them

in the closet. The toys I loaded into a cardboard box and sat next to the TV. It looked fairly livable. Now to just get Preston to stop crying and make us breakfast. I thought it would be best if the kids were eating when they showed up.

“Sorry, we’re in the middle of lunch,” I told them when they arrived, right on time.

“Oh, it’s no problem at all. What did they have for breakfast?” one of the social workers asked me.

“Oh, uh, I just made Preston some oatmeal. Rowan is still breastfeeding.”

“I see,” she said. “Do you mind if we take a look around?”

“Not at all,” I said, hoping they didn’t get too nosy. They looked around in the kitchen, peeked into my bedroom (which I didn’t have time to clean, but what can you do), though they didn’t say anything about the state of the apartment. They sat down on the couch.

“So, tell us why you’ve opted for adoption,” the other social worker said.

I gave them a sugar-coated rundown of how exhausted I felt, how I knew I couldn’t handle another kid, at least not right now.

“Well, we’d like to put together a family album, pictures of you and your children that we can send to prospective parents”

“But I’m only putting the newborn up for adoption,” I said.

“Of course, but we’ve found that prospective families respond much better when they can see the mother. We’d also like to take a short video, just of you, if you prefer, to show them as well.”

“Uh, sure, I have plenty of pictures on my phone. What should I say in the video?”

“Just say a little about yourself, as much as you’re comfortable with, maybe why you’ve opted for adoption, but it’s completely up to you.”

I went to the bathroom and fixed my hair as best I could, applied some last-minute makeup. I looked... okay, I guessed. I stared into their tablet and recited my story, why I chose to give up my child, though I didn’t word it quite like that. They seemed satisfied with my performance.

“We’ll be in touch with a list of prospective families. Thank you for your time, and thanks again for choosing Helping Hands adoption agency.” I saw them out and closed the door. Preston giggled and Rowan was fixated on his tiny little fists, which opened and closed, like a cat chasing its tail.

HIM

There was a party at my friend’s uncle’s house. Since I bought weed off his roommate, and smoked with them a

few times, he invited me out. It was a house, a little ways out of the city, ‘out in the county,’ as we called it. I pulled into the gravel driveway and parked among the four or five other cars and made my way inside. I could hear sloppily played music coming from the garage. I let myself in and ‘the band’ stopped playing so everyone could greet me. They offered me a beer and we milled about, shouting over the music.

A little while into the party, this girl came downstairs. She wore a tight-fitting hoodie and jeans. She was ghostly pale, wore thick makeup, and had a gleaming, distressed look in her eyes, which met mine for an instant before she laid her head in her arms and apparently went to sleep.

“Who’s that?” I asked my friend.

“That’s Robbie’s girlfriend.”

Robbie, as anyone in that friend group would tell you, was by all rights a piece of shit. The first night I met him (at a bar, go figure) he was wearing a construction hat and proceeded to detail his recent statutory rape conviction, just to give you an idea of the guy.

“She’s cute,” I said.

“You should go for it,” he confided to me, “Robbie said she cheats on him all the time.”

The party ended, as all eventually do, with just a

handful of us at the end of the night, tired and woozy, thinking of home. We mumbled over our lukewarm beers and bitter cigarettes. I got up to leave, steady enough, and bid everyone goodbye.

That night, Robbie's girlfriend ended up hooking up with my friend, who I found out later was one of Robbie's best friends. None of them seemed to care, since I never noticed anything different after word got out.

It was easy to find her on social media. We were both tagged in photos from the party, glassy-eyed and bloodshot pale under the fluorescent lights. I sent her a friend request and a quick message, saying I thought she seemed really cool, and asking if she wanted to talk more. She answered right away, and invited me over to her place, under the pretext of watching a movie. Her apartment was kind of a mess, and there was a spoiled milk smell in the air.

"Don't worry, the kids are asleep. I'm gonna get a quick shower. Make yourself at home." She went upstairs and I sat down on the couch, wondering what I would do if one of her kids woke up. I heard her singing in the shower. She was good, belting out soul song after soul song as they crackled from her phone's cheap speaker. She must have been in there for fifteen minutes.

The water and the singing finally stopped. A few minutes later, she came back down and laid her legs across my lap,

her hair drying in a towel.

“You wanna go upstairs?” she asked me. There was no fanfare. We fucked unceremoniously and fell asleep.

I awoke to a child wailing from downstairs.

“That’s just Preston,” she said, “I’ll get him up here shortly.” She wrapped her arms around me. “I had fun last night.”

“Me too,” I said, “But I have to get going. I have to be at work in an hour.”

“Oh shit, you should have set an alarm.”

“I did, I just didn’t adjust for the... detour.”

I shuffled into my clothes and kissed her goodbye. “I’ll call you,” I said, then made my way out of her apartment.

PRESTON

Mommy said we’re getting a new baby brother, but he won’t be staying (sad face). People are coming to talk to her, even though my brother is still in her tummy. She said he’s going to live with a new family, since ours was already too big, but it was just me and baby Rowan, what would be the harm in one more? Besides, we could sure use some help cleaning, since mommy definitely doesn’t like to do it. She’d been running around all morning while I cried to her from my pack-n’-play. If I was just a little bigger, I could have climbed out and tried to get some food from

the kitchen. She finally got me out and cooked some lunch, even though we never had breakfast. The people came and talked to her for a while. They took a video of mommy for my brother's new family. They left after a time, and we went back to our normal life.

HER

They sent me a list of families from all over the country, dozens of smiling couples, all vying for custody of my unborn son. I scanned the faces until I saw a couple, a young man and woman who lived in a nearby city, so it wouldn't be much trouble for us to meet in person. Their contact info was right there on the list, so I rang them up. A woman answered.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Yes, is this the McMurtry residence?”

“It is, may I ask who's calling?”

I told her my name, the due date of the baby. “They told me you're looking to adopt?” I said. I could hear her breaking down on the other line. A man eventually picked up the phone.

“Who are you?” he asked, in wife defense mode.

“I'm sorry,” I said, “It's just... I'm pregnant.”

He got her to calm down and they agreed to meet me at my apartment. Which means another round of cleaning, I thought.

When they arrived, they were punctual and well-dressed. They seemed young. I wondered which one of them couldn't have children, and why I couldn't have that problem. I offered them a seat on the couch and brought them some tea from the kitchen.

"Oh, thank you," the woman said, but they never took a sip from their cups. "I understand you have two other children?"

"Yeah, they're in their room." For some reason, I didn't want them to see my other kids, especially the wife, now that I'd met her, but I made sure the outfit I wore accentuated my swollen belly.

"Well," she said, "We don't want to keep you long. I'm sure you must get back to them. But if it's alright with you, we'd like to go ahead with the adoption. We'll stay in touch to make arrangements, of course." I thanked them and showed them out. As soon as I heard their car door slam, I sank down against the door and sobbed. Preston started crying from the other room.

HIM

It was my birthday. I was on my way over to her place after work (no, I wasn't the self-indulgent type to take my born day off work). She said she'd made me a cake, which was more effort than I'd ever seen from her before. I showed up and she looked a little tired. She let me in and

immediately started apologizing. The cake had fallen and was splattered all over her kitchen floor.

“I got it out of the oven, put icing on it and everything, then the darn thing just jumped off the counter.”

“It’s fine,” I said, “Do you need help cleaning it up?”

“That would be awesome,” she said, “Sorry again, I’m so clumsy.”

We cleaned up the spilled cake, sweeping it into a dustpan and scooping the rest up with our hands, which were soon caked with icing and crumbs. We washed up and made our way upstairs.

It was just a feeling, but something seemed strange about the way she left the cake waiting for me on the floor. She couldn’t have cleaned it up, just a little? What were the odds that it fell just before I walked in? Maybe she was too lazy, I thought.

That night, while we were fucking, I thought I smelled latex, which was odd, since we never used a condom. I thought my pull-out game was strong. Being the weak man that I was, I finished (on her back, if you must know), let the after-sex calm subside, then confronted her about it.

“What, no,” she said, “It’s just this new shampoo I’ve been using.” She sprang up from the bed and fetched a bottle from the bathroom. “Here, smell it.”

I humored her and gave it a reluctant whiff.

“No, it’s different,” I said.

“That’s nasty, I would never fuck two people in the same day, gross.”

I couldn’t look her in the eyes, and while we weren’t explicitly exclusive, it still stung the old ego.

“Listen,” she said, “You have to go. Robbie’s coming over.” Robbie was the father of her second kid, if I never mentioned that before.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I said, raising my voice. She shushed me.

“You’re going to wake up the kids, now go. He said he’s on his way.”

“I can’t fucking believe you,” I said, pulling on my clothes. I made my way wordlessly out of her apartment. She said nothing to stop me on the way out.

I woke up to dozens of texts from her, sent around three in the morning.

“I’m sorry I dropped your cake and kicked you out on your birthday. Robbie busted down my door and the cops took him to jail. I miss you. <3”

PRESTON

That one guy came over again today, but mommy threw his cake on the floor. I watched her do it with this mean look on her face. It was weird, because mommy had

seen one of her other guy friends just a few hours before. He came in and I heard them clean up the cake, then they went upstairs, just like the man from earlier. A little while later, I heard them fighting, lots of f-words being thrown around by the guy. He left and a little while later, Rowan's dad showed up. Too many visitors, I thought. Mommy locked the door and wouldn't let him in, no matter how much he pounded. He seemed to have left, but when he came back, I heard power tools going off in the hallway. A few minutes later, the door burst in, and Rowan's dad followed with it. The cops came and took Rowan's dad to jail. I watched them stick him in the car through the window. Mommy cried and cried until I finally fell asleep.

HER

I handed my other two kids off to my mom. I couldn't do it anymore, not if I wanted to be a singer. I met a guy online, a producer, he saw one of my videos I posted on YouTube (some stupid cover I did) and reached out to me. Apparently, he'd worked with some pretty big names, but he could have been bullshitting. He seemed legit enough to me. He said he had a home studio, and we could get started on tracking vocals right away. I took in the new-found silence of my apartment, then headed to his house.

It was a one-story home, painted a flat color I can't remember. He met me at the door and welcomed me in.

His house was sparsely furnished, few decorations, except for the odd knick-knack on his shelves, so I assumed he lived alone.

“So, where’s this studio?” I asked him. “I want to get started on something.”

“Oh, there’ll be plenty of time for that,” he said, pouring himself a drink. “Would you like one?”

“No, I’m good,” I said. The last thing I wanted was to be tipsy in that creep’s house.

“Come on, all the greats have at least a few before they go in the booth.”

“No, I’m fine,” I said, putting a bite in my voice.

“Look, bitch, I didn’t invite you into my home so you could give me attitude.” He came up to me, right in my face. His breath reeked of the cheap liquor he’d offered me. I panicked and went into seduction mode. If he did have a studio, it would be worth fucking him. I lowered my eyelids and caressed him.

“That’s more like it,” he said, as he unzipped his pants.

He didn’t have a studio, but he knew someone who did, a drummer friend of his. He gave me the address and told me to be there in a couple days.

This guy actually did have a studio, and we did record a little, but not a whole song or anything. Every take,

the ‘producer’ kept telling me to take off another article of clothing. I could see them laughing at me from the little isolation booth, but I played along. By the time he’d punched me in for the third or fourth time, I was completely naked. I could tell what they wanted from the look in their eyes. I sauntered out of the isolation booth and melted into them like a vision of flesh and submission.

“Do you party?” the drummer asked me, producing a pipe that could only be for meth. We stayed up all night fucking and getting high. I asked them to send me the recordings of what we had worked on.

“Sure will,” the drummer said, and closed the door in my face.

HIM

It had been years since I’d heard from her. Granted, I’d kept up with her on social media (or internet stalked her, if you prefer, but haven’t we all at one point or another?). The odd Instagram post here, a cryptic status update there. But one day, I got a text from her. Not a DM, a text. She must have gotten my number from someone.

“I need to see you,” was all she said. I texted her back right away, since I thought she might be in trouble. She said she was five minutes away, which meant she must have either already been in the area, which was unlikely, or she made sure she was close before she reached out to me.

Knowing her, it was probably the latter.

“Wow, you look defeated,” she said to me as I sat down in the passenger seat of her van. I guessed I was. Trash and junk were piled up in the back, and it looked as if she may have been sleeping in it. She was thinner than I’d ever seen her before. I hate to admit this, but she looked good.

“You wanna smoke?” she asked me. “Sorry about my van. Things have been pretty crazy lately.”

“It’s cool,” I said, “Sure, we can smoke.” She handed me a bowl already packed with weed. I took a hit, leaving half the green for her out of courtesy, and she let out a laugh she’d been trying to suppress.

“Sorry, there’s a little leftover meth in that bowl.”

“What?” I said, panicking. I’d never done meth before, nor did I want to start in her van.

“I’m just fucking with you. I wouldn’t do that.”

My heart started to flutter in my chest, but it could have just been the placebo effect.

“You wanna go to New York?” she asked me. “Come on, we could go tonight. I wanna try and make it.”

“As a singer, you mean?”

“Yeah, I met this slick producer guy, he let me record some stuff.”

“I know, I actually listened to it.” The recordings

were years old by then, and she hadn't posted much on her YouTube channel except for the odd *acapella* cover, filmed in her bathroom, for the reverb.

"You creep! How'd you find it?"

"You posted it on Facebook, silly."

"Oh, right. What did you think?"

I thought the recordings were terrible, sound-quality wise, but her voice came through alright, even if it was nervous-sounding and shaky. That gave it a little bit of an edge.

"I liked it," I said.

"Oh my god, thank you, getting that guy to record me was like pulling teeth."

"Hey, so what happened to your radio?" I asked her. It looked as if it had been ripped out with little care for the casing. Maybe she sold it to fund her habits, I thought.

"Oh, that? I had to get rid of it. They kept trying to send me messages."

"They?"

"Yeah, you know, the shadow men."

"The... shadow men?"

"Yeah, but look, that's not what I came here to tell you about."

"Okay then, what is it?"

"You got me pregnant."

"Um."

“Don’t look surprised, we never used a condom. You’re the only guy it could have been.” I thought about the latex smell coming from her in her apartment, the surprise visit from her baby dad.

“But that was years ago,” I said, “What happened to the kid?”

“I gave him up for adoption. He lives one city over with this young wealthy couple. He’s in good hands.” Better hands than hers, I hoped.

“He. So we had a boy.”

“Yep.” She patted her legs as if this was just your everyday awkward silence.

SON

Dad, who wasn’t actually my real dad, said my real dad, my “bio dad,” since he was still my “real dad,” was going to come and visit. He said we would be going to a park and then get ice cream. I was already confused about which dad was who, but I agreed. Things had been pretty good up until then, not that they got much worse after or anything. We had a nice house tucked away in the country, which meant a big yard with plenty to explore, but also no friends to hang out with. Mom said I’d be home-schooled, but I could make friends other ways. I wondered when that would happen, since we never went anywhere. Mom said it wasn’t safe. I really tried to make sense of the whole “bio

dad” situation, but it made my brain hurt. In the end, I saw it as a chance to finally make a new friend.

HER

Things got bad after I went to the drummer’s house. I got strung out, hard. I moved in soon after and became nothing more than a glorified spinner, a name I only really lived up to once I lost a bunch of weight. I was always a little heavy, but the meth and pills cleared that right up. I felt weak and jumpy most of the time.

Somebody flattened a tire on my van. Something told me it was either the ‘producer’ or the drummer, to keep me there. I waited for the drummer to pass out and cleaned out his wallet. I used the cash to buy a new tire, changed it with some help from this older guy who was sitting out on his porch, and made it back to my apartment. A pink sheet of paper was taped to the door, an eviction notice.

“Shit,” I said to myself, ready to crumble. I snatched the paper off the door and collapsed down to the floor of the hallway, sobbing. A young woman about my age popped her head out of her door, opened just a crack, and asked if I was okay.

“Fuck you,” I hissed, throwing the crumpled-up eviction notice at her. She ducked back inside and fastened the dead bolt. Best to get gone before she calls the cops, I thought.

I did the only thing I could think to do. I called my mom. No answer. I called again, hoping I had enough gas to make it to her house. She finally answered. She sounded fucked up, as usual.

“Mm, hello?” she said, as if she just woke up.

“Mom, it’s me, your daughter? Why didn’t you pick up?”

“Sorry, I was passed—uh, I was sleeping.”

“Where are the boys?”

“Oh, I’m sure they’re around here somewhere.”

Imagine that being the babysitter’s response when you called to check in.

“Mom, what the fuck?” She hung up on me. I tried to suppress my rage as I sped to her place. Let them pull me over, I thought, I’ll steal their damn cop car.

I should’ve known she would fuck up our agreement, but I needed time away. Being a single mom was exhausting, and I thought if I had just a couple months to get a music career going, I could scoop them back up with my armloads of money, but I didn’t make it that far. Yet, I assured myself.

The door was unlocked when I got there. My uncle was snoring on the couch, and I could hear my mom’s chunky-sounding coughs. I kicked my uncle’s leg.

“Where are the boys?” Snores were his only re-

sponse. I called for them.

“Here, mommy,” Preston said from their temporary bedroom. They had colored all over the walls with pens and crayons. Preston was covering Rowan’s face with lipstick he had found somewhere. They were little hellions, but they were still my boys. They rushed over to me, and I knelt to meet their hugs.

“Where did you go, mommy?” Preston asked me. I just cried and held them, wondering where we were going to live.

HIM

I wore my best clothes. If my son was going to see me, he was going to see me looking my best. No cowlicks and hole-ridden jeans today, he was getting the job interview version of his old man. The drive was a little over an hour. You’d think it would have given me plenty of time to meditate and compose myself, but it seemed like I so much as blinked, and I was there. At least I wasn’t over-thinking it, but where did the time go?

They had a beautiful house, far enough away from the road that you probably couldn’t even hear the cars going by. They were there to greet me at the door. It swung open before I could even knock or ring the bell.

“I understand you’re the bio dad?” the man asked me.

“Yes, like I said over the phone, I didn’t know I was the father until very recently. Otherwise, I would have come much sooner.”

“Of course, please come in,” he said. We shook hands, and his wife wrapped me up in a big grateful hug. I looked at his eyes and kept my hands away, to show him there was no funny business.

“Well, he’s upstairs if you want to meet him,” the man said.

I rounded the stairs, trying to be quiet so I could retain some element of surprise. I cracked his bedroom door, and get this, he was reading a book. My son, reading. I couldn’t believe it.

“Hey, little guy,” I said to him from his doorway.

“Hello,” he said, without looking up from his book. It was Pete the Cat, the one where he raced a turtle, I guessed, since I didn’t see any more pages before he closed the book and rose to face me. We both studied each other’s features, looking for similarities. I guessed his nose was sort of shaped like mine.

“Whatcha readin’?” I asked him.

“Pete the Cat. It’s stupid.”

“Why do you say that?”

“They’re always trying to teach you a lesson in these books. By the time you get to the end, you know Pete’s go-

ing to win the race. Just once, I want Pete to lose. Then we'll see how they like it.”

I thought that whatever home-schooling techniques they were using were working. My son was critically analyzing a book well within his age range. Smart kid, I thought, nothing like his father, or his mother, for that matter.

“Well, hey, I thought we'd go to the park, maybe feed some ducks. That sound fun?”

“You shouldn't feed ducks bread, you know, it's bad for them.” Well, there goes that plan, I thought, seeing many sandwiches in my future, so the loaves of bread I bought didn't go to waste.

We loaded up in their van and headed to the park. On the way, my kid watched a nature documentary with headphones, displayed on a screen built into the passenger seat. I watched along with him, without the added benefit of the no doubt erudite and English-accented narration, thinking I might be able to quiz him about it later.

The park was centered on a sizable duck pond. There was a shelter area with bathrooms, a playground, and benches scattered along the edge of the water. We got out and settled at a nearby bench.

“We'll leave you two alone for a while,” the husband said, as he and his wife held hands while they traipsed dreamily

along the pond's edge. A long silence passed between myself and the boy.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked him.

“Mm, nothin.”

“What did you think of those penguins? Pretty cool, huh?”

I said, referencing the nature documentary.

“I guess,” he said. I picked up a rock and skipped it across the water.

“Hey, asshole, I’m trying to fish here,” a man yelled from across the pond. The boy laughed and tried to skip his own rock, but it just plunked into the water.

“You better get your fuckin’ kid. He’s scaring away the blue-gill,” the fisherman shouted. I waved the man off and we started in the direction of his guardians.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk,” I said. “I’m cool with that.” He reached up and held my hand. We met up with the couple, who sat on a bench just around a curve in the pond.

“Ice cream, anyone?” the wife asked.

SON

I met my bio dad today. It was pretty cool, I guess. He kept asking me questions, but mom said he was just “trying to relate.” I have to admit, it felt cool when I held his hand, like I was touching my real flesh and blood, I

guess since I was born. We went and got ice cream after the park, but I wasn't really hungry. My bio dad ate all of his really fast, which I thought was funny. I actually wouldn't mind if he visited again. Maybe we could watch another nature documentary, since he seemed to like those. I couldn't wait to tell my parents about it when he left. As always, they were very patient with me as I sputtered my way through another story. I asked them if I could see him again, and they said, "we'll see," which I think was their way of saying they didn't know. They didn't know, or they wouldn't tell me, one or the other. I wondered if I would meet my bio mom one day, too.

HER

I finally managed to settle down after a while. I did some door-dashing, and between that and the assistance I was getting, I made ends meet. Rowan's dad started helping me out (court-ordered, mind you) but it was a welcomed relief. I would drop Preston off at my mom's and scramble around for a handful of hours, making as much money as I could.

We moved back into my old complex, different unit, same floor plan, so it was almost as if we hadn't moved at all. For all they knew, we just took an extended vacation at grandma's.

I decided to reach out to my adopted kid's dad and

see how he was doing. We met at this place he likes to hike at. Part of it was this old cemetery from like the 1800's or something. He seemed really tired. We stopped to rest at the top of these wooden stairs that led down into some marshlands. I could tell from his body language that he wanted to fuck, but that wasn't what I had come to do (for once). Not that I wasn't into the risky public thing, it just wasn't the right time.

“So look,” I said, “I wanted to tell you this in person.” He shuffled a little bit, stood up, and lit a cigarette. “You’re not the dad. I’m sorry.”

He stared off into the distance. I could tell he didn't want to be looked at.

“I figured as much,” he said, trying to cover the tracks of his own heart. “But it was still fun to meet the little guy.”

“Why did you wait so long after I told you to set up a meeting?”

“Listen, you lied to be about something extremely serious and personal, don't chide me for being a deadbeat dad. I saw your apartment back in the day, you might not have even been able to keep him.”

“Yeah, it was pretty bad,” I said. “I've been thinking about us. I've changed. I'm honest now.”

“You want me to take you back, after what you just

told me?”

“I told you, I started telling the truth. No more lies, no more bullshit.”

We were together for a few months before he found out I cheated on him.

HIM

It was foolish of me to get with her in the first place, let alone take her back, but that was the last straw. I had two or three people messaging me, saying they'd seen her with other guys. One of them even sent me screenshot sexts that fit inside the timeline of our attempted rekindling. Of course, when I confronted her, she denied it. I showed her the screenshots, and she said her account had been hacked.

“They hacked your nudes, too?” I asked her, with as much sarcasm as I could muster, scrolling through the damning evidence. She broke down, but I didn't let it soften my reserve.

“It's over,” I said, “I can't do this anymore.”

SON

I still keep up with my bio parents as much as I can, but my foster parents won't let me talk to them without supervision. My bio mom says some pretty crazy stuff sometimes, so I couldn't really blame them. I wondered if I would become all manic and frantic like her one day. My bio dad was a lot more chill, but I never saw him again after

his first and only visit. Even so, he wished me happy birthday every year, sent me gifts then and on holidays. It was nice to have at least a pen pal, considering how sheltered I was. A part of me thought that one day, the world was going to slap me across the face, that all the stuff around me was just a bubble protecting me from inevitable doom. When I voiced my concerns, my foster parents assured me that there were children in the world, some even close by, who had a very hard life, and I should be grateful. I was sick of grown-ups telling me to be grateful all the time, like it's freakin' Thanksgiving year 'round or something. I guessed I did have it pretty good. Everything was going smoothly until my bio mom came to visit. She crashed her van right into the mailbox and rushed the house. I could hear her pounding on the door and screaming, "Give me my son, give me my son." I didn't know what to do, so I just hid in my closet. Eventually, the police came and took her away. She looked very, very tired.

THE COUPLE

We couldn't express to you the gift this child has been to my husband and I. Where our marriage was once dull and full of dread, this boy has brought a sparkle back into our lives. He is excelling in academics, as I'm sure he's told you (yes, we supervised all the texting and video chats,

I'm sure you understand) and he is growing into a bright young man. I'm sorry to hear that you are not actually the biological father, but we thought it best not to inform our son (god, it feels great to say that!) until we know for sure. Until then, I understand if you would no longer like to continue your visits, as I'm sure this has all been very painful for you.

A part of me expected her to show up, but I didn't think it would actually happen, and in such an explosive way. Luckily, our insurance covered the damages, but I can't imagine how our little one must have felt seeing her like that. He talks about it, and you, often, but we just do our best to change the subject. I hope her stint in jail was without mishap, but I'm sure you understand why we've ceased contact. I hope this letter finds you well.

Sincerely,

Miranda//

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



G. W. McClary is a native of Ohio, with a B.A. in literature. His stories have appeared in *Pulp Lit Mag*, *The Fear of Monkeys*, *Mobius Blvd*, and the 2024 *Visions* anthology [Pages Promotions], and are forthcoming in *Mystic Mind*, *Schlock!* webzine, *Nova Literary-Arts Magazine*, *Altered*

Worlds: An Altered Reality Anthology, *CC&D* [Scars Publications], and *Dark Horses*.

You can find G.W.'s works on Amazon: **Visions: Stories and Poems from Peculiar Perspectives**: 9781628283266: [HERE](#)

Mobius Blvd: Stories from the Byway Between Reality and Dream No. 16:

February 2025: [HERE](#)

Books, Timada's Diary, Mystic Mind, Mobius Blvd, and Schlock! webzine.

[HERE](#)



AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR, JOEL MCKAY

Joel McKay is an award-winning writer. He calls Prince George, B.C. home, where he lives with his wife and two daughters. *Wolf at the Door* is his first novella, which won the 2022 Global Book Award gold medal for horror. His most recent published fiction was the short story *Number Hunnerd* in Tyche Books' anthology *Water: Selkies, Sirens and Sea Monsters*, and the splatterpunk western short story *Hands*, which was published in Brigids Gate Press' anthology *Blood in the Soil, Terror on the Wind*. He most recently placed Bronze at the Global Book Awards.

Q: Tell us, readers, about your anthology, *It Came From the Trees and Other Violent Aberrations*.

It Came From the Trees and Other Violent Aberrations is a short anthology of five stories all tied by the theme of dread. There's a creature feature novelette that's an ode to an X-Files episode, a science fiction thriller about teleportation technology, a Lovecraftian adventure tale, a grim dark fantasy and a splatterpunk western. They're all different, none of them linked except through the common theme of dread. I did that on purpose because I enjoy anthologies that really mix narrative and genre.

It's also designed to be a throwback to the pulp horror stories of the 40s and 50s – yarns, page-turners, that sort

of thing. My only goal is to get you to the next page, five times over. To that end, I also made it short. The collection clocks in at 130 pages. This, admittedly, is also about me. I have the attention span of a gnat, so I'm appealing to people who, like me, love a good short story collection but not a 300-page one.

To sum up, if you like page-turners, creature-features, variety, and short reads: this collection is for you. Please go buy it now.

Q: When did you begin writing *It Came From the Trees*?

The titular story *It Came From the Trees* was written at the start of the pandemic. Honestly, I didn't care for it at first. It was written in a different format and so I shelved it for two years and worked on other things. Eventually, I kicked it over to an editor for feedback and he, surprisingly, loved it and had some great advice to improve it. Once that was done, I knew I wanted it out, but it wasn't long enough to justify a release on its own. That's when I decided to create a cornucopia collection, adding in four other stories I had written, all previously unpublished, that I thought paired well with the titular story. Here we are four years later and it's finally out!

Q: What themes will readers find in your horror stories?

Dread. Paranoia. Cynicism. Friendship. Perseverance. Honor. I try to create characters that are facsimiles of real human beings— they're dynamic, they're imperfect, they say and do things that create problems for themselves, but they're also self-reflective, kind and survivors. I think that's a solid gamut of the human experience. There's even love in these stories – friendship, both the adult and child kind, and even that type of romantic love that takes you unexpectedly and transforms you.

Q: How have your other professions such an economic development profession, journalist, and former public relations specialist shaped your writing career as an author?

I think my work in economic development gives me a little bit of knowledge about a lot of things. Frankly, journalism and public relations do the same. Makes me a whizz at trivia, most times. That's helpful for writing because it largely means I have no problems coming up with ideas or shaping stories around existing structures and systems. As well, that work makes you a quick study, which really helps if you feel you have to conduct research for a story. Although

I love researching and learning, I don't get lost in it. Honestly, I'm more interested in the characters than I am the setting, structures or systems, though I do want those latter elements to function logically and consistently to keep the reader in the story – then watch and see how the characters react in those settings. So, overall, I'd say it helps a lot. One thing journalism gives you is a better-than-average ability to write fast, which really helps with first drafts.

As an aside, one of the biggest skill gaps I see in the business world is the ability to write effectively. That's why I recommend that journalism education in post-secondary is not only important for people who want to pursue that profession, but for anyone who goes into business. Journalism 101 – researching, interviewing, writing a lede and disseminating information quickly and accurately – should be a mandatory course in every business school in North America.

Q: Why be an author when your main passion is in business and economics?

My main passion is writing fiction. I started writing fiction when I was 12 and never stopped. The only reason I'm in business is because I became a journalist (hoping to be-

coming a novelist), and that led me to business journalism and that, eventually, translated into business and economics.

Don't get me wrong, I love my day job. I'm good at it and extremely privileged to work in that space. But if you put a gun to my head and asked me to choose between writing horror and doing economic development to pay the bills, it's going to be the former seven days a week. No apologies.

Q: What other books would you like to publish?

I have two novels drafted already that I need to edit and start submitting. One is a sword and sorcery fantasy (in the same world as the grim dark story in the *It Came From the Trees* anthology), and another is what I call industrial horror. The goal this year is to get them edited and see if I can find a publisher.

Meantime, I'll keep writing whatever comes to mind, short stories, novellas, and novels. I don't ever intend to stop. In fact, I'm just getting started.

Q: How would you describe your writing style?

Accessible. Page-turner. Yarn. Pulpy. My work isn't heady, and it's never going to be welcomed in the esteemed circles of high literature (p.s. I love high literature). I'm writing for the everyday reader, the beach or cabin reader, the person who takes a paperback with them wherever they go. I'm not looking for the reader to have a transformative experience, but I would like them to turn the last page and say, 'That was fun.' That's it. If I achieve that, I feel good.

Q: What advice would you give to aspiring writers in the horror genre?

Just do it. Write it. Don't worry about being perfect or comparing yourself to others. Don't worry about who is ahead of you, who has more sales, or any sales for that matter. If you want to be in this business, be in it for you. Write for you. Finish for you. Finish for that feeling. Connect and become friends with others in the business, but at every step resist the urge to compare yourself, grade yourself or, for that matter, anyone else. This is a craft. You can learn it. Discipline beats talent seven days a week. Get at it, have fun, and stick with it and you'll find success. But always remember the definition of success is your own to make.

Q: What is the difference between the classic horror stories and modern day horror stories like your collection, *It Came From the Trees*?

Well, obviously, any story set in the contemporary with current-day culture and technology is going to be your most obvious point of separation. I think word choice, pace and structure would be the next most obvious. Beyond that, not much. I think you'll find that stories haven't really changed all that much throughout human history – they're about people who face internal and external conflicts and their journey through those conflicts to an eventual, or lack of eventual, transformation. This is true all the way back to the mythology of cultures throughout the world – there are common themes, elements, archetypes, and lessons present in myths from every culture throughout the planet. Whether it was written four thousand years ago or four minutes ago, ultimately, all stories are human stories.

The benefit of being a modern horror writer is that we get to draw on all the examples of horror written by the people who came before us. We have a rich archive to draw on for inspiration, lessons, et cetera. That makes it an exciting time to be writing in this genre or any other.

Q: Where can readers find you and your work online?

My work can be found on Amazon – Wolf at the Door (horror novella) and It Came From the Trees (horror anthology). My work has also been published in anthologies from Brigids Gate Press, Eerie River Publishing, Locust Candy, Bewildering Stories, Tyche Books and Sley House Publishing.

You can also find me on:

X (Twitter [@joelcmckay](#))

Instagram ([author joel mckay](#))

and [Threads](#)



A DAY FROM THE LIFE OF KLAUS WERNER SWAMP-MAN

A POEM BY PAWEŁ MARKIEWICZ

The marvelous winter has come
with the most tender Christmas Eve

Klaus Werner Swamp-Man awaits dream
August Moment is revealed

Klaus a forester lives alone
in a clear home amidst the grove

In the evening praying by table
he enjoyed freedom of silence

Oracular characters come
after rook has visited his

The rook knows from the black raven
that there are marsh-treasure hidden

Next hydra bangs on the window
she gives to Werner the obol

He enchants tenderly the guest:
>The eternal moor! Dream with us!<

Then a Stymphalian's birdlet comes
flying in dazzling-brilliant ways

The bird gives away an obol
the man told him the gorgeous words

>Eternal moory landscape dwell!
such for the ghosts a meek landscape<

Hereafter attends – Dionysus
sir of numinous moory homes

Third obolus – given away
therefor can be valid Klaus' dream

Oboli are being given
>Be the fen full of tender myths!<

Mister Swamp-Man boasts of marshlands
they are free in eternities

Rook is nidifying in tree
the plant stays over the moor-mist

Bewitched landscape and dreamy bog
and women dream of moory fog

Two women seem to have been enchanted of the
boglet (my neologism) plainly in a propitious way.

ABOUT THE POET



Paweł Markiewicz was born 1983 in Siemiatycze in Poland. He is poet who lives in Bielsk Podlaski and writes tender poems, haiku as well as long poems. Paweł has published his poetries in many magazines. He writes in English and German.

ALMOST 2000 YEARS AGO

A SHORT STORY BY HUGH BLANTON

It was one of those weird Sunday afternoons when you're worn-out tired and should be home resting for the upcoming week, but some impulsion compels you to your favorite bar. Wendell walked into The Caliph and despite the near total darkness inside (the only lighting in the place was provided by the television screens behind the bar) left his purple tinted sunglasses on. His sable black waist-length fur coat and snow white scarf around his neck elicited the response he wanted as he stood in line at the serving station—someone at the other side of the room barking like a dog chasing a bitch in heat. A couple of weekends ago he had walked into The Caliph on karaoke night just as a singer finished up and was returning the microphone. The KJ took the mic and exclaimed in a perfect imitation of George Michael, “Ladies and gentlemen—MISTER ELTON JOHN!” and pointed at Wendell coming in through the door. Wendell took a bow as the patrons applauded his look. If you can't be pretty, at least be noticeable. Wendell liked going to The Caliph, especially the attention he always got when he was there.

Wendell knew he shouldn't be spending all this money,

he'd already had to phone his parents once to send him cash in between his monthly allowance deposits. He stayed in the dorm at UCSD so he couldn't use rent payments as an excuse for running low on money. Being a freshman, he used the excuse of unexpected textbooks, but what reason would he come up with next if he needed to? He would come up with something, but for now he needed a drink, company, and attention. Wendell ordered a cosmo, the Z-stem glass with the triangular bell filled with red liquid was the perfect drink for the flamboyant man about town. He took a seat by himself at a table in the middle of the lounge within sight of the barker across the room and crossed his legs at the knee, bouncing his suede ankle bootie, and sipped his cosmo.

The entertainer was a bad piano player and a worse singer. Perhaps that's why he had the afternoon gig—warming up for the professionals that would be playing later that night. He certainly made it obvious why the term “lounge singer” was a pejorative. The violinist that Wendell had met on campus as she left Chamber Orchestra class was someone who had talent, real musical talent. She'd promised to meet him at the movies that morning for the early showing of *The Matrix Reloaded*, but he waited in the lobby of Landmark Cinema and she never showed up.

Maybe it was just as well, he was terribly hungover after the party at Steadman's last night. Steadman always had the best dope, and then on top of that Carlos started mixing Patron tequila margaritas. There was a steady procession of people in and out of Steadman's apartment, they had all been introduced to Wendell, but he didn't remember any of their names. Carlos lived in Steadman's apartment as Steadman's latest boyfriend, but he'd already been there three months, an eternity in Steadman's relationships. Wendell was the last guest when Steadman tackled Carlos on the couch and stuck his hand down the front of Carlos' pants. "I'm not your boy toy!" Carlos exclaimed. Carlos seemed to be genuinely upset, at least in Wendell's extremely drunk and stoned mind, so Wendell bailed.

"The gentleman in the corner would like to buy your next drink," the waiter said to Wendell. Oh, please. He hadn't even been in there five minutes and here comes the come-ons. At least it wasn't Barking Man. Wendell twisted in his seat to and raised his drink in thanks to the gentleman in the corner. And he did look like a gentleman. Sitting alone there in his loafers, dress slacks and dress shirt, gray hair neatly trimmed and smiling pleasantly. Tanned, too. After Wendell finished his first cosmo and the sponsored drink arrived, he again turned and

lifted his glass in toast. This time the gentleman came over.

“I hope no baby seals were sacrificed for that coat,” he said.

“No, maybe just some North American Black Bears,” Wendell said.

“Oh, so you’re a bear, huh?”

“Oh, god no.”

* * *

One hour earlier as Anthony Brinkley slowly shuffled into The Caliph he told himself he would only have one drink, listen to some live piano music, and leave. He could have left after the first half-dozen missed notes without even finishing his drink, but he was wrecked. He leaned his head back on the banquette, closed his eyes, and the images of his weekend flickered into his mind. Friday afternoon at Club San Diego bathhouse with Ronaldo. The bathhouse wasn’t really Anthony’s thing, but Ronaldo loved it—the hustlers, the E being passed out like candy, nude men in and around the pool, disco music blasting. Then across the street to Martinis Above 4th for happy hour; \$5 martinis from 5 to 6. And even after happy hour, when the martinis went back to their regular \$15, they stayed for several more rounds, nearly hooking up with another couple before beg-

ging off and leaving for a late dinner at a Greek cafe.

Saturday morning he woke up in complete misery at Ronaldo's apartment, the sun already out and trash trucks thundering in the alley. "I have the perfect cure for you," Ronaldo said. "Brunch at Hamburger Mary's!" They took a taxi over, Ronaldo's car had been left over by the bathhouse last night. Anthony was barely able to hold it down, the whole greasy food thing as a cure for hangovers is a myth perpetuated by young people with stomachs strong enough for it. Anthony had just turned 62 and the hangovers were doing their best to convince him it was time to give up partying like a young man. But he did enjoy being with Ronaldo in the scene (Ronaldo being an extroverted people-person) and the bottomless mimosas did cure the hangover. And fortified them; they had to make their Saturday afternoon visit with Jerome.

At 80 years old and confined to a wheelchair, Jerome had emphysema and cirrhosis of the liver. He still smoked and drank, no need in quitting now. The days of all-night club hopping were long gone, now he sat in front of his television all day. He likes this new television show *Queer as Folk*, a much more realistic representation of queer life than *Will and Grace*. He leaves his front door unlocked so visitors can knock and enter. Anthony and Ronaldo

walked in just past noon. “Well, there you are,” Jerome said. “I thought I was going to have to make my Bloody Mary myself!” He struggled to get a cigarette out of its pack.

“If you’re going to smoke, at least take the oxygen tube off first,” Ronaldo said while Anthony started mixing Bloodys in the kitchen.

“Don’t be bitchy,” Jerome said as Ronaldo gently removed the tube from Jerome’s nose and set it aside.

“I’ll turn off the oxygen machine so you don’t blow us all to hell with your cigarette,” Ronaldo said.

“I haven’t blown anything in years, my dear.”

“How have you been feeling lately,” Anthony said, setting his Bloody on the tray next to the wheelchair and handing another to Ronaldo.

“I feel like I look,” Jerome said. “Like a shriveled up old queen waiting for her turn to die.” He coughed after taking a drag on his cigarette, but recomposed himself quickly. “Listen dear,” he said to Anthony. “I want you to take my entire folio home with you.”

“What in the world for?” Anthony said. “My goodness Jerome...”

“Oh, please Anthony. Stop. I already have one foot in the grave. Frankly I can’t wait to get out of here. Take care

of them, find them a home.” Jerome had a folio of hundreds, maybe thousands of plays he’d written since he was a teenager. Only a few had ever been produced, and only in small theaters. “You’d be perfect as a lead for a few of them, if you’d just get off that procrastination horse and get back into the theater. You think you’ve got an endless supply of tomorrows and then you wake up one day sitting in a wheelchair with a shawl over your shoulders.” He waved to his stacks of plays in the corner of the room.

The plays landed with a thud on top of Anthony’s credenza and he laid down for a nap. He needed one after the five Bloody Marys at Jerome’s. Of course, Ronaldo woke him up only a few hours later for Saturday night clubbing. That’s why this Sunday he’d escaped alone to the Caliph, to take a break from Ronaldo and the scene. So why then was he buying this young man in a Liberace coat a drink?

It was like being the prettiest girl in school. All this attention he got from men. The one right here buying him a drink looked a little old, but Wendell wasn’t shallow. Older men were interesting conversationalists. Philosophy. Poetry. Especially poetry. He’d taken it in high school, and now at UCSD. It made him feel smarter than everyone

else. If he met someone who knew who Ovid was, he became especially excited. Wendell wanted to write poetry so scandalous it would get him banished like Ovid, but poetry was no longer considered important enough to get anyone banished. Ovid's words written 2000 years ago were still being read today and Wendell was delighted to think that if he wrote well enough someone would be reading him 2000 years from now, too.

Mercifully, the piano player announced he was taking a five minute break and the conversation flowed a little easier without the dinging of flubbed notes and off key singing. Anthony downed his drink and asked Wendell if he could buy him another. "You twisted my arm," Wendell said. "But just one more. I have to get up early tomorrow and read Lord Byron in front of my class. I've been told I sound like an amateur doing Shakespeare when I read poetry, so I want to get up early and practice before going in." Then the atmosphere changed, the piano player finished his gig, the waiters and bartenders switched shifts, and they remained at their table, Anthony buying more cosmos for Wendell, Wendell continuing to allow his arm to be twisted. Wendell was excited to meet a real actor; Anthony had been cast in major roles in several plays, and as the night shift entertainment began to take the stage they both re-

alized how drunk they were and how late it was, and they called it a night.

Wendell walked up Fifth Avenue trying to remember how far up the bus stop was and if it was even running this late on a Sunday night. A silver Avalon pulled up beside him, Anthony rolled down his window and asked Wendell if he wanted a ride. Swaying, Wendell walked to the passenger side and got in.

“How about a nightcap?” Anthony asked.

“I’m totally wasted already,” Wendell said.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Anthony said, and took a right on Robinson Avenue, away from the campus, pretty damn wasted himself.

* * *

The building was new, composed of eight two-story townhouse condominiums. The man parked his car on the steeply slanted driveway in front of the underground garage. They both stumbled on the steep driveway and the man fumbled with his key in the door lock—he must really be fucked up. He finally got it unlocked, and holding the door open, directed the boy in with “After you.” It was a nice condo, impeccably clean and decorated with modern artwork. Wendell was much more tense now that he was

alone with him and considered leaving right then.

“Have you ever heard Sarah Vaughan?” the man asked, putting a CD in the tray.

“I don’t think so,” Wendell said.

“Poets should listen to jazz singers,” the man said, hitting the play button and then going to the kitchen to make drinks.

The voice was heavenly, and Wendell collapsed into a chair still contemplating leaving. The man extended a high-ball glass to him and he drank without even asking what it was. Whiskey and Coke, he guessed after downing nearly half of it in one gulp. He was grateful that the man took a seat on the sofa on the other side of the room. Wendell felt an earthquake underneath him, or something like an earthquake, and he sat his drink on the end table and let himself to the floor before he had a chance to pass out. Wendell let his eyes close. He was finally bombed enough to put the violinist out of his mind.

* * *

Is the kid out? Anthony Brinkley was wondering if the kid was faking, there wasn’t the telltale asthmatic wheezing or snoring of a passed out drunk. He picked up the letter from Jerome on the coffee table. Here we are on the verge of a

new millennium and Jerome still didn't have an internet connection or an email account. Just a one page letter from last week thanking Anthony for delivering his new oxygen tanks and taking back his empties. Something about words on paper seemed more poignant these days.

When Anthony was 21, only a few years older than the kid lying in his floor right now, he'd auditioned for Four Winds where Jerome was casting director. Anthony did not get the part, but Jerome told him what his weaknesses were (strengths, too) and offered to coach him. That was the start of their more or less monogamous relationship that lasted until Anthony was 46, which was coincidentally around the time the AIDS epidemic was starting. Jerome, who miraculously never contracted HIV, watched as his subsequent lovers became terribly ill and died. Anthony and Jerome became even closer after that, though the romantic part of their relationship was gone. Terror and lust just don't mix.

Anthony knelt next to the kid, still supine, eyes closed, but still not snoring. He reached down and undid the kid's belt buckle and fly; Calvin Klein briefs! The boy was flaccid, but Anthony dove in anyway. However, the boy jumped up, zipped up, rebuttoned, and strode out the door. Damn.

* * *

Wendell knew the night would end up here. Hell, he made damn sure it would. So why was he walking away? Walking in the cold dark night, miles away from his dorm. It would take him hours to get home. He'd make sure to get a cell phone, just one more thing to pester his mom and dad about. He was walking away because he was not in control. Not in control of his own body, just like he wasn't in control during the writers' retreat when his English teacher Mr. Davis climbed into bed with him and Wendell felt that wet mouth under the covers then like he did to-night. But he offered no resistance then. In fact, he enjoyed going along with it, if not the "it" specifically, but the "it" of doing something sneaky and privileged. It's just that now he wanted control back. And quite honestly he didn't like his fur coat and suede ankle booties, either.

It was 3 AM when he made it back to the dorm. A note was taped to his door, "Sorry I was late. Where did you go? Let's try for next week. I really want to see that movie! Pop by my dorm tomorrow before class. Cheryl." Maybe the violinist hadn't stood him up after all.

* * *

What exactly happened? Oh well. Maybe the kid really did have to practice for his poetry reading tomorrow. An-

thony poured another drink, lit up a cigarette and called Jerome.

“Hello?”

“Jerome! How are you tonight?”

“The same as any other night at 1 in the morning, dear. Sleeping.”

“A most wonderful thing happened tonight,” Anthony said.

“That’s nice dear, but I doubt it’s wonderful enough to wake me up at 1 in the morning. Are you drunk again?”

“Well, not that drunk. Look who’s talking.”

“Touche.”

“Well don’t you want to hear about my wonderful night?”

“At 1 in the morning? Frankly, no my dear.”

“I picked up a boy tonight. College freshman. Drinking at The Caliph.”

“And?”

“Well, nothing happened. He left just now.”

“So you called to tell me nothing happened. At 1 in the morning.”

“Jerome, he seemed like a nice boy, a little on the

flamboyant side...”

“No more, dear. It’s late. I need my beauty sleep. Love you. Hanging up now.”

Anthony turned off the CD player and the lights. He drank and smoked alone in the dark.

* * *

Cheryl’s dorm room door was open, he tapped on the frame. Even though Wendell had brushed his teeth as soon as he got up, there was still a hint of sourness in his mouth. Hopefully not enough to emit morning breath that Cheryl would notice.

“There you are, Wendell! Where did you go yesterday? I went to the Landmark but you weren’t there.”

“I left after show time, I figured you weren’t coming.”

“Wait, it wasn’t like a date, was it? I thought a bunch of your friends were coming.”

Wendell had made it easy for her to get that impression because he didn’t want to seem like he was actually asking her out on a date when he asked her out. He shrugged.

“Just got my espresso machine yesterday. Would you like a cup?”

While she had her back to him he studied the photos on the wall, pictures of her at different ages playing her violin: her in a grade school orchestra, a high school orchestra, at her mom's kitchen table. Another pic in formal dress holding her violin in front of a theater, her mother beside her. Was she one of these child prodigies under immense pressure from her parents? With music, you played it and then it disappeared, unless it was recorded. But a recording of music is like a translation of poetry. It's unavoidable that something will be lost. Cheryl handed him a tiny cup of espresso.

"Are your fingers callused?" Wendell asked her. "You know, from the violin?" He mimed fingers on a neck board.

"Oh sure. But nothing like guitar calluses. Wanna see?" She held out her left hand.

"Can't even see them," Wendell said.

"Can I ask you a question?" Cheryl asked.

"Sure."

"It's kinda personal."

"I don't mind. Go ahead."

"Are you gay?"

"No."

"I was just wondering is all."

“No! I wouldn’t have asked you out if I was.”

“Its okay, I don’t mind if you are.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“It’s cool. You’re kinda weird. In a good way. I like weird people. You still want to catch Matrix Reloaded? I hear it’s good,” Cheryl said.

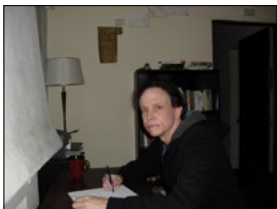
“Sure. When’s good for you?”

“The early Saturday show. And this time I’ll show up on time.”

“Okay. Let’s do it. Saturday it is.”

They said goodbyes and went to their first classes. Wendell would be reciting Lord Byron in just a few minutes, but he hoped the poem he was composing in his head right now about a child prodigy violinist wouldn’t evaporate before he could get himself to a blank page.//

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hugh Blanton’s latest book is *Kentucky Outlaw*.
He can be reached on X [@HughBlanton5](https://twitter.com/HughBlanton5).

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

BRIAN D. ANDERSON



Author of over 25 novels, Brian D. Anderson gained massive popularity right out of the gate with his debut series, **The Godling Chronicles**. His follow-up series, **Dragonvein**, was just as popular, Book One becoming a Top Five Finalist on Audible.com

for Fantasy Book of the Year in 2015 – becoming the very first independent to reach the finals. But Anderson was far from finished.

After co-authoring the Akiri series with Steven Savile (**Warhammer, Pathfinder, Dr. Who, and Sherlock Holmes**) Anderson became the first independent author in history to secure a six-figure audio only deal for his highly anticipated two-book sequel of **The Godling Chronicles**.

Still, Anderson felt there was more to accomplish. So he secured a three-book deal with Tor Books for **The Sorcerer's Song** series and is currently writing short fiction for the **Conan the Barbarian** Franchise.

When not writing, Brian D . Anderson divides his

time enjoying his friends and family at home in the sleepy little southern town of Fairhope, Alabama or astride his Harley Davidson, traveling the country from convention to convention, meeting fans and signing books. Information on the Sorcerers Song series can be found here: [The Sorcerer's Song \(3 book series\) Audible Audiobook Edition](#).

A Three Book Epic Series By Award-Winning And Critically Acclaimed Author, Brian D. Anderson

The Bard's Blade is the start of the new Sorcerer's



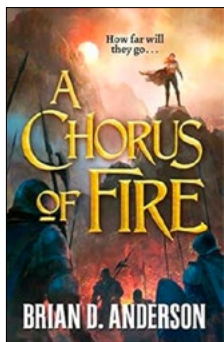
Song fantasy adventure series from Brian D. Anderson, bestselling author of **The Godling Chronicles** and **Dragonvein**.

Mariyah enjoys a simple life in Vylari, a land magically sealed off from the outside world, where fear and hatred are all but unknown. There she's a renowned wine maker and her betrothed, Lem, is a musician of rare talent. Their destiny has never been in question. Whatever life brings, they will face it together.

Then a stranger crosses the wards into Vylari for the first time in centuries, bringing a dark prophecy that forces Lem and Mariyah down separate paths. How far will they have

to go to stop a rising darkness and save their home? And how much of themselves will they have to give up along the way?

A Chorus of Fire is the second installment of the



Sorcerer's Song fantasy adventure series from Brian D. Anderson, bestselling author of **The Godling Chronicles** and **Dragonvein**.

A shadow has moved across Lamoria. Whispers of the coming conflict are growing louder; the enemy becoming bolder. Belkar's reach has extended far into the heart of Ralmarstad and war now seems inevitable.

Mariyah, clinging to the hope of one day being reunited with Lem, struggles to attain the power she will need to make the world safe again.

But a power like this is not easily acquired and will test the limits of her mind and body. She will need to look deep inside herself to find the strength to achieve what even the Thaumases of old could not.

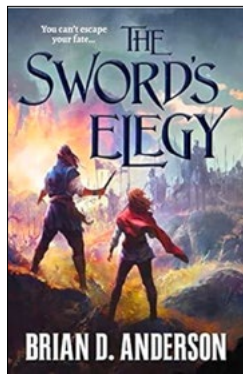
Lem continues his descent into darkness, serving a man he does not trust in the name of a faith which is not his own. Only Shemi keeps his heart from succumbing to despair, along with the knowledge that he has finally found

Mariyah. But Lem is convinced she is being held against her will, and compelled to do the bidding of her captors. He is determined to free her, regardless the cost.

Their separate roads are leading them to the same destination. And once they arrive they will have to confront more than the power of Belkar. They will have to face themselves and what Lamoria has forced them to become.

At the Publisher's request, this title is being sold without Digital Rights Management Software (DRM) applied.

The Sword's Elegy is the third book in a new epic fantasy trilogy from successful self-published author Brian D. Anderson, perfect for fans of **The Wheel of Time** and **The Sword of Truth**.



The doom of humankind has at last been realized. Belkar's prison is broken and his army is on the move. The nations of Lamoria, unaware of the greater danger, look to repel the aggression of Ralmarstad.

Mariyah and Lem, certain that only the magic of the Bards can save them, desperately search for that lost knowledge. But friends and allies are what they need to complete their task. And they are in short supply. For, while

peril often brings out the best in us, it also brings out the worst.

In the end, it is not great power, terrible armies, or mighty warriors who will influence the course of fate. But two lovers and the unbreakable bond they share. All questions are answered. All mysteries revealed. And even Belkar will learn that fate, once tempted, cannot be denied.

Learn more at his website:

<https://www.briandanderson.com/>

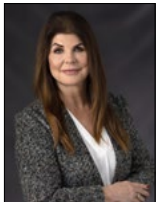
Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/TheGodlingChronicles>

Blog: <https://briandandersonbooks.blogspot.com>

AN INTERVIEW WITH

DIANN FLOYD BOEHM



Diann Floyd Boehm is an award-winning international author. Diann writes children's books and young adult books. In addition, Diann writes books to inspire kids to be kind, like themselves, and to "Embrace Imagination". You can find all her books on Amazon.

Q: When did you first begin writing stories?

I have always been a storyteller, but it was around 1998 that I started putting my stories to print and began the author journey.

Q: Where did you find the inspiration for your book, *Ruby Takes Chicago*?

Ruby Takes Chicago is the sequel to the book **Rise: A Girl's Struggle for More**. Both books are based on the early life of my grandmother. She inspired me, and I wanted to share her journey to encourage readers never to give up and pursue their dreams.

Q: Can you tell us readers what your novel, *Ruby Takes Chicago* is about?

Ruby Take Chicago takes place in the 1920s and is about a recent college graduate who, after returning home from school “up north”, leaves her hometown in Oklahoma to pursue her dreams in Chicago. Once in Chicago, Ruby is surprised that society is still reluctant to accept women working outside the home, even in the big city. Determined to stay true to herself, she takes on life’s challenges in tumultuous times of Prohibition, protests, and women’s rights marches. Ruby meets like-minded women, and together, they break through the barriers until Ruby lands the perfect job, all amidst discovering the joys of life and love, heartbreak, and love again.

Q: What themes are inside this book?

The central theme is a young girl, Ruby, working to find her dream job in a man’s world.

The sub-theme is Ruby and her friends working through the maze of life; wanting to work and to be recognized as an equal in the workforce, but also enjoying life and seeking love.

Q: Why pick the 1920s?

I selected the 1920’s because that is when my

grandmother experienced her young life.

Q: Who are the main characters in Ruby Takes Chicago?

The main characters:

- Ruby Dinsmore
- Mr. and Mrs. Clark, friends of Ruby's parents, who let Ruby live in their home to help her get settled in Chicago.
- Liz, Ruby's trusted friend and coworker
- John Wiess, Ruby's first boss and later, after she moves to a new job, someone she dates.
- Zoe, a new trusted friend
- Ralph a new beau in Ruby's life
- Edward the next beau in Ruby's life

Q: What do you do as a cohost on USA Global TV?

I cohost with Dr. Jacalyn for three shows:

The Corner Bookstore

Books, Blogs, and Poetry, where we interview authors, publishers, and anyone connected with the author world.

On the show, **The United Kingdom News and Culture**, I cohost with Dr. Jacalyn and the United Kingdom Correspondents Helena Chard and Simon Mac Donald.

Q: What are some of the humanitarian projects that you do?

When I was living in Dubai, I was able to work with a team of women, and we assisted various organizations located in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.

Today, back in Texas, I volunteer for our church and other community organizations.

Q: What other organizations do you work with?

I belong to the Austin Women's Club, and we work to preserve an historical home built in 1874 by the North family. The North home became known as the Chateau Bellevue. We also give historical tours of the home.

Q: What other books are you working on at the moment?

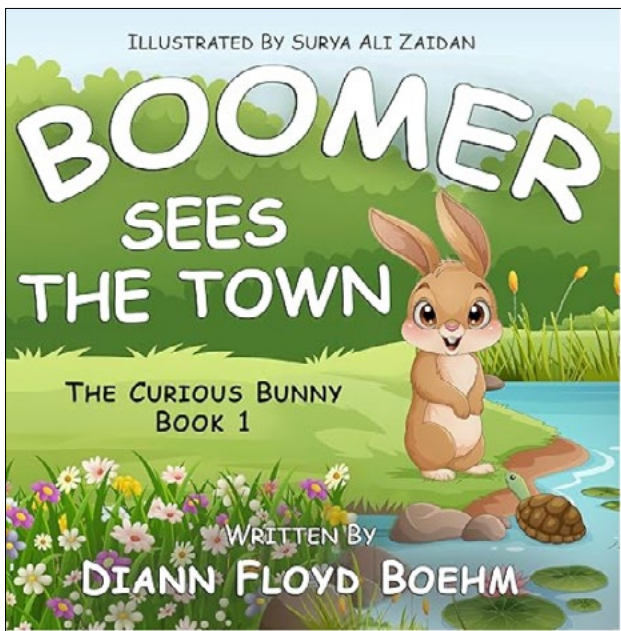
I am working on several children's books; Boomer the Curious Bunny will become a series, so several stories are in the making. I am working on a new short story series

about a young girl and her various adventures in life. The book title is still to be determined.

Q: Where can readers find you and your books online?

You may find my books online at:

- [Amazon](#)
- Barnes and Noble
- Norns Triad Publications
- Ebook- [Boomer the Curious Bunny](#)



BURGERS AND DREAMS

A SHORT STORY BY LEONARD HENRY SCOTT

Twenty years ago on this very day, Martin Villa Rosa took first place in the Howard Morris High School Science Fair for his invention of the turnip powered airplane. It didn't fly and of course it didn't use actual turnips. TURNIP was in fact just an acronym for some long scientific words that Martin had completely mastered down to the most subtly nuanced shades of meaning, quite impressive for a boy of 16. As for the "airplane" part, well the word was intended as more of a metaphor than an actual airplane. But then, all in all, that was the beauty and genius of its design. His invention worked perfectly and was a brilliant success.

"Thank you for this honor." He said haltingly from the auditorium stage as he received his nicely framed and suitably curlicued award certificate before the packed assembly which included students, teachers, parents and an aunt who had come all the way from Philadelphia. His mother was there as well, of course (younger sister of the aunt). He also thought he had caught a glimpse of the much admired Marcia Carrier, who set his heart aflutter

whenever she came within twenty feet of him. Martin believed that his dad, Harry might be there as well, but sadly just in spirit. He had died two years earlier when the defective rung of a brand new extension ladder suddenly came undone while he was cleaning leaves from the gutters of an elderly neighbor's two story colonial house. Harry fell promptly to the ground, broke his neck and that was that, so quick, so unexpected. The family received a generous settlement. Although the money was nice, Martin would have preferred to have had his dad instead. He was missed by his family and his community as well. He was always doing something to help out, from collecting mail, watering plants or generally just looking out for things when neighbors were away or sick or old. Martin was very much like him.

“No, thank you Martin for giving us this marvelously innovative invention.” Mr. Turley head of the science department said enthusiastically into his hand-held microphone. “Your project clearly demonstrates the fine-tuned workings of a highly developed and creative mind. If you don't mind, I'd like for you to please share with us your plans for the future.”

Mr. Turley pointed the microphone suddenly in Martin's direction. And as Martin lurched nervously

forward much too quickly, he practically banged his mouth into its inscrutable black metal face. In that flashing moment, Jerry Goodwin popped through mind, the boy whose head had been playfully pushed into a water fountain spigot in the sixth grade, creating an upside down V of his two front teeth (perhaps) for the rest of time. Until this very moment, he had seen or thought of Jerry Godwin in years.

“Well,” Martin said (regrouping himself) while vigorously bouncing his head up and down. He was great at science but not so good at speaking. “I just want to, I mean (he paused thoughtfully). In the future I will be, hopefully going to college, hopefully, to study engineering and I just want to do some good....anduhm.... make a difference in this world, okay?... You know?”

What a cumbersome, high-flown and stupid set of remarks, he thought, so very much unlike the sterling speech he had been practicing for two weeks. But then that was before his own nonjudgmental face in the bathroom mirror. That speech was perfect. That speech even overshadowed by miles the normally troublesome newly emerging reddish eruption on his chin. But now, as he ruminated sorrowfully over his stumbling words, he recalled poor Ms. South Carolina Teen’s famously

interesting struggle to explain why so many Americans can't find the USA on a map. And so starting with the near microphone mishap an entire litany of imperfections and ineptitudes began to spin madly through his head. He felt an unsteadiness in his knees. His arms seemed to flap about uselessly like the arms of a penguin. The runaway jackhammer of his heartbeat pounded relentlessly in his ears. And worst of all at that moment, as Martin obsessively fixated on his ever growing litany of ineptitude and imperfectness. The little red mark seemed in this mind to grow by Vesuvian proportions, seeming in his mind to swell into a great hideous Bella mushroom-like thing, poking up fiercely out of his chin. Now, with this last image, his feeling of embarrassment was so complete that he wished with of his might that he could be anyplace else on this planet other than here on this stage in front of all of these people.

Then all at once something magical and completely unexpected happened. As Martin continued to shrink further and further down into his own very private little mortification valley, suddenly everything changed.

The audience broke into loud applause and cheers. At first, Martin did not comprehend what was happening and stared dumbly back into the blurry swell

of mysterious noise. But when he realized that they were cheering for him, he could not help but smile. As the applause continued Martin's broadening smile threatened to split his face in half. With that, all of his of his fears and perceived failings evaporated. And he became totally filled to the brim of himself with complete and absolute joy. It was then that he knew, without any doubt, uncertainty or equivocation whatsoever, that this particular instant in time was in fact the greatest moment of his entire life.

Time passed, not much, but some.

To a septuagenarian this flowing on of time would be just a whisker's width in the grand scheme of things. Time accelerates with increasing age and the years seemingly shrink down to mere moments. But to Martin, a young rising adult, eager to get on with life, time crawled. Months could seem like decades.

Martin Villa Rosa, last year's winner of the Howard Morris High School Science Fair, now 17 and one full half inch taller, carefully adjusted his hat in the mirror. It was a thin red cloth cunt cap that stood four inches high and now laid over at a jaunty angle, just so. The hat matched his short sleeved red shirt and contrasted nicely with his blue denim pants. He leaned against the men's room sink,

into the mirror making some last minute slight, fussy adjustments. Finally satisfied, he stood back from the mirror and put on his apron. It was faded blue denim to match his jeans. Fancy white letters printed in bold angled script across the chest part read:

“Chuckwagon - A Cheerful Respite from Humdrumiddy.”

It was Martin's 3rd day on the job. He felt he was already making an excellent impression. He knew the importance of making of good impression. His mom and his much beloved and sadly departed dad (rest his soul) had drummed that critical notion into his head since the age of four. He was neat, clean and on time. What more could they want? Soon it would be summer vacation and he would work a full schedule instead of only Saturdays and after school. In a few months he would graduate and would work full-time during the summer before he headed off to college. He had been accepted by several colleges. But Martin's life energy at this point boiled down to two things that he desperately wanted. He wanted very much to go to the School of Engineering at M.I.T. He was still waiting to hear if he had been accepted. He also desperately yearned for a car.

His mother said that he could have a car if he could pay half of the cost. Although the family was quite well off, especially since the insurance settlement, his mother did not want to encourage any feelings of entitlement. His parents tried to instill in him the notion that good things in life can only be truly appreciated if they are earned.

Of course, he didn't have a license yet. But that was just a detail. The money, he thought, the money would make the car happen. The money was the important thing. And from his job at Chuckwagon, he would have a fist full of money every week. Before too long the car would be sitting in front of his house, glinting chrome and deep glossy red paint. And there'd still be a little summer left to enjoy it. But it was understood that the car would stay in the garage when he initially headed off to college.

Martin tied his apron, and then tilted his head up to the mirror once more for a final hat check.

'Yes,' he thought. It was perfect. His face was so young looking, but quickly losing its cherubness. Soon all of that innocent baby fat would be dissipated. He would look so different in two or three years. Even the dreaded acne would be altogether gone. It hadn't been much of a problem though, not as bad as some of his friends. The red marks would suddenly appear then flower into great

burgeoning ugly white pustules almost overnight. God, they were so hideous.. For years he battled them off, pinching them, salving them mercilessly driving them back until they were dead. It seemed so unfair that the acne had to be on his face of all places, right there for everyone to see. As he scrutinized his face he noticed two small red marks, one just to the left of his nose and the other on his chin. He studied them intently for a moment. Small as they were they were definitely the beginning of something. He was certain of it.

“Hey, Marty!” Someone called from outside of the men’s room.

“Yeah. Coming.”

Martin Villa Rosa one of Harrison High School’s most stellar students turned and walked quickly toward the door. Then he stopped all at once, clumsily, as if all of him didn’t stop at the same time. He reached into his shirt pocket for something. He pulled it out and pinned it onto the front of his apron. It was a name tag that read “Marty.” Next to his name was a picture of big spoked wagon wheel. This was the first time he had ever been called Marty. He liked it. In a sense it symbolized his time of change and crossing over. He read once about an Indian tribes that

allowed all the newly minted young men to select their own names. The practice symbolized their passing over to adulthood and their new elevated status in the tribe. With this last change they became actual men, to be respected and admired as such by the entire tribe . Men. Now, he wanted everyone to call him Marty. It was time for him to select a name and Marty was the name he had selected.

It was 6:30 p.m. when he walked from the men's room out into the Chuckwagon dining area. Joel McIntyre stood waiting. It was time for him go home. It was shift change and Marty was his replacement.

“About time you came out of there...”

Marty smiled.

“Look Phil's got the rag on today so be careful and don't let the tables pile up, especially, okay?”

“Okay, thanks.”

The new people always got the worst jobs. The old timers got to work behind the counter, doing the burgers, doing the French fries and the shakes and giving orders into the microphone. But he was determined to patiently work his way up. One of the reasons that he came to Chuckwagon was that his girlfriend, Marcia worked there

and she was doing well. She liked it. So far, in three days, the newly named Marty had only been behind the counter once and that was for his orientation tour. The place where he worked was out among the tables, emptying ashtrays, throwing away trash, wiping tables, mopping the floor. He'd have to work his way up just like everyone else in the Chuckwagon had done. His father once worked in a restaurant as a busboy. He worked one whole summer cleaning up after the patrons. The next summer he got a job as a waiter. In those days there was big money in waiting tables. Perhaps there still was money in waiting tables. Marty didn't really know. But he knew that his father worked his way through college doing it. Marty wanted to do the same thing, maybe not as a waiter though. He'd find something that he could do well and he'd have to work his way up. He understood that. But it would be worth it. Plus, he needed the money for his car. Then later he'd need it to help with college expenses. He had a brilliant mind, everyone said so. He hoped to go to M.I.T. That was his dream. He had applied and every day when he got home, his first stop was the dining room table where his mother left the mail. Any day now, any day now it would come. His mother had promised to leave it on the table, unopened. He knew that when the letter finally arrived, he'd be happy and sad at the same time, joyfully filled with dread.

He'd become a first class engineer one day. That was his dream, Martin Villa Rosa, B.S.E., V.I.P. And when he'd come home from building bridges in Zambia, his shiny red car would be waiting in the garage. Life would be good. Life would be fantastic! He could almost taste the wonderful honey sweet promise of it. Although all of that waited for him just, barely beyond his fingertips, it seemed like a million miles. It would not be easy but he would get there.

He walked out into the Chuckwagon's large crowded dining area. Three long lines of people came all the way out to the salad bar. Almost all of the tables were occupied. And that was one of the things that Marty wondered about. Almost all of the tables were occupied, almost all. The room was jammed with people waiting to give their orders. At this time of day, the room was always jammed. Yet, no matter how many people came to Chuckwagon, there were always a few empty seats. He had only just started working there but he'd been a steady customer for years. Marty could not remember a time when there was no place to sit. It seemed a mathematical impossibility, but there it was. The lines could go clear out to the parking lot, but still there would be at least one empty seat.

He took the red checkered rag out of his apron

pocket and went to the first empty table to clean up. It had only been just a few minutes since Joel punched out and already things were hopelessly backed up (trash, trash, trash). One table had a particularly unpleasant collection of used paper ware, napkins soaked with everything from catsup to snot. Plastic utensils stuck to the table top with gummy apple pie residue and burger wrappers translucent with grease and with Chuckwagon “Secret Sauce.” The next table was only slightly better. But instead of apple pie, there was a thin glaze of mustard sticking to the bottoms of everything. Such meticulous disarray, such carefully contrived nastiness surely could not have occurred by accident. People are like that though, he thought. They didn’t care. ‘Leave it there’ they say. ‘People need jobs’ they’d say. Marty had heard them. They said these things openly in front of him as if he were invisible right in front of the big red sign above the tray receptacle that read:

“PLACE TRASH HERE”

There was an arrow pointing to the hard plastic trash cans. People don’t care. They’d just leave their trash in a sticky heap on the tables, despite, the signs. Then again what if they all did do just what the signs wanted. What then? Would Marty have a job at the Chuckwagon? Or would he be home right now, shoes kicked off, laying

across his bed pouring over the classified and dreaming in vain about his red car? People did need jobs. He wondered if perhaps he should thank them for their generous gift of slovenliness.

The Chuckwagon was crowded even more than usual it seemed. So, Marty busied himself with the tables and the trash until without any warning at all, the restaurant was suddenly empty. It was strange how that worked. He would dash about between and among the endless hordes of messy, cackling eaters. Then as he frantically wiped one more table or retrieved one more stack of plastic trays, he'd look up and everyone would be gone, like magic. It was eerie.

At 8:00 p.m. Marty was outside emptying two trash cans into the Dempsey Dumpster. Afterwards, he washed them, wiped them clean and carried them back inside. As he came through the front door something strange was happening. There were three patrons in the restaurant, all standing by the counter looking in his direction. They should have been turned the other way. Also, all of the people behind the counter stood stiff and quiet, like a squad of soldiers at attention. It looked so odd. He observed that Phil was ashen; the blood had drained

completely from his face. He noticed all of these people first. Then as the door slid quietly shut behind him, he noticed the two men in the center aisle. They were directly in front of him, perhaps 20 feet away. They wore dark clothes and their backs were turned to him. They didn't hear Marty come in. At that moment he knew what was going on. The realization hit him all at once. Involuntarily, he dropped the cans noisily onto the tiled floor. Both men turned sharply. The men had pistols which they held out far in front of them with both hands. He didn't see the pistols until the men turned around. One man fired his pistol two times hitting Marty once in the neck. The man who fired had round had large frightened eyes and a forehead bubbling over with perspiration.

After the shots were fired, the two men ran immediately past him and were outside, empty handed, before Marty hit the floor. The din of anxious voices and rushing feet rose up around him. He heard someone yelling something about an ambulance. But the words were garbled and almost lost among all of the other noises. His apron was covered with red blood. More of it and more it came. Phil Rose, the manager, bent over to help, his ghost face hard frozen. Two of the girls from behind the counter cried and made horrible faces at the spring of blood that puddled on the floor beneath Marty. Phil didn't know what

to do and Marty was beginning to go white from blood loss.

Soon, but much too late, the ambulance came. The paramedics listened to his chest. They pounded here and there and felt about. They performed CPR. In a few minutes they were finished. Martin Villa Rosa, winner of last year's Howard Morris High School science fair was dead.

And all of his dreams died with him (or did they?)

A day and a half later, the two robbers were arrested without incident as they sat with their shoes off, eating corn chips, so thoroughly engrossed in a movie on television that they did not hear the police SWAT team until it was much, much too late. They never got to see how the movie ended. The next morning the two were perp-walked to the court room for a bail hearing. That very popularly satisfying event was shown on the evening news. The one who had fired the fatal shot was identified as unemployed construction worker Wilson Brickman, age twenty four. Ironically seven years earlier while, he himself was attending Howard Morris High school and,

had participated in the school's science fair. He was in a group project and the group had finished fourth. At the time Brickman, was said to have been enthralled with science. The robbers were arrested based upon a tip from Brickman's mother who had seen the Chuckwagon video pictures on T.V. and recognized the cap that she had given him for his birthday two weeks earlier. During a police interview, Brickman stated that he had purchased the gun from someone in a shopping center parking lot.

It was all very sad. Marty was well-liked at the Chuckwagon, even though he had only been there three days. He had known some of the other employees from school. Phil, the manager, had the Chuckwagon flag flown at half staff for an entire week. During that time the employees all wore black ribbon pins on their lapels. It was a balancing act. Phil wanted to commemorate this horrible, tragic event. But at the same time he didn't want the Chuckwagon to take on the look of a sad dreary place hung with clouds of despair. It was after all supposed to be a happy place, "a cheerful respite from humdrumiddy." That was the Chuckwagon's newest slogan and opinions about it ranged from "moronic" to "brilliant." But people remembered it and so it did its job. Their previous slogan,

“Good Grub for the Grabbin,” had been discontinued in response to complaints by a local citizens group that felt it encouraged thievery among the youth of the community.

Consternation over Marty’s death was relentless. Gun control advocates made their appearances on various television programs, pointing out vociferously how the world was coming apart at the seams because of gun violence and pronouncing time and again that more restrictive gun laws are needed.

Second Amendment advocates retorted with equal vociferousness that all the laws in the world would not stop a determined felon.

Brickman had reportedly been a good kid at one point and showed some real promise. But seemingly, it was never nurtured or encouraged. Rudderless and without purpose, Brickman simply drifted further and further away into an increasingly dark world of drug and crime.

Martin Villa Rosa’s funeral was well attended and covered by all the local media. Snippets of it were shown on the local T.V. news.

“Martin is not dead. He is alive with God!”

Reverend Lawrence T. Humboldt, Pastor of the Cherry Hill Community Church spoke stirring from the

pulpit before the large assemblage of mourners.

“And he has also been reunited with his late, beloved father, Harry. Martin’s eternal spirit is now in a new home, in Heaven, where all things are possible. And so I know that he is smiling down on us at this moment. And I know that he is saying, ‘Don’t worry about me. I am fine....’

Marcia Carrier spoke shyly at first, until she got warmed up.

“Marty was studying to get his driver’s license and he really, really wanted to get a car. He dreamed of getting that car, a red car probably but definitely a convertible. He said we’d go riding around. I was looking forward to it. I’ll bet, right now, at this minute, he’s probably cruising down those wonderful golden streets of Heaven in a brand new red convertible with the top down! He’s cruising where the smooth roads go on and on forever! ... Where it never rains and no one even needs a driver’s license. I think that’s true. That’s what I believe. That’s what I think...”

Robert Turley, Head of the Science Department of Howard Morris High School said, “He was a brilliant young man, a great student. Martin was headed for M.I.T. Mrs. Villa Rosa told me that his acceptance letter came in the mail three days after his death. Now, isn’t that ironic. Sadly, he never got to see it....”

An older gentleman walked slowly up to the microphone, after pausing from time to time to lean on his Hurry Cane and catch his breath.

“Hello,” he said finally, “I’m Tom Slater. The Villa Rosas have been my next door neighbors ever since they bought their house, over 20 years ago. Twenty years. Boy, the time goes by...”

A sudden new glaze of new tears swept up quickly across the surface of his blinking red and watery eyes. He stopped to dab at them and to blow his nose in a great lump of wrinkled white handkerchief. Then he placed it carefully back into his jacket pocket.

“...Although people still tell me that it wasn’t my fault, still, I can’t help but believe that I was responsible for Harry’s death. After all, He was killed while in the process cleaning MY gutters. He was doing ME a favor. Falling off that ladder to his death was his payment for being a good neighbor. And that is exactly what he was, a good neighbor and a good friend. Isn’t that ironic?”

“You know, Mr. Turley also talked about irony a few minutes ago. And I’ll tell you something else that is ironic. On the day Harry Villa Rosa died cleaning my gutters, he was actually filling in for his son, Martin, uh, Marty. He had some kind of school assignment he had to finish that

day. You know a couple of weeks ago MARTY asked me to do him a favor. I said ‘sure.’ And he said, ‘Mr. Slater, could you please call me Marty from now on?’ It made me laugh that he would ask me that. But, it was important to him, so I said ‘sure, no problem.’ He had cleaned out those gutters several times before and I had offered to pay him. He always refused. He said, ‘We have to look out for each other.’”

Marty was a good kid and he was growing up to be a good neighbor and a good man, just like his dad.”

Before the funeral, in the hospital where Marty had been taken after being shot, there was the issue of organ donations. Harry Villa Rosa had been an organ donor. And so Donna graciously allowed Marty’s underage organs to be parceled off as if he were a 57’ Chevy parts car. She knew that Marty would not have objected. He had been surprisingly pragmatic for young man anxiously poised on the precipice of adulthood yet still brim full of the irrational notions of youth.

She never knew who received what. But she daydreamed that perhaps a six-year-old aspiring ballerina in Oxford, Mississippi would be able to achieve near perfect sight for the first time in her life. She dreamed that a sadly infirmed Gulf War vet could be made almost

entirely new by a heart and lung transplant (thank you for your service). She dreamed of the skin to be had and the bone, and the kidneys and the liver and all the other numerous things that she had no understanding of at all. She thought of them as seeds from Marty's body, scattered across the land. And when she thought of these things she smiled. Through the agony of her grief, she smiled and she felt better.

Despite the organ donations, as she stared down at his deceased and unnoticeably depleted body on funeral day, she thought Marty looked “good” and at peace. He looked terrific. But make no mistake Donna Villa Rosa knew that he most certainly was dead. She had no expectation that he would suddenly open his eyes, smile up at her with that particular quizzical look of his that she had always found so endearing, and say, “Hi mom. What’s going on?” He looked “good,” that is to say as good as a dead person could look. But clearly notwithstanding how “good” he looked, she knew full well that to gaze upon his still, inert face was to see the look and the solemn finality of death itself and its unequivocal truth.

Who knows what Marty might have accomplished if not for his untimely death? Who can truly assess the entirety of what Wilson Brickman took from the world in

that one stupid, cruel, selfish, awful moment; a moment that he would live on and on to regret for the rest of his life. And such was his unremitting grief at the institutional stunting of his own blossoming life and his honest and continuing remorse over his incontrovertible sin, that six years into his life sentence at Brushy Mountain State Prison he attempted suicide three times. On his last, the most undeniable of the three, he was truly surprised when he awoke in the prison hospital. He took that as a sign and decided to turn his incarcerated life in a new direction. He threw himself passionately into this pursuit and in the following years became a very effective counselor of young offenders whose efforts contributing greatly to the rehabilitation of some of the most recalcitrant prisoners at Brushy Mountain. Also, ironically, he intentionally never watched the end of that long-ago movie. That unfinished movie in some convoluted way was symbolic of the unfinished nature of his good work. At least that is how explained it to Diane Sawyer in television years later from his prison cell.

In the weeks that followed Marty's death, Charles "Chuck" Eiserman, founder and CEO of the Chuckwagon, a regional chain of 157 restaurants, spearheaded a movement that resulted in the formation of the Martin Villa Rosa Foundation. It was created to help, nurture and

support promising inner-city science students to achieve their academic and career goals. Their slogan, often seen on their signature green and white tee shirts was, “We just want to do some good.”

And over time, they did.

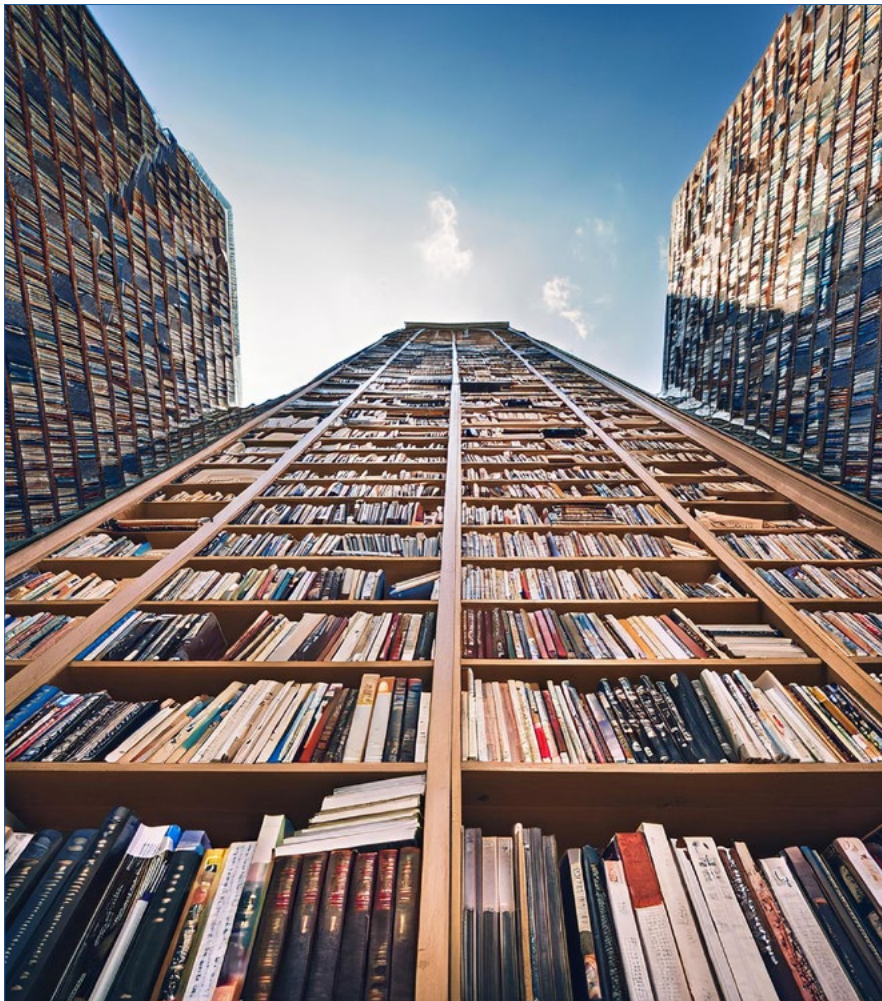
Martin’s untimely death caused him to miss out on many things, most particularly, his own actual life. He never got his red car at least on this plane of existence. He never got to see his M.I.T. acceptance letter of or celebrate his ultimate victory over the dreaded acne. He missed out on all of the many years of challenges, sadness and joy, blustery autumn days, Caribbean vacations, standing on line in the supermarket and most of all, the bringing to fruition of a budding life of great promise. And he left behind a wife who never existed and children who were never to be born.

When Martin Villa Rosa won the Howard Morris School Science Fair award, he said clumsily, “I just want to do some good.” Although he was unable to witness the success of his life, his all too brief existence on this planet most certainly did result in many good things, probably enough good things to fill up a true entire lifetime. He just never got the opportunity to walk up on the stage and receive his award.//

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Leonard Henry Scott is a Bronx born graduate of American University and retired Library of Congress Employee, who presently resides in National Harbor, Maryland. His fiction has appeared in Mystery Tribune, Piker Press, Sci Phi Journal, The Chamber Magazine and elsewhere.



IT'S RAINING MEN

A SHORT STORY BY ZEKE JARVIS

I'm putting this down for an official record, because I think that it's important. To remember it accurately, I mean. In the age of deep fakes and AI images, there's going to come a time when people claim that none of this really happened or that it happened so differently, but it did happen just like this. The first body came just before 10:30 on a Friday. The corner of Wash and Armstead The streets were busy with people looking for fun after a long week. What they got was a human body plummeting to the earth.

At first, people noticed the crash, most of them not even sure what had fallen. Then they saw a single red balloon drift away from the body. Then they all looked at the body. It was crumpled from the long fall, but you could pretty quickly recognize two things. First, it was a real body. Second, the person had been costumed to look like a clown. The face had been disfigured. The mouth had been sliced and then stretched into a terrible grin. You could still see the various slices and some blisters. The eyes had been taken out, seemingly caved in from force. What would come out later was that the body had also been castrated.

The actual identity was impossible to tell, so of course

the rumors started immediately. Some were at least reasonable. Like the claim that one birthday clown kept stealing gigs from other party clowns, and this was an act of revenge. Others were ridiculous, like the theory that the government was trying to create super soldiers whose natural appearance would tap into people's natural fear of clowns. In the end, the dead clown would turn out to be a priest or preacher of some kind. Not long after that much was announced, people started to come forward. Apparently, the clown was not a good man. He had taken advantage of people under his charge. You know the deal. After the accusations, there was some blowback, people telling the accusers to lay off. Don't "cancel" the dead. Again, you know the deal.

But what was interesting was that, this time, the accusers seemed to have a bubble of protection. Instead of being doxed and harassed, they had confirmation of their stories, affirmation of their bravery, and offers of help. It was pleasantly bizarre, like a miracle.

Meanwhile, the search for the clown's killer was fruitless. The cops tried to see what roof the clown would've been thrown from, but a variety of experts studied the body's trajectory, and they all concluded the same thing; the body had fallen straight down from a very high spot. Like it had

been thrown down from heaven or dropped from a cloud. This led to more conspiracy theories (“angels are real, and they’re wreaking vengeance”) but no leads. Nobody knew what to do.

The whole thing might have gone away except for the fact that another body dropped. Again, shortly before ten thirty. Again in a busy enough area that there were plenty of witnesses. This time, the body was dressed in a suit. It was also decapitated. The wound seemed to have been cauterized right after it had been made. Like it was cut with something sharp but hot. Maybe something on fire. Some people claimed that they could smell brimstone when they got near the body, but that wasn’t actually confirmed in a consistent way. Where the human head should have been, there was a snake head. The coroner took the head out to examine it. The weird thing was that there was no tail. Not just that the tail had been cut off, but it had never been there. It’s like it has always only been a head.

Although there was no head, the body did have both hands, so the authorities were able to run the prints. While the clown costume was just a costume, the business suit apparently, really belonged to the body. When the body had a head and was a person, he had been like a clown, a bad person. He’d been part of a variety of schemes that had,

while not quite breaking the law, left people financially devastated. In many ways, it was typical business, but when you read his biography, it was easy to think, “Maybe people like this really should beheaded.”

The discourse on this body was different. Rather than individual revelations about an otherwise beloved figure, this time, people really came together to shit on the deceased. It was almost like whoever was doing it had tried to pick a target that would be more popular. Of course, the cops still tried to conduct an investigation, but again, it was a straight fall from up high. No clues, and no real pressure from anyone to find the killer.

The next body was a cop. He fell down in the middle of an intersection. Literally in the middle. Oddly, all lights had turned red for a little bit before the impact. People sometimes claim that’s a lie, but the traffic cameras have been checked and rechecked. And even if you don’t believe that, consider the fact that the body hit the street and not any car. Its impact didn’t even cause a fender bender. Someone cared about public safety.

The body itself actually was split cleanly down the middle. It’s guts had spilled out a little when it hit the ground. Underneath the guts and gore, each side of the cut had an almost imperceptible blue streak along it. You can

imagine how that hit the news. People immediately began speculating that the cop had been crooked. That he was taking money from drug lords and letting them infiltrate the city. It actually took a long time and a lot of digging to uncover the truth. He wasn't working with the criminals. His sin was a subtle but steady stream of abuse and exploitation. A black man hassled here, a young woman aggressively frisked there. Nothing that would stand out as particularly evil other than the fact that we'd all come to see these actions as normal and tolerable.

By the time that this all came to light, the rumors were pervasive. Some folks firmly believed that it was a serial killer hiding in law enforcement a la Dexter. Others thought that it was an alien trying to subdue humanity enough to prepare them for invasion. The truth didn't seem to matter, and that's why this testimonial is so important. That, whatever the judgment, the reader at least grounds that judgment in facts.

After the third body came, a new category of rumor took off. This one posited that the bodies correlated to the various horsemen of the apocalypse, and, when the fourth body came, the apocalypse would as well. Never mind that there wasn't a clear mapping of who was war, who was death, as so on. All public officials were in a very

weird space where they wanted to say that the best people were working on it, and the killer or killers would soon be caught, but they also must have suspected that this was a supernatural issue, making it far outside of their jurisdiction and capabilities.

Perhaps it was good that the fourth and fifth bodies came so closely together. There was no time for the apocalypse. The fourth was a landlord. He was different from the first three bodies in a number of ways. First, there was no symbolic mutilation. He'd just been clubbed in the back of the head. Second, he actually has been thrown off a roof. Third, the killer had left forensic evidence on the body (he was arrested about a week later, and while plenty of people did support him, he did go to jail). Finally, he was different because his body was almost immediately crushed by the fifth body, which landed directly on top of the fourth body.

The fifth body turned out to be an internet crack pot. Someone who spread a mixture of conspiracy theories and dog whistles. While he had his bones and muscle and most of his organs, an autopsy revealed that his heart and brain had both been removed. How they'd been removed and where they ended up was never discovered.

The two overlapping bodies is, in a way, when all hell broke loose. The clear presence of a human murderer, and

the way that the human's victims was so absurdly different was what led to even more end times hand waving. That was annoying but not immediately dangerous. What was dangerous were the proclamations that these murders were divinely sanctioned and, therefore, a good model to follow. It was like a terrible version of What Would Jesus do. Terrible because it led to, on the one hand folks who'd been pushed to the margins talking about very brutal and very literal vengeance, and on the other hand, the people in power to become an extra level of paranoid.

There was actual violence on both sides. A boss who forced women to let him indulge his fantasies was tied up and dropped from the top of a hotel. A group of workers trying to sneak into another boss's house were shot to death by independent contractors who had been hired on as extra security. A teacher who'd been verbally abusive to queer students showed up on the school rooftop, not thrown, but still dead. A cop shot dead a civilian, citing concerns of "intent."

This all came to a halt when a final body fell. It was not disfigured, at least not like the others. It has on only shorts, and, written on its chest was the very simple message, "It was me." There was no speculation on what this message meant. Everyone understood that this was the killer, but

there was still plenty of questions. The thing was, the body had no fingerprints. I don't mean that there were no fingerprints on the body; I mean that the fingertips didn't have any prints. No whorls that could identify this person as a person. The DNA and dental records didn't match any person who'd ever lived.

That got a lot of speculation going. The "person" was an alien. Or a robot. Or an angel. Everyone had an opinion even if nobody had an actual fact. Either way, the authorities closed the central cases. They named the killer "John Doe." Some people criticized them, saying that it was too close to the movie *Seven*, but any other name might have either implied sympathy or taken a stance on the killings, so there probably was no choice.

That was a few years ago, and, by now, we've all seen the fallout, so speak. Social media profiles honoring "the work." Some even claiming to have been involved. Shitty movie and TV adaptations. Scholarly and trashy articles and books about it. Hopefully this is neither of those. The point of this account is not to analyze the ethics or the metaphysics of all this. The main goal is to filter that out and focus mainly on the facts. But there is one piece of the commentary that's important enough to include.

You could certainly be forgiven for not remembering

this, but during the height of the speculation, just after the third body. Several media outlets were doing “person on the street” interviews, getting different viewpoints. Once of them got a comment from an older woman. She looked tired and like she was giving a comment to be polite and not because she had a strong opinion. The reporter asked her, “Do you think they’re moral, these murders?” The old woman gave a long sigh. Then she said, “Is this the rain moral?” You can hear the reporter laugh a little before asking, “The rain?”

The old lady shrugged, “People say ‘Right as rain,’ but is the rain right?” The reporter asked, “What does that have to do with all the bodies though?”

The old lady said, “Do you know what the rain is?” The reporter laughed again, “The rain?” he said, “I mean, doesn’t everybody know what the rain is?”

It’s easy to miss, but a little bit of sparkle came into the old lady’s eye. She said, “Everybody can see when it’s raining, but that doesn’t mean that they know what the rain is. You see, the rain is what happens when there’s too much water in the air. It builds and builds until the world can’t take it anymore, so the sky has to toss it back down on us. And you know what happens to everyone then?” The reporter asked, “What happens?” The lady leaned in, “We all get

wet,” and then she just walked off. The interview didn’t necessarily make a huge splash, but it did seem to capture something about the moment. It was refreshing in a way. Almost enough to make you say, “Hallelujah.”//

About the Author

Zeke Jarvis is a Professor of English at Eureka College. His work has appeared in Moon City Review, Posit, and KNOCK, among other places. His books include, *So Anyway...*, *In A Family Way*, *The Three of Them*, and *Antisocial Norms*. His website is zekedotjarvis.wordpress.com





INTO THE JUNGLE

by Erica Ferencik

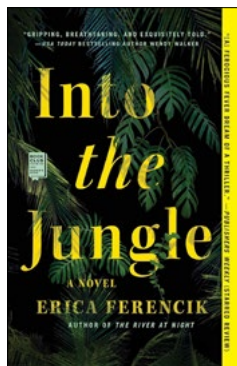
REVIEW BY JILL HEDGECOCK,
author of *Between Shadow's Eyes* and *Rhino in the Room*

www.jillhedgecock.com

“Into the Jungle” (Gallery/Scout Press, 2019, paperback, 352 pages, \$10.06) by Erica Ferencik is a literary thriller that will keep readers turning the pages.

Nineteen-year-old Lily Bushwold is a survivor. She fled her latest foster home to take a job in Bolivia. When her teaching post falls through, Lily remains adrift in Cochabamba, living on stolen bananas until she meets handsome Omar. Omar is a hunter from an indigenous tribe who wants to learn English so he can become a jungle guide in the tourist industry. When Lily agrees to teach him, the two become lovers. But when Omar’s nephew is killed by a jaguar, his family asks him to return to his remote home deep in the jungle.

Omar thinks Lily will not adapt to the rigors of living in the rainforest. But spunky Lily, who has lived as a wild child most of her life, believes she has what it takes to



assimilate into an undeveloped jungle community. She shrugs off that there is no electricity, no running water, and no roads. Lily insists on taking the perilous flight into the remote village and Omar acquiesces.

Lily gets her first wake-up call when, upon arrival, she discovers tarantulas have invaded her hut. To make matters worse, the inhabitants of Omar's tribal village of Ayachero are less than welcoming. Even after a few of the residents warm to her, Lily soon discovers how hard and dangerous daily life in the rainforest can be. The novel does not back away from difficult topics, such as the vulnerability of indigenous women when the men are off hunting, or the problems caused by greedy Westerners intent on extracting natural resources that are critical for the continued existence of the indigenous residents.

Lily and Omar are both complex characters, but For God's Sake, a Tatinga tribesman, and the poachers, Carlos and Dutchie, are memorable additions to the story. For God's Sake is torn between loyalty to his native tribe despite that they have shunned him, and the Ayachero people who employ him as a river driver. For God's Sake's adorable habit of concluding his statements with "over" is sure to endear readers to him. Carlos and Dutchie represent all that is wrong with people who lack a

conscience and who view money as more important than morality.

“Into the Jungle” is more than a coming-of-age thriller set in an exotic world. The novel takes a hard look at the impact of colonialism on native tribes.

Erica Ferencik is the award-winning author of two other thrillers, “The River at Night” and “Girl in Ice” which “The New York Times Book Review” declared hauntingly beautiful. Her work has appeared in “Salon” and “The Boston Globe”, as well as on National Public Radio.

ABOUT JILL HEDGECK

Jill Hedgecock is a local author of a Doberman trilogy series: “Between Shadow’s Eyes” (Book 1) and “From Shadow’s Perspective (Book 2) and “In Shadow’s Reflection”. (Book 3). Her books are available on amazon.com and www.jillhedgecock.com

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Starting March we will be expanding the website to have a steady stream of stories, poems, articles and more, rather than simply once a month. This will give authors added exposure by allowing them to stand out on their own.

Existing publications will remain available.

See you in March!

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