

B&P

Books 'N Pieces Magazine

MAY 2024

**FREE
TO READ**

IN THIS ISSUE:

Nancy Lane

Julian Font

Marjorie Brody

Michael Barrington

Denice Penrose

Roly Andrews

Emil Rem

Happenings

Book Reviews

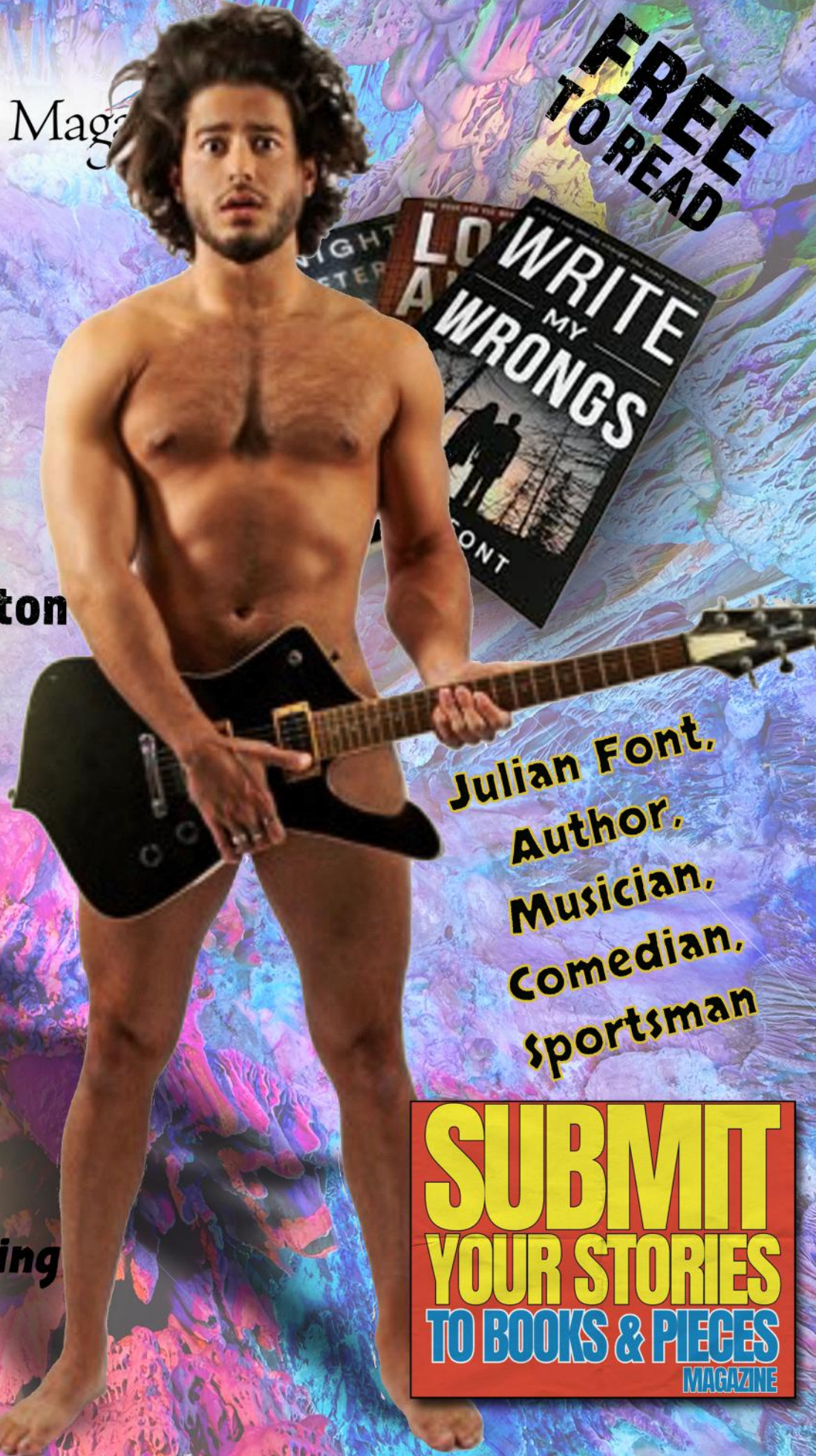
Poetry

Artwork

Foolproof Cooking

Take A Poll

and more....



**Julian Font,
Author,
Musician,
Comedian,
sportsman**

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

www.BooksNPieces.com

Backgroundimage
Maciejbledowski/Envato.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

May 2024

INTERVIEW WITH: °JULIAN FONT WRITER, MUSICIAN and more

WRITTEN BY: °NANCY LANE °MARJORIE BRODY

°MICHAEL BARRINGTON °DENICE PENROSE

°ROLY ANDREWS °EMIL REM °WILLIAM

GENSBURGER °JILL HEDGECOCK

° POETRY °ARTWORK °FOOLPROOF

COOKING FOR WRITERS & ARTISTS

°B&P TAKE-A-POLL °FACTS. & more...



Books & Pieces Magazine is published monthly by William Gensburger as an extension of the website www.BooksNPieces.com . All story rights remain with the authors.

Direct questions to editor@BooksNPieces.com

In this publication, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents of short stories are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental, unless intended by the author..

Story images: DEEPAI, ARVIN or DAL-E2 unless otherwise stated.

©2024 William Gensburger. All rights reserved



INKDROPS

Welcome to the May 2024 issue of Books & Pieces Magazine. This issue is available as a PDF and on our Heyzine platform where you can read it like a magazine, or download it. If you need an epub version for your Kindle or eBook reader, please email editor@booksnpieces.com and one will be provided.

This issue expands on our content to include artwork, editorials, poetry, music (which you can click to download or watch on our flip-page edition,) easy cooking for writers and artists with a foolproof dinner that takes ten minutes to prepare, odd facts of interest, and even a poll.

We do accept advertising (would you like to advertise here or on the website?), although you will notice that no one is nagging you. As an advertising-supported publication, I hope that if you know anyone who could advertise here please share this with them. Our ad rates are very low and include designs.

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

All the best,

William Gensburger

FACT

#

You call this a hashtag, but it really has a name. It is called an
OCTOTHORPE.



oc·to·thorp

/'äktə, THôrp/

noun

noun: **octothorpe**

another term for the pound sign (#).

AFTER THE DANCE

A Short Story by NANCY LANE

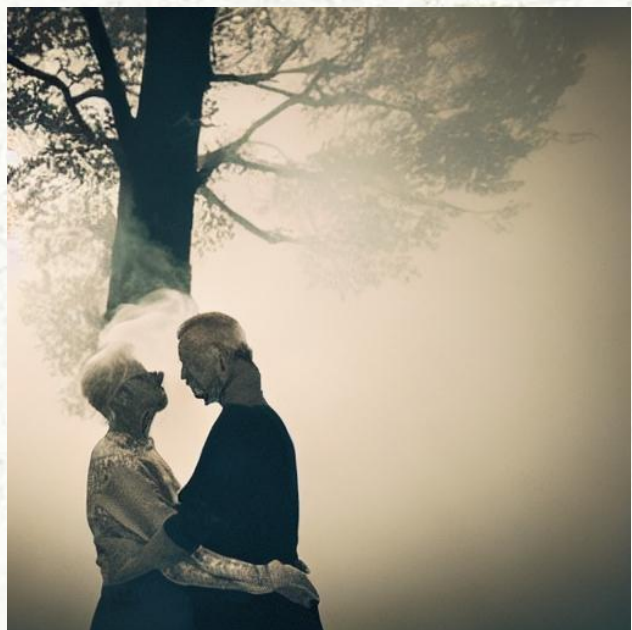
“ The once red leaf, the last of its clan, that dances as often as dance it can.”

~Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Three weeks after the last dinner/dance at the Elks Lodge

Mae pulled a pen from the junk drawer by the refrigerator and squinted at the calendar affixed by magnet to the refrigerator door. She glanced at the wall clock—11:17 p.m. When Lou joined the Elks Lodge, he told Mae the traditional meaning of 11 p.m., the time when the great heart of Elkdom swells and throbs. She imagined a herd of elk in Heaven, all with angel wings, and Lou astride the lead elk.

She crossed off days on the calendar around this same time each evening. She had marked off twelve days. Only twelve—time was going by so slowly. That made her think of words sung by Bobby Hatfield, and that reminded her of their last night at the Elks Lodge. She and Lou had sat at a table with an engaged couple. The fiancée asked Lou whether Unchained Melody was a wedding song or a funeral song.



“It’s tender and sweet and about love and loss,” Lou said. “You could make an argument either way. You two will find your perfect forever song. We did.” He winked at Mae.

Mae took the groom-to-be’s slight smile to mean Lou’s answer jibed with his reluctance to embrace his bride-to-be’s

suggested wedding song. Lou—the quintessential diplomat!

Mae opened the refrigerator, a habit at this time of night because she had routinely poured Lou a glass of milk before bedtime. This night, the glaring light of the refrigerator bulb illuminated Bobby Hatfield wearing a pink sports coat. He was only a few inches tall and sat atop a Twinkie Lou had left on a plate two weeks earlier—two days before 9-1-1, the wail of an ambulance over Mae’s screams, and a flatline on the ER monitor. The hallucination didn’t shock her, perhaps because other shocks had oversaturated her brain. She stared at the crooner, who shrugged his shoulders with arms out. She agreed—what now? Her dance with Lou now ended, she sat on the stage of life, like Bobby sitting atop the shriveled Twinkie, a bright light glaring on her one-woman show—no rehearsals, no script, no choreography, no partner. Guilt hounded her to the bedroom. She

climbed into bed, still wearing her housecoat, and sobbed for hours. She should have prepared herself.

The phone rang early. She ignored it. She answered when it rang later.

“Hi, Celeste.” She managed a congenial voice and a lie. “Thanks anyway, but I have relatives staying with me to help out. I appreciate your concern. Yes, I will. Thank you.” When relatives called, she switched the lie: “My good friends from church are staying with me to help out.” She didn’t want anyone there but Lou. At the funeral, too many offered inane platitudes: he’s in a better place; you’re strong, you’ll get through this. The worst-time heals all. They wanted her to think about the future, but she couldn’t think ahead, only back.

The last dinner/dance at the Elks Lodge, three weeks earlier

Outside the building, wind-driven rain pelted those hurrying from the parking lot toward the entrance doors. Inside, members and guests swayed on the parquet dance floor to canned sixties and seventies music piped from a backroom to speakers hanging from the tiled ceiling of the Elks Lodge Hall, built in the fifties and renovated minimally in the intervening decades. White-aproned staff cleared the last dessert plates from plastic tablecloths. The monthly prime rib dinner and dance always drew a near-capacity crowd comprised mainly of senior citizens.

Mae had giggled when Lou forked his dinner entrée in a mocking way, swinging a forkful toward his mouth and breaking into an exaggerated grin. She was ready for a pleasurable evening. They hadn't been on a "date" for over two months. Lou's hospitalization and recovery had scared Mae. When she made the dinner reservation for the evening, she ordered two vegetarian plates. He complained. She reminded him their heart-healthy dinner was just a prelude to an evening of dance—doctor's orders: no red meat, but occasional moderate exercise.

The playlist of twenty-five songs never varied. Lou had written down the titles and carried the playlist in his pocket. She watched each time Lou would sneak a peek and then announce the next three songs to newcomers at the table. Mae also knew the playlist, at least when her favorite, Marvin Gaye's *After the Dance*, would play next. She'd tap Lou's arm and skip to the dance floor ahead of him.

On this overdue date night at the Elks Lodge, Mae's mind drifted back to the night they met in 1976 at a trendy nightclub and danced to this song. She had felt awkward in this stranger's arms but didn't want the dance to end. It played on and seemed to bend time—as if forever could start with a Marvin Gaye song. Lou, this handsome young man, shifted his body and, bending forward, brought his lips close to her ear. Surprise—she heard his deep voice whispering some of the lyrics to her, lyrics suggesting they should get together after the dance. After she had heard those words repeatedly, the song

ended and she felt her face flush. She knew his intentions, and hers too. Together after the dance that night and continuing almost fifty years—her forever started with her first dance in Lou's arms.

At the Elks Lodge dinner/dances, the 1965 recording of Unchained Melody played twice—the first song and the last, the only song repeated in the list and for some a cue to bid good-night to friends and head to the coatrack before sauntering to the exit doors. Lou and Mae, never in a hurry to claim their wraps and scurry to the parking lot, savored the last dance before leaving. On that brisk evening, Mae enjoyed the feel of Lou's warm hand as they stepped carefully over slippery downed leaves. After the dance that night, laughter and well wishes from other dancing Elks and their partners leaving the hall became a memory from before forever broke in half.

Four weeks after Lou died

Mae had not hallucinated again since Bobby Hatfield shrugged in the refrigerator, and there were other things she had not done, such as clean out the refrigerator. The stale Twinkie and sour milk remained. She had not shopped for groceries or eaten out. She heated instant oatmeal in the microwave twice a day and consumed coffee hour after hour. She passed her time the way a prisoner might, crossing out days on the calendar. Every night she went to bed in her housecoat, with its coffee stain and drip of crusted oatmeal. She had not washed it or done any laundry in the last twenty-eight days.



Rain pelted against the skylight in the vaulted ceiling of the master bedroom, a surprise birthday gift Lou had installed twenty-seven years earlier while she was out of town at a reunion. This night she awoke startled. She did not see it but felt a face looking at her. Her swollen eyes scanned the bedroom. The window blinds were closed. Rolling raindrops on the skylight merged and trickled in streams. Behind the streams, a friendly face emerged—the man in the moon—filling the skylight, edge to edge, with soft light. Dark splotches on the heavenly orb formed the eyes, nose, and open mouth. Could she discern any heavenly message from this delightful surprise? The face watching her gave her a strange sense of Lou's presence and reminded her his gift persisted. Even now, after their life's dance together had ended, she still felt his love.

A shaft of light fell across the free-standing mirror in the corner of the bedroom. Mae slipped out of bed and turned on the nightstand lamp. The moonlight faded from the skylight and, in the dim lamplight, she caught her reflection in the mirror. Even in the soiled housecoat, she looked younger, like a past version of herself. She

picked up her phone from the nightstand and turned on her one-song playlist. As she listened, she glided to Lou's side of the walk-in closet. She took down his tweed blazer and Trilby hat and breathed in the scent of Lou.

When she put on the coat and hat, they felt so good—why hadn't she done so before? She watched herself in the mirror, dancing, arms up and stepping as if following Lou's lead. The song played again and again. Gaye sang, but she heard Lou's deep voice. After that first dance with Lou years earlier, she knew her intentions, but now she didn't.

She paused the music and pulled a clean t-shirt of Lou's from the dresser. She watched herself in the mirror as she replaced her housecoat with a nightshirt. Take it slow, she told herself—perhaps three new intentions each day, little ones, rewarded by a dance in the mirror at 11 p.m.

The next day, she cleaned out the refrigerator, bought groceries, got a book from the library about coping with grief, and danced before going to bed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nancy Lane earned a B.A. degree with a major in Mathematics and a minor in English from UCLA and began writing short stories after years of industry-

related writing and teaching. Her stories have been published in many online publications and in the print anthology, “The Best of Fiction on the Web.”

Her story collection, “Pretty Chrysanthemum and Other Stories,” was published by Open Books Publishing in 2020. Nancy teaches a writing class at public libraries and has also taught writing at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Southern Oregon University.

Visit Nancy’s website at <https://nancylanewriter.com> .

THE MOST EXPENSIVE FOUNTAIN PEN IN THE WORLD

The Fulgor Nocturnus By Tibaldi



The most expensive pen in the world is the Fulgor Nocturnus by Tibaldi which sold for \$8 million dollars at auction.

In Latin the name Fulgor Nocturnus means “night glow.”

The pen consists of 123 Rubies and 945 Black Diamonds on a Gold case.

Truly an artistic writing instrument. Learn more about this pen at <https://goldspot.com/blogs/magazine/most-expensive-pens-pens-in-the-world> .

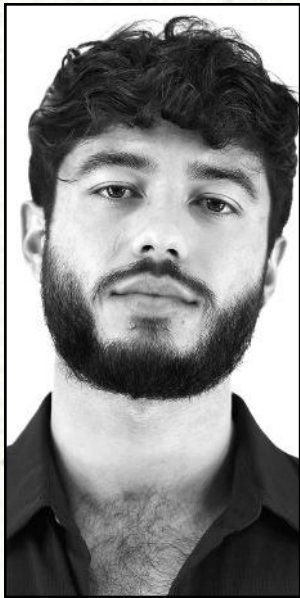
For other luxury fountain pens visit: <https://www.executivepensdirect.com/en-us/blogs/fun-stuff/the-ten-most-expensive-pens-in-the-world>

I always use fountain pens, although my budget is far more modest. The pen is elegant and the writing style gets formed as you use it, almost as if the pen learns from you.

You can find a variety of fountain pens to fit your budget [HERE](#). And if you need help learning how to use it properly—you do not use it like. ballpoint pen—you can click [HERE](#) for instructions.

AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIAN FONT

AUTHOR, MUSICIAN, SPORTSMAN, COMEDIAN AND MORE...



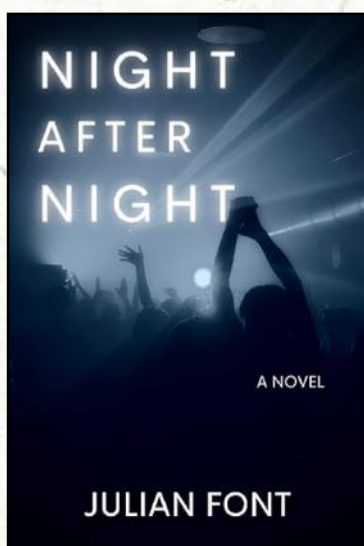
Julian Font, by his own admission, is a thrill-seeking author with a passion for living life through the eyes of his characters. While growing up composing music, Julian became intrigued by the simple pleasures that come with the pursuit of fame and romance, which has heavily influenced his work as an author.

Julian dives into fiction writing headfirst, creating thrilling and emotional experiences in his novels, "NIGHT AFTER NIGHT," "WRITE MY WRONGS," and his latest work, a psychological thriller novel called "LOOK AWAY: The Book for the Morbidly Curious," that dives into the captivating realm of how a corrupted television network creates a TV show that exposes the darker side of humanity. It's a gripping exploration of the intersection between media manipulation and the morbid human psyche, offering a unique perspective on the consequences of exposing the hidden shadows within the book's fictional society.

Q: Where are you from? Family background?

A: While I was born in Irvine, California, I'm half Cuban, half Puerto Rican. Both sets of my grandparents dropped everything to come to America to live a better life and thanks to the sacrifices made by them and my parents, I'm proud to say I'm a Cubarican born and raised in the United States!

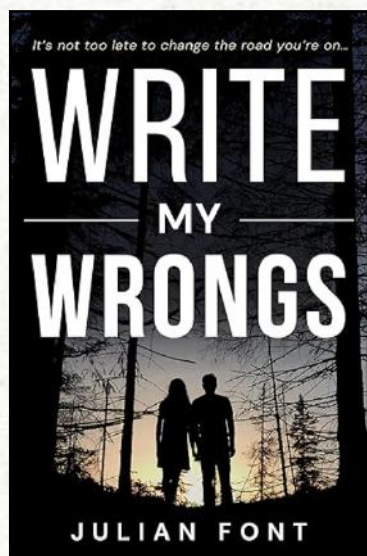
Q: How and when did you start with writing and music?



In this fast-paced emotional fiction novel, two brothers are exposed to the corruption behind the *Hollywood scene*...
[CLICK COVER FOR MORE](#)

A: As a child, I spent a lot of time in my room writing fan fiction in journals. If I didn't like the endings of movies, video game storylines, or TV shows, I found myself rewriting the endings the way I wanted to. Eventually, that turned into writing original stories.

In 2020, I took the leap by releasing my debut novel, "Night After Night," and I haven't lifted the pen from the page since. As far as music goes, I always sang in the car with Mom and Dad. It became a creative outlet in my teenage years which then led to the inspiration of a few albums and my second novel, "Write My Wrongs."



When Eren and Harlow get the opportunity to write an album together for a mysterious artist, their polar-opposite worlds will collide. Hearts will be tested. Leaps will be taken. Wrongs will be written. [CLICK COVER FOR MORE](#)

Q: You're not afraid to take chances and have said as much. Your interest range is also quite diverse, from writing to music, sports, and comedy. Tell us a little about how you came to develop that attitude.

A: I live with one fear and that's not making the most of this one life I get to live. If something interests me, I have no choice but to experience it. Also, the beauty in taking chances on a diverse range of interests is that it inspires the characters I write, which in turn, inspires me to experience even more.

Q: What's the worst part of the writing process for you?

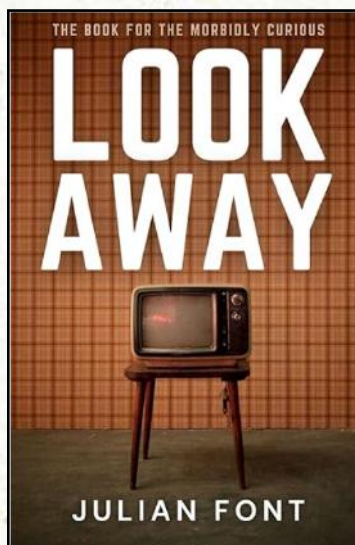
A: Editing... I'm a stickler for even the smallest grammar mistakes and I find myself wanting to read my manuscripts over and over again before I pass it along.

Q: You wrote two romance novels—which readers seemed to enjoy and one thriller. Why the change of genre?

A: I love romance and I will continue to write it, but the dark time I was going through last year just pulled the thriller right out of me. A thriller novel was never in my scope, which is the beautiful part about being able to funnel my emotions into my work. It was the

right time for me to change genres, and now I feel romance pulling at me once more.

Q: What's a typical day like for you and what's your creative process like?



"DEATH IS IN THE BUILDING!" the show host announces. "And it's prepared to take the life of tonight's winner in exchange for bettering the lives of others." [CLICK COVER FOR MORE](#)

A: Oh, I LOVE a routine. My typical day looks like the following. The gym at 5:50 am, then do technical writing (meeting a specific word count) until lunch, then I head to a coffee shop for some afternoon creative writing (writing/storyboarding/world building), then dinner and spending time with family or friends. I'll repeat all of that the next day no matter what!

Q: What's your end goal?

A: My goal is to turn the books I continue to write into films and TV shows that I'll eventually act in. Life is short and not only do I have too many stories to tell, but I want to experience them for myself.

Q: You have almost 70K followers on TikTok, and many on other social platforms as well. How did you amass such a following and which is your favorite platform and why?

A: I'm a big advocate for the idea that followers are a reflection of the influencer. As a literary influencer, I believe my passion for writing and reading was made transparent to people who share those passions. That being said, as I continue to portray my writing and love for storytelling, I hope that my followers feel the same way and find value in what I put out! My favorite platform tends to fluctuate, but I think my favorite platform to make content for is YouTube while my favorite platform to engage on is Instagram.

Q: Are you married, or single? And how do you feel that influences your ability to produce the variety of work you have?

A: I'm single! I would say some of my greatest work has been influenced by previous relationships, which I value. The highs, the lows, and everything in between... I pull inspiration from all of my relationships in my life. If you touch a part of my heart, you'll inspire a page in my book... that's a promise.

Q: What was the best day in your life thus far?

A: My best day was holding the first copy of my debut novel, "Night After Night." That's when I realized I'll forever be in the writing game. There's nothing like holding the world you created in the palm of your hand for the first time.

Q: What was the worst day?

A: I've pondered this question and thankfully the worst day doesn't come to mind. I take all of my hardships and struggles as life lessons. I fail forward. And I keep my chin up regardless of what life throws my way because there's no good plot without conflict.

Q: Any message for your readers?



A: I would like my readers to know that I'm forever grateful for them. They bring my stories to life, they give my characters heartbeats. If you enjoy my books, know that I have many more coming your way and big plans for both myself and my readers when it comes to getting them involved in film adaptations. Also, I'm currently working on a new romance that is going to revolutionize the subgenre it's in. No spoilers, but I'm excited to show the world what's been weighing on my heart and mind lately.

You can find Julian Font's books on Amazon [HERE](#), and on his social media outlets:

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

TikTok: <https://www.tiktok.com/@julianfont.author>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/julianfont.author/>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOot7zH-zh6qeJXxl4c-9CQ>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/julianfont.author>

Music:

Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/julianfont>

Listen to his song 'Somebody' [HERE](#).

Click [HERE](#) to watch one of Julian's YouTube video

GOTCHA

A NOVELLA

by MARJORIE BRODY

GEORGE

I didn't want my wife murdered for real—not honest-to-goodness-dead—when I joked about paying the guy in the bar fifty grand to knock her off, but as the cold rain rips against my faux leather overcoat and I stand at her grave site with her two grown kids from her first marriage, their spouses, and three gawky, squirming grandchildren, and the guy from the bar pokes his head from behind the crowd of grievers to give me a private salute with a gloved hand, I know I'm in trouble.

The warm breath I blow onto my bare, frozen palms sends a puff of steam billowing up my cheeks, fogging my eyeglasses, blocking my view of the inevitable. The guy wants to be paid, but where the hell can I get fifty grand? And why should I pay him? It's not like I solicited him to do it. I was just letting off steam, for Christ's sake. Just venting to a stranger who didn't know my wife. Who would sigh and say, yeah, you've been treated wrong, and then buy me a drink to ease my pain?

I want to jump into the hole dug for Alma, pull the dung-colored heap of earth next to it right over me, and burrow to China. The

words from a Laurel and Hardy late-night rerun sound in my ear, “What a fine mess you’ve got us into this time.”

Hiring someone to kill your spouse, must earn a whole lot of prison time. A shudder skitters up my spine, across my shoulders. To be locked away. With murderers. Real murderers. The shudder chases goosebumps down my arms, and rattles my nerves. Some future. Especially when I wasn’t serious about killing Alma. I swear, I didn’t mean it! We’d had this stupid argument, Alma and me, and I went to this bar . . . I need to stay focused. Fifty Grover Clevelands. That’s what I need. Do they even make Clevelands, anymore?

I make a discreet call after the funeral. Find out I can’t sell the house. Texas is a community property state, but the house belonged to Alma before we married and her older child, Zack, says his mother’s home is staying in the family. Told me he could be generous—generous!—and let me live in the house if I pay him and his sister an exorbitantly high rental rate. “Keep paying,” he said, “and you can stay there as long as you live.”—This may not be long if the guy from the bar doesn’t get his money.

“Mom loved you,” Zack says, “and we won’t be cruel.”

Right.

Alma’s younger child, Claire, conceded to her brother about renting to me, but only after insisting her mother would’ve wanted the house sold and the profit invested in an education fund for the

grandkids' college—split equally between the three grandchildren. (Naturally, Claire's the parent of two of those three grandkids.)

I'm eager for Alma's brood to return to their respective states of residence, but Claire's taking forever to go through her mother's possessions: clothes, shoes and handbags, jewelry. She says it'll be easier on me not to have to sort that stuff.

She promises to give Zack's wife the string of pearls I bought Alma as a wedding gift and a few other "trinkets" that have less sentimental value to her. The important items, she asserts, belong to the biological daughter.

"And Zack?" Zack's wife asks. "And Zack's son? What personal belongings does he get?"

Claire sets aside Alma's iPad for Zack's son. The gilded-framed original of Wassily Kandinsky's *Upwards* hung over our bed for Zack. The frame's worth more than the artistic extravagance inside it that Alma bought herself on her last birthday.

Our good china gets packed up for Zack's wife. As Claire explains, "She's been Mother's daughter-in-law far longer than you've been Mother's husband. Surely you can't object." Claire holds a plate up to the light and watches her fingers wiggle behind it. "Besides, you won't need these. I'm sure you won't be entertaining with Mother so recently—so prematurely—ripped from our hearts."

The statement sounds like a warning: Don't celebrate, you-who-arranged-our mother's-murder. Not that I'm planning to throw a

fancy party, but as I watch the dish crates leave the house, I feel plundered. Please, believe me, I want to shout, I didn't want the guy to really kill your mother.

I pretend the police theory is the unfortunate truth. Alma was killed in a tragic car accident. Pure and simple. Statistics do say most automobile accidents occur near home, I tell myself. It could happen. It did happen.

Three days after the funeral, I sit in Alma's sewing room—on the antique chair she painstakingly covered with a hand-stitched petit point scene of hunters on horses chasing the hounds chasing the fox—and wail.

The thunderburst of sobs soaks the front of my shirt. Claire turns from the treasures she is searching for in the closet and makes a surprisingly humane gesture—she leaves her search-for-goodies forage, walks over to me and places a cool hand on my shoulder, patting it three times.

I suck in uneven breaths, let this rare comfort seep through my thin shirt and circle around my chest.

The next day, Alma's attorney authenticates the will her kids present to him. The whole lawyer office scene freaks me out, dries up all the moisture in my mouth, makes it hard to swallow, no less breathe. The legalistic mumbo-jumbo makes about as much sense to me as reading a Russian classic in braille. The lawyer's bottom line: Whatever Alma owned before we married belongs to her two

children, except for a hefty endowment to the church and a few grand to the Independent-Women-Speak-Their-Mind group Alma belonged to since her sorority days at Vanderbilt. Whatever we accumulated together is now mine—but that’s not much.

“What about the bills?” I ask when I find my voice. Her stack of bills is higher than her stack of sympathy cards. “Without her income—Alma earned five times more than me—I’m gonna need to tap into savings.” Zack and Claire have left for the airport by this time, so I feel free to admit this to the attorney.

“The bank will freeze assets until after probate,” he says, “not that it’ll make a difference to you, George.” He expounds. Seems Alma withdrew a huge sum of money the week before she was killed—I mean, was in the accident.

I’m letting that fact sink in, concentrating on the tha-thumping in my chest, and I miss his next words. I think I hear him say she also borrowed from her insurance policy to provide capital for Zack’s fledgling computer company. My heart’s walloping so hard now, I can’t even hear myself ask, “What do you mean?”

His mouth moves in slow motion, like a film strip set at the wrong speed. I’m still hearing nothing, then the film slips into gear. Mouth and words blare in sync, “So the insurance payout—when the organizational bureaucracy of Chase and Hatter Financial Investors gets around to cutting a death benefit check—will be enough to pay for the clergy’s honorarium for speaking at the funeral.”

Not enough for her casket.

Not enough for funeral parlor expenses.

Not enough to save my life.

I float to the top of the floor lamp and sit on the pewter shade watching myself squirm on the padded chair in front of the lawyer's desk. I see myself nodding. See myself lean over to sign the papers the lawyer pushes across the desk. See myself stand and walk to the door. It is only when the attorney shakes my hand that I leap back into my body and say, "Thank you. Goodbye."

I drive myself to Freida's Bar for a stiff one.

Sam, the bartender, puts my first shot on the house. "Cause you look like shit."

He puts my second shot on the house. "Out of respect for a good patron who's lost his one and only"

"One and only?" My words slide off each other like gin over ice. "Shall I count all I've lost?"

It hits me all of a sudden, he means my one and only Alma and that he was serving drinks the night I made that wisecrack about knocking her off. I quickly add, "There isn't even a word to describe what my lovely Alma meant to me." I put two doubles on my tab and hurry them down, drowning my gut. Running a tab? Nothing like adding fuel to the fire.

I clank the empty second glass on the bar and a sinewy, bare arm plops another drink in front of me. My courage shimmies down the bar stool and hides under my shoes. It's him.

"Sorry about your missus," he says, pushing the drink closer to me.

I raise my head, force myself to look into wide, mirror-black eyes. His face, rough as cement and as pockmarked, has a gray tone under an artificial tan. Spooks me out.

"Saw you at the funeral," I say.

"Wanted to pay my respects." He nods to the businessman sitting to my right. The suit vacates his stool and moves two spaces over.

"I didn't mean it, you know."

His eyebrows lift in an unvoiced question. He's crazy if he thinks I'll be more specific, and spell out the details. He might be taping me—for his security.

My throat goes as dry as Alma's kisses. I have to swig the whiskey before I say, "I can't pay you." My heart pounds like a jackhammer on speed. I flatten my palms on the bar to keep him from seeing my shakes.

The corners of his lips extend out. Not up or down. Just elongate. "You're covered for now, man, what with your wife just . . . dying and all."

The timber in his voice prickles my skin. "I could come up with ten. Maybe I could get you ten."

"What do you take me for, George? It is George, isn't it?"

I don't want to answer, but it's as if he's pulling strings and my wooden head nods. Someone's shoveling mounds of coal into my internal furnace. A river of sweat runs down my back, and soaks my underarms. A curtain of sweat forms over my forehead, runs into my eyes. The salt burns. Droplets reach the corner of my lips. My tongue jabs them like a frog thrusting for flies.

"I feel your pain, George." He sits on the vacated stool and downs the drink in front of him.

A rumbling in my stomach grows, sloshes alcohol against its walls, mushrooms up like a monster from the depths. I'm Hell-fire hot, yet I shiver. The drink. He poisoned me!

"Next time," he says. "You—"

The kettledrum thrashing in my ears drowns out his words.

I see his hand release his tumbler, lift off the bar, and reach upward toward my neck. The motion prolongs time. Seconds push on, slow as growing toenails. Before he can strangle me right there and then, I upchuck all over him.

* * *

I'm not sure who drove me home and only vaguely remember lying in the bed of a pickup. I strip and stand under the shower, still shaking. I lean forward and let the water run over the back of my neck, the neck my puking preserved.

Holy shit. I punch the faucet off, dry and put on a robe.

The bill the bartender gave me to cover clean-up and loss of patrons now sits atop the how-the-hell-will-I-pay-for-this mountain of expenses on the credenza. But with this bill, it just may be worth the humiliation my stomach caused. The guy in the bar, Alma's hitman, didn't kill me.

I double-check the lock on the front door and peek out the drapes to scan the street. My Kia is parked in the driveway. I don't know how it got here or where the keys are. It's too late to check it out. I stand still listening for movement outside, strange noises inside. When I'm satisfied I'm safe, I enter the kitchen and put on a pot of water for tea. My stomach growls and I realize I'm starving. Haven't had anything to eat all day. Vomiting that poison must've cleaned out my gut. The inside retching ache has been replaced by ravenous hunger.

I eat three bologna and Swiss sandwiches. Drink three cups of tea with milk and sugar, a preference Alma never understood. "Real men drink coffee. Black," she'd say. It's a relief to finally have the kind of hot beverage I like in my own home. At least, the house I've lived in for the last seven years. Before Alma died, I thought of this place as my home. Somehow thinking of it as her kids' property, just a house I'm renting . . . Well, my pride in the place evaporates like steam from the teapot.

I take a fourth cup of tea down to the basement. Put a tiny bean pillow into the divot of the sofa bed where a renegade spring jabs my

back whenever I roll over. When Zack was here, I told him it was too soon to sleep in the bed where Alma and I made love. He must have told Claire what I said because she told me to try new bed sheets. What I didn't say was I'd been sleeping in the basement for close to six months. Alma couldn't get her beauty sleep when I snored.

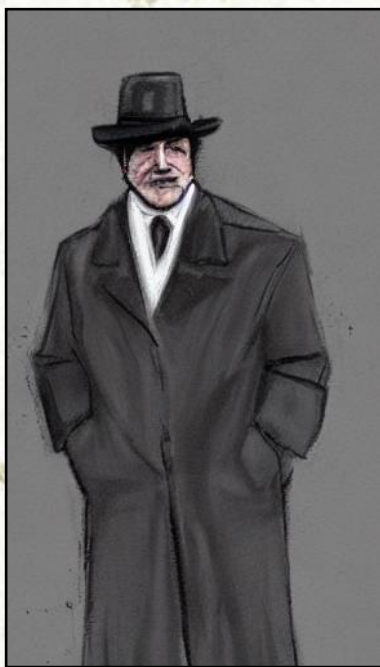
MURDOCK

"You don't think it was an accident, do you?" a female caller asks recently-promoted-to- detective Murdock.

"Excuse me?" Murdock wipes his mouth with the back of his fist and the granulated sugar from his strawberry jelly donut coats his hand. "What are you talking about, ma'am?" He washes the remnants of donut dough down his throat with a gulp of cold coffee.

"The accident on the Old Brewery Road. The woman who supposedly lost control of her car and crashed."

Murdock glances at caller ID. Unlisted number. Probably a cell. His gaze travels to the clock on the wall. Another fifty-seven seconds and he'll be able to start a trace. "You see it happen? Know something we don't?" he asks, taking his time with the words.



His second jelly donut calls his name, loud and impatient. He wets an index finger with his tongue and runs a line across the powdered sugar, sticks the finger between his lips, and sucks it clean. “You some clown yanking my chain?”

“Only if you have a chain to yank.”

His eyes shoot to the clock. “Very funny.”

“She was killed. Murdered.”

“How would you know that, ma’am?” He urges the second hand forward.

“Check out the husband, Detective Murdock.”

Murdock’s spine shrivels. She knows his name, his new rank.

Thirty-three seconds to trace.

Murdock scans the usual morning chaos of the control room. Desks piled with files. Phone calls and interviews. Pacing colleagues.

Thirty-one seconds.

“You have information to support your claim?” he asks.

“That’s your job. It’s called doing a proper investigation. And you better get crackin’. Chief Harriman won’t be happy if you botch up your first assignment.”

The donut in Murdock’s belly knots into a ball of lard and anchors him to the metal seat of his desk chair.

“I already tipped off the chief.” The woman’s words cut through him like a chainsaw.

Fifteen seconds.

She's bluffing. "It was an accident," Murdock says.

"Right," the woman answers. "As much of an accident as the strawberry jelly you've got on your shirt."

Murdock glances down at his shirt. A little wrinkled, but no strawberry stain.

"Gotcha," the woman says before she hangs up.

Murdock jerks up his head. Sweeps his eyes over the room. Sees nothing unusual. His pulse thrums, urging him into action, but he leans back in his chair, lowers his shoulders and chuckles. A kid's game. He fell for a kid's game. His smile grows in admiration. The caller is a regular prankster. Could be any one of the two dozen women who work at the station and have the hots for him. He shakes his head and tries to place the voice. But then he sees Chief Harriman, forehead as lined as a roadmap of New Jersey, marching straight at him.

Murdock's theory about an office prank disintegrates as fast as his smile. He scoots the donut box with the awaiting pastry into the trash and sits erect as the caller's words replay in his head, Chief Harriman won't be happy if you botch up your first assignment. He swallows hard and braces for the confirmation: his little accident report is in serious trouble.

GEORGE

I can't decide if it's the four cups of tea or my dream about the hitman that beat up my bladder during the night and caused me to piss in the bed. Surely I couldn't sleep so deeply, but then, her kids are gone. Alma's gone. I'm on my own. I strip out of my wet pjs, roll them up in the sheets and drop the bundle into the washing machine—a machine that Alma never used, preferring to send our clothes out to be cleaned. Even my raggedy boxers.

The buzzing of the doorbell upstairs jolts me. I dump some soap into the bin, turn the dial and hurry, naked, up the wooden steps. Déjà vu rushes over me as I peek through the drapes in the living room.

I tighten my sphincter and try not to shit on the carpet.

It's the police. They found out.

MURDOCK

Murdock knocks again, rings the doorbell, and takes a step backward when he notes a ruffling behind the curtain. He's home. He presses the doorbell once more, then hotfoots it around the side of the house, checking windows and doors as he moves.

He passes the Kia in the driveway registered to George Luca—he checked out the plates before approaching the house. There's no fence around the rear of the house, so he's not in trouble for unlawful entry. The backyard blows him away. Transports him to Japan. To a mini Shangri-La. Bonsai trees. Rock structure flowing water into a

pond with orange and black-and-white koi. Marble stepping stones wind through well-tended flowers. To compensate for the momentary distraction—assessing for an ambush, he justifies to himself—Murdock pounds on the rear door, hoping to scare the occupant forward. And, voilà. Just as he dashes back to the front of the house, George opens the door.

The guy looks guilty as shit. He's buttoning his shirt, no shoes or socks. Bedhead disheveled hair. A little soon-to-be screwing someone, Murdock thinks and wishes he had a clone to identify the person currently escaping out the back door. "Morning, Mr. Luca. I'm Detective Murdock."



A quick flap of his wrist shows his badge and ID card. Another twist of the wrist and faster than David Copperfield can make a lion disappear, the leather holder is back in his pocket. He makes a show of looking at his watch. "Sorry to interrupt your . . ." He rolls a hand as if conjuring the right word. Too provocative to say, 'affair.' Too insincere to say, 'business.' His mental thesaurus comes up empty. "I have a few questions to ask. May I come in?"

George's eyes are hubcap-wide. They blink like shorted-out Christmas lights. A nervous peek over his shoulder yields no one.

“You have company?” Murdock asks. He wonders if he should mention George’s open fly. Decides against it, but the glance makes a statement.

George looks down and glows as red in the face as a strawberry in a jelly donut. He does a one-eighty and zips up. His face is still flushed when he does an about-face.

“May I come in?” Murdock repeats.

“I-i-it’s not a good time.” George runs a finger above his upper lip. Runs it back. Then across once again.

“I’m sure you’re busy, Mr. Luca. Here’s my card. Meet me at the precinct in an hour.”

“This about my wife?” Sweat’s dribbling around his hairline.

“Yes, but I don’t mind questioning you at the station.” Murdock turns and struts off the porch. He’s giving Luca to the count of five before the guy calls him back. Murdock smiles as he counts. One. Two.

“Come on in,” Luca yells. “I’ve got nothing to hide.”

GEORGE

The detective scans the room, taking in Alma’s collection of antiques, her art gallery paintings, and her one-of-a-kind cashmere throw rug. At least the officer’s eyes aren’t on me at the moment.

“You an antique dealer,” he asks.

“My wife dabbled in period pieces.” I point to the couch and take a seat in a Jacobean Carolean chair—Alma couldn’t say I didn’t listen to her lectures on furniture. I straighten my back against the ornate, uncomfortable wood.

“Dabbled?” Murdock says. “Don’t think there’s anything here manufactured after the Revolutionary War. Must cost a bundle to have this kind of hobby.”

“My wife had money from her first marriage.” As soon as I say this, I feel the heat rise from my chest to my neck, burning my face. “I didn’t need her money if that’s what you’re thinking. I’ve got a pension.”

“I’m not thinking anything, Mr. Luca. Just gathering the facts.” His eyes land on mine and he’s studying me like a specimen flayed and pinned. I wiggle my bare toes and watch them move. The heat from his glare bores into the top of my head.

“You get a settlement?”

“Settlement? No, we weren’t divorced.”

“An insurance settlement.”

“Uh, no.”

Murdock lifts his eyebrow like he doesn’t believe me.

“There wasn’t any insurance left. Alma borrowed money on the policy—for her son’s start-up business. So, insurance wasn’t an issue.”

“She discuss that with you—her giving the money to her son?”

“No, but what could I say about it anyway? It was her son. She’d do anything for her son—for her children, she has a daughter, too, you know—if they needed something.” I’ve got diarrhea of the mouth, and can’t stop blabbering. “Not that she wouldn’t do anything for me, too. She might’ve been hard to get along with sometimes, but she loved me. Loved me to the end.”

“And did you love her?”

“What kind of question is that? Of course, I did. We’d had seven good years of marriage. We were very happy together.”

“Surely there were rough times. Doesn’t every marriage have rough spots? How’d you handle those, George? May I call you George?”

“We didn’t fight, if that’s what you mean.”

Murdock leans back on the plush William and Mary couch. Places his hands behind his head. “Know anyone who would’ve wanted your wife dead, George?”

His posture seems relaxed, but if his eyes were UV rays, I’d have third-degree burns.

A phlegm ball congeals in my throat and I can’t get it down. I cough. The cough makes my throat spasm. Now I’m coughing like a three-pack-a-day smoker.

Murdock stands, and approaches. “Raise your arms,” he demands.

Oh, God. He’s going to arrest me right now. I bend my arms at the elbows, palms facing front. Still hacking out a cough.

“Up high,” he says. “Reach for the ceiling.”

I do as commanded and my coughing sputters, and calms.

“A little trick my grandma taught me. Expands the lungs.”

I wipe my face with my palms. “I think I’d better lie down.”

Murdock nods. “No problem. Got what I need for now.” He heads for the door, and doesn’t turn around when he adds, “We’ll talk again.”

MURDOCK

“The guy’s guilty as hell,” Murdock tells his desk mate, Barney. “A trail of brake fluid. Minor construction up the road. Easy for a lazy investigator to think a stray stone pierced the brake hose and write up ‘accident.’ Then go home early for dinner. But maybe it wasn’t a stray stone. I’m gonna have forensics do some detail work. Bet he punctured that hose himself.”

“Motive?” Barney files a form in his outbox. “You said there was no insurance payout.”

“Exactly. He’s pissed she gave away money that should go to him. Pissed she held the purse strings in general. Pissed he can’t compete with Husband Number One.”

“I don’t buy it. He had an alibi if I remember correctly. No mechanical history to speak of, so not enough knowledge to tamper with the car. I can’t see Mr. Milktoast sliding under that Caddie to play around with a brake line. And if he doesn’t have his own money, he couldn’t’ve paid for a hit.”

“Could’ve bought a contract on credit, expecting to inherit. Maybe he was skimming money and sockin’ it away. Shit, Barney, I don’t know yet. I just started to investigate.”

“She been dead a week already, ain’t she? And you’re just starting to investigate?”

“Cut me some slack, old man. I just got the tip.”

“Shove it, Murdock.” Barney slams his desk drawer shut, and stands. “I’ve got more experience in this one finger than you have in your puny adolescent brain.” He makes a fist and extends his middle finger. “Old man, shit,” he mutters. “Don’t expect help from me.”

“I wasn’t asking,” Murdock says as Barney stomps away from his desk.

“You should. Chief’s been sniffing around.”

GEORGE

“You need to be there, George. Tomorrow. Two sharp,” Claire tells me over the phone that night. “Gray Madison keeps her appointment times as crisp as the crease in her slacks.”

“What if I have something else to do tomorrow?” I ask. Not that I do, but I could. She think about that?

“Geeooooorge.” She strings out my name like I’m a kid caught being naughty. “Gray Madison is the best antique dealer in the country. She’s got to see Mom’s furniture to set prices for the estate sale.”

My head swirls like I have a hangover and I haven't been to Frieda's Bar for two nights now. "What estate sale?"

"Zack arranged for Mom's things to be sold. There's going to be an estate sale next weekend. Gray set everything up except the prices. That's what she has to do tomorrow. At two sharp."

I'm speechless.

"We're trying to be helpful, George," she says in my silence. "We figure you'll want new things, so you won't have to be around constant reminders of Mother."

"Maybe I want constant reminders." My voice sounds weak even to my own ears.

"Mother would want you to move on."

"By stripping my house—"

"Mother's house."

"I loved your mother." This I assert with authority.

"Yeah, well. Just let Gray Madison inside the house tomorrow at—"

"Two sharp," we say in unison.

MURDOCK

Murdock calls Alma's son in LA, but can only leave a message with Zack's secretary. The Wisconsin daughter answers before the first ring.

"This is Detective First Class Murdock, of the—"

"Oh! I didn't hear the phone ring." Her soft voice carries an accusatory edge. "If you want a donation, Detective, I've already

given to the joint police and fire fund. So if you'll excuse me, I was just going to make a call."

"If you could put off that call for a few moments, ma'am, I'd like to ask you about your mother."

"My mother's d--she . . . she . . . passed away last week."

"Yes, ma'am. That's what I'd like to talk to you about. I'm from the Brewster County Police Department."

Her exhale, staccato and, sad? rattles in his ear.

"You okay, ma'am?"

"Please, I'm Claire. Ma'am was my mother. What can I do for you, Detective?"

He hates interviews over the phone. Limits all that non-verbal communication stuff they taught him at the police academy, but he'd need more evidence--hell, more than the none he has now--to justify flying to Wisconsin on the department's budget to question the deceased's daughter.

"I don't want to alarm you, ma'am--Claire--but did your mother have any enemies? Claire? Are you there?"

"I'm here. You just took me by surprise, that's all."

"How's that?"

"Thinking about Mother having enemies. I mean, she wasn't the easiest person to get along with, but enemies? No, can't say I know of any."

“Do you know if she recently had a fight, a disagreement, a falling out with anyone? Any information you could give us would be helpful.” Another sustained pause, so he asks again, “Claire?”

“Helpful for what?”

“We’re following up on the . . . accident.”

Murdock waits through another staccato exhale.

“Well, now that you mentioned it . . .”

He can taste his excitement on the sweet part of his tongue. He coaxes her with his hand, come on, come on, even though she can’t see him. His head nods with encouragement.

“The week before Mom died, she told me she was going to file for divorce.”

Murdock licks his lips.

“I thought she was just letting off steam.”

“But she used the word divorce?”

“Mother was like that. She’d get hot and steamy about something, blow things out of proportion, then it would blow over.”

Maybe. Maybe not. Murdock had seen plenty of people who announced their intentions before taking action. “Go on.”

“Mother and George had a fight.”

“She say what about?”

“She was too busy cursing him out.”

Even if she physically beat him up, Murdock thought, George couldn't use a self-defense plea. A punctured brake hose meant premeditation.

"But the night she had the accident—earlier that day—I called her and she told me she was going to go away for a while. That she had to get away."

The palm holding the phone itches. Murdock's grandma said an itchy palm meant money coming your way. This could be better than money. Murdock sticks an index finger between the receiver and his palm and scratches. He tries not to let excitement flow into his voice. "What else did she say?"

"It was a short call. She was going to tell George."

"That she was leaving or that she was divorcing him?"

"Both, I guess."

"Did she say when she planned to tell him?"

"No, I caught her at an antique fair, and she was too busy to talk. Mother always had her priorities." The bitterness in the daughter's tone added a silent, "And I wasn't one of them."

Such rancor might detour a less-focused detective, Murdock thought, but even grown kids resented parental rejection. Didn't mean they'd kill their parents. Otherwise, his parents would be long gone.

"Said she was spending money because George was with some woman. As I said, she was too busy to talk to me. The call was short."

Murdock savors the warmth that grows in his belly and enjoys the smile on his lips. “Did your mother mention this woman’s name?”

“I remember it sounded artistic, but . . . no, sorry, I can’t remember—it was such a brief call.”

“How long did your mother know about George’s womanizing?” He wonders if he should’ve said, ‘George and the other woman,’ or even ‘George’s affair.’ Either phrase would’ve been less leading and maybe more professional, but the academy taught him sometimes you have to throw away what you learned in books and trust your gut. He pictures George’s midday rumpled hair, his hastily-dressed appearance, the open zipper, and stops wondering. ‘Womanizing’ hits his gut just right.

“I have no idea, Detective.” The bite in the word “detective” lets him know she thinks he should find out for himself. “It’s not something she would publicize. Mother was a proud woman.”

“Claire?” He lowers the volume on his voice, going for a sympathetic tone. “Do you know of anyone who would want your mother murdered?”

Her voice hitches and he can almost feel the sharp suction of her inhale. He curses himself as he waits. He should’ve at least tried to arrange a Skype interview, so he could see if she was crying. His palm itches again. This time he switches the phone to his other hand and rubs the offending skin against his pants leg.

“I’m sorry, Claire. I needed to ask,” he says. God, he’d hate it if he made her cry.

“I’ve got to go,” she says.

“I’ll call ba—” His stops rubbing his palm. “Back,” he says to the dead line.

GEORGE



I sit on the cement bench near Alma’s grave, feeling the coolness of the stone under my slacks, the sun’s early morning rays on my face. I’ve been here since dawn, trying to explain to her I didn’t mean for her to get hurt. I was just frustrated that night at Frieda’s because I couldn’t get Alma to understand. I didn’t think that guy would take me serious. I didn’t take me serious.

“I was only venting,” I say. “You’ve got to know that. We both overreacted—over nothing really, don’t you agree? The fight was so silly, I can’t even remember what we were arguing about now. Can you, Sweet Pea? It seems so unimportant . . .” I don’t finish the sentence. Her nickname, Sweet Pea, sends a rush of emotions through my veins, up my neck and straight to the tip of my ears. Down below, the name stirs other memories.

They collect around me, these flashbacks, and I sift through them. Alma's typically fragile smile broad as a schoolgirl's when I first called her Sweet Pea.

"I've never had anyone look at me the way you do, George," she'd said. "As though you see only the best of me."

"I've got to confess, it wasn't that, Sweet Pea," I tell her now. "I saw that nasty part of you same as everyone else. Only I knew why you protected yourself with that facade, and I loved you anyway. Loved that delicate little sweet pea underneath that hard shell."

I push other memories aside and focus on her face, her beautiful face.

"I loved how you smiled," I whisper. "As if you loved me just as I was. I didn't have to do anything special or be anything special." I close my eyes, longer than a blink. I don't want to set the waterworks in motion. The mist behind my lids I blame on the brightness of the day poking fingers at my eyes, but I know different.

"I never thought I would love again when Mindy died—never thought I could. Thirty-three years is a long time to give your heart away. And when she passed, I expected to spend the next thirty-three grieving. I would have too, if I hadn't been working the afternoon shift that day you walked into the shoe store." I chuckle and wipe the tears from my eyes with a bent knuckle.

"'Been shopping all day,' you said, pinching the muscles between your eyebrows, 'my feet feel like they're walking on a bed of coals.

Find me some comfortable shoes and I'll be your slave forever. Remember, Sweet Pea? And I carried your packages to a chair, sat you down, and before you tried on a single shoe, I massaged your feet and told you I was your slave from the moment you walked into the store. You bought shoes that day—three pairs. I bought dinner—at the most expensive restaurant in the mall. You provided the nightcap—and oh, what a cap on the night it was. I'm lost without you, Alma. I miss you terribly.”

Chatter from a nearby tree attracts my attention. Three blue jays are having a territorial showdown. The one with the brightest feathers and largest crown takes a position on the highest part of the branch and runs down toward a second bird, pecking its beak. A smaller jay hops to a nearby branch, fluffs her feathers and sings. The second jay flies off, dropping a wad of white and black shit on Alma's tombstone.

I stand and dig a handkerchief from my pants pocket, wipe off the poo as best I can, spitting on the spot to clean it better, trying not to get the mess on my fingers as I fold the handkerchief over to wipe another area. I don't know what to do with the cloth when I'm done. I don't see any trashcans around and I can't just leave it on the ground. I don't want to take it into my car either. Have enough shit I'm driving around with.

I dig a hole under the cement bench with my car key and give the handkerchief a short, clandestine burial.

“Goodbye, Sweet Pea,” I say to Alma in a rush and hightail it out of there.

MURDOCK

“What the hell are you doing, George?” Murdock murmurs as he watches the widower survey the cemetery, take something from his pocket and squat to the ground.

A minute passes.

Two.

George’s back blocks his actions. Murdock taps his right foot, clutches the binoculars hanging around his neck. As soon as George stands, Murdock presses the lenses to his eyes and zooms in. He scrambles to clear the vision. A field of gray marble turns into the green of grass turns into the cement of a bench the guy had been sitting on. Another fine-tuning and the binoculars magnify the ground under the bench. A bald spot in the grass. A fresh pile of dirt.

“What the—?” He zooms in even closer and studies the mutilated ground for clues. By the time Murdock lowers the binoculars to his side, George is in his car heading toward the exit.

Murdock’s gaze sweeps the grave sites. Two puppies sniff flower pots and frolic in the open spaces between headstones, chasing and pulling each other’s tails, tripping each other and tumbling one over the other. The few people in the area seem legit. He decides to follow

George and come back to the drop site under the bench as soon as he can arrange another tail.

Fifteen minutes later he's mentally patting himself on the back. Good decision. He applauds himself as he observes George entering First National Bank. "Making a withdrawal, Georgie?" he says as he sits in the unmarked sedan and jots the time in his notebook.

Next stop the post office. "Mailing money somewhere, Georgie? Afraid to have the bank wire it?" He remains three cars behind the Kia when it leaves.

* * *

"Hasta la vista, baby," Murdock says when George pulls into the driveway of his house, feeling as though he had safely tucked George away for an hour or two. He cruises past the residence and heads back to the cemetery. Once out of George's neighborhood, he punches the radio on, presses the CD button. Horns begin the intro to 'Dancing in the Street.' Murdock cranks up the volume. By the time he hits Fifth Street, his shoulders are swaying, his head bobbing, and his free hand pretends to hold a microphone while he belts out the words to the song.

He's still humming to himself and bobbing his head as he dances up the path to Alma's grave. The tune stops and his jaw drops. A gap as wide as Murdock's open mouth yawns from under the bench. "Son of a bitch," he says as he hurries to the site. He whips his head around, taking inventory of the cemetery grounds. A few people

huddled by an open plot. A couple of godforsaken noisy birds chatter on a nearby tree. Two cocker puppies play tug-of-war over some white piece of cloth. "Shit," Murdock says. He stomps a foot, strikes the air, and shouts, "Shit, shit, shit."

The mourners glare at him and he feels his face warm. I'm gonna get you, George.

GEORGE

I pace through the empty house, and peek out the front window curtains at least a dozen times. It's a creepy feeling I've got. Like someone's following me, watching my every move. The jitters run up and down my arms like maniacal chiggers.

It's him, I know it. Hitman. He wants his money. I would pay him so he'd go away and leave me alone. If I had the money. But the bank won't give me a loan. Not till after probate. All the pleading I did with the bank VP today got me nowhere. I sent my old high school buddy a postcard: Dear Bill, Alma is dead. Need help. Can you spare some change?

My stomach knots like a tangled fishing line, hard to see and impossible to unravel. I don't want to pay Hitman for killing Alma. He shouldn't have done it. He should've known better. I should've known better. But if I don't pay him, then what? A reunion with Alma?

I put on a light sweater and head for Frieda's. I don't even get from my car to the entrance and Hitman's walking behind me.

"Evening, George," he says. "Nice night for a walk, dontcha think?"

"Can we make a deal?" I ask him once I get my voice. "We can work something out, can't we? I mean we're two civilized men. Civilized? He killed my wife.

"What do you have in mind?" he asks as he holds open the heavy carved wood door.

I lead him to a booth near the front window. He stakes out the seat facing the door.

The room is noisy. Voices and competing jukeboxes.

He orders a Guinness. I order a straight whiskey.

"I didn't mean what I said before," I say. "You know that, don't you?" The stupidity of my question strikes me in the right temple like an ice pick. Sharp and deep. My fingers jump to the site and press. I lower my head but can't hide the grimace on my face. It's a cluster headache. Been plagued with them for years.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Nothing," I squeak out, my voice thin and high. I'll be damned before I explain a headache to Hitman. Don't want to appear weak. I brace myself for another episode—they usually come in threes or fives—but as fast as the pain comes, it disappears. Still, I'm on edge. I clutch my glass tight, take a small sip, and fortify my courage. "Silly of

me, huh? If you knew I didn't mean it, you wouldn't have . . . you know."

Light from a passing truck spikes through the window and bounces off the taut skin of Hitman's shaved head.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he says. His jaw pulses. A hard perpendicular line ripples from his ear to his chin.

I nod, scan the room. "Of course. You're right." I remove the drink menu from between the napkin holder and a catsup bottle, pretend to read it. The words blur. I keep my eyes on them. If anyone is watching, I'm studying the menu, not talking through barely parted lips. "We shouldn't talk about it in public."

"You said you wanted to work something out? What did you mean by that?"

Television watching isn't my thing, but I'm doing a pretty good imitation of the covert behavior I've seen on cop shows. I'm acting suave. Confident. "This conversation never took place, okay?"

He shrugs. "Whatever you say. Just so long as you know, I do good work. I can fix anything."

"So, let's say, you thought someone hired you to . . . fix something, and you do it and they really didn't want you to . . . fix it. What would you do?"

I avoid his eyes. Focus on the tuft of hair growing in the hollow under his bottom lip—a little trick a public speaker told me after I

sold him a pair of Florsheims. I don't need to see his eyes to feel him scowling at me over his beer.

He drains the stein in silence. Lowers the empty mug, pulsing his fingers on the handle. "That someone a double-crosser? Wants to weasel out of a deal? I don't take to people weaseling out of paying me, 'specially when I go to a lot of trouble to do something for 'em, know what I mean? Like I told ya, I do good work."

Pain makes the room and everything in it fade. "Jesus," I curse and press the heel of my palm against my right temple. I squeeze my eyes tight, and breathe out of my mouth. I double over, rocking back and forth. Hell's worst searing pain. Maybe nine seconds. Then it's gone.

My body temperature has risen ten degrees, or so it seems. I open my eyes. The guy isn't at the table. He's leaning over the bar, talking to the bartender. I down my drink in one burning mouthful. Keeping my eyes on Hitman's back, I sneak out the door, hurry to my car, lock the doors and head for home.

MURDOCK

Murdock rises from a corner booth, crosses to the bar. "scuze me," he says to the guy with Vin Diesel's bald head and bulging muscles. Murdock compensates for the jealousy heating his belly by pushing back his shoulders, standing taller, and lowering his voice. "That fella you were just talking to?"

Muscle-man glances to the table by the front window. “I don’t see no one.”

Murdock flashes his badge. Take that, you sorry-faced, weight-pumping-gym-addict. He watches the guy’s eyes widen. Lots of types of muscle in this world, isn’t there? “Like to ask you a few questions.”

“Listen man, I don’t want no trouble.”

Murdock lifts both hands, palms front. “None desired. We’ll just shoot the breeze over at my table, ‘kay?”

The guy whips a look back at the two empty chairs by the window. “Sure, why not?” he says. “Mind if I bring a drink?”

Murdock smells the guy’s fear. What does he care if the guy uses alcohol to calm his nerves, long as it loosens his tongue? “Not at all.”

He checks the Hulk’s ID—Jake Turner—then digs right in. “How long have you known George Luca?”

“Not long.”

Even sitting, Jake’s a head taller than Murdock. Murdock pushes his feet into the floor and props himself an inch off the bench. “How long’s ‘not long’?”

“Couple of weeks maybe. I’d seen him around here, but the first time we spoke was about a week before his old lady died. Saw him at the funeral but didn’t say nothing. Spoke to him once after he buried the missus. Didn’t chat again until tonight. So, what’s that? Three times? Only spoke to the guy three times. That explanation of ‘not long’ good enough for ya?”

“Why’d you go to the funeral if you hardly knew him?” Murdock says a silent prayer that his locked knees will continue to hold him off the seat.

“The guy was in a funk the night I met him. Bummed out pretty bad.”

“What upset him?” Murdock’s legs begin to tremble, a fine quiver from ankle to thigh. He tightens his ass and presses his back into the divider between booths.

“Don’t know the particulars. Some sort of falling out with his wife.” Jake lifts his beer and swigs.

The bobbing of Jake’s Adam’s apple—the size of a fist—mesmerizes Murdock and draws his attention away from the vibration building in his legs. His thighs press against the underside of the table and cause the unused silverware to quiver on the surface. He bends his stiff knees as the burning in his legs flames. He fights a yowl by pressing his teeth together.

As inconspicuously as possible, he lowers his ass to the bench.

“You said you saw him after the funeral.”

The lines across Jake’s forehead ease. A smile flashes across his mouth. His voice lightens. “Bought him a drink. Thought I’d cheer him up.”

“And?”

The lines creep back onto Jake’s forehead. “He was pretty shook up, grieving and all. Kept wanting to pay me back for the drink, but

didn't have the money." Jake looks down at his shirt front and slides an open palm down his chest, twice wiping away nothing. "He looked like shit. Like he'd just received a death sentence or something. Wouldn't be surprised. He tossed his cookies all over, know what I mean?" Again Jake wipes something invisible from his shirt. "Had to drive the poor schmo home myself." He gets to his feet. "We done?"

Murdock feels Jake's height standing by the side of the booth, a newly erected wall of bricks. He refuses to look up. "Did George mention a girlfriend to you?"

Jake slides back down into the booth. "No, shit? I never would've guessed." His chuckle rumbles across the table, deep and full. "Was that what caused the spat with his missus?" He slaps a flat palm on the tabletop. The empty mug jumps, the silverware leaps. "Well, I'll be. Guess it's true what they say. The quiet ones get the most action." He shakes his head and repeats, "Well, I'll be."

* * *

After the interview, Murdock drives to the station to write up his report. Another corroboration that George and his wife were on the outs! He tries not to gloat when Barney comes in twenty minutes later and places a paper cup of coffee on each of their desks.

"Got a hot date tonight?" Barney asks. The metal legs of his chair grate on the worn linoleum as he plops down and pulls it forward under his desk. "You've got a grin I haven't seen since 1999."

“You didn’t know me in 1999.”

“Think your momma walked your stroller past the precinct and I got to peek at your goo-goo face then. Yup. Same old smile.”

“Up yours, Barney.” Murdock refuses to look up from the papers on his desk. He scribbles 1999 on the paper blotter beneath them. Does a quick calculation—math never was his strong point. I was fucking sixteen then, jerk-off. He keeps his lips tight.

“Thanks for the coffee, Barney,” Barney says. “You’re welcome, Murdock.” He punches some numbers on his phone, mumbles, “Putz,” and drifts into conversation with the person on the other end of the line.

GEORGE

Never knew what to do with these cluster headaches. They ambush like hit-and-run swordsmen.

Jab.

Another attacks me as I unlock the front door. Stabs me just as I slide the key into the keyhole. I think I’m electrocuted, but the searing pain remains when my hand springs off the door handle and jerks to my temple. I try to shove a fist inside my head to make the torture stop, which it does, about twelve seconds later. My arms and legs are shaking when I finish unlocking the door. I drop the key on the credenza in the vestibule—beside the Mount Shasta of bills—only

to be graced with another three seconds worth of scalding poker ramming into my skull.

It's Alma, getting back at me. Has to be. These headaches haven't plagued me in years. Now? All of a sudden? "I'm sorry, Sweet Pea." My voice is more a quiver than a shout. More a prayer than an apology, I offer a supplication to the ceiling. "Forgive me. If I could do it over, I would."

I lumber toward the basement stairs, needing to lie down on my sofa bed. The sofa bed with the exposed spring. In the moldy basement.

What am I doing?

I stop. Do a U-turn in the hallway. Walk to the living room. Study the collection of antique furniture bloating the precisely arranged space—her collection.

Her selection of artwork.

Her preference of wall color.

Her choice of photographs. Alma was skiing on a blustery mountain, snow forming icicles on a few stray wisps of hair. Alma standing in a Christmas-adorned store, Santa's empty chair to her right, columns of newly bought packages to her left, her shoes dangling from her fingertips, her lips forming a coy smile. True, there aren't many photos. Seven to be exact.

None of her children.

None of her grandchildren.

None of me.

I don't know why I never noticed that before. Maybe those mental jabs did something to my brain. A steeliness hardens my shoulders, firms my spine, stiffens my legs.

"Sorry, Sweet Pea," I repeat, only this time, my voice tastes rhubarb tart. I march into the master bedroom and sit on the handmade periwinkle quilt atop the four-poster bed. I stretch my arms above my head, as if reaching up to touch the lace canopy, then out to my sides, as if to expand the walls. My fingers reach out, elongate my arms, my vertebrae. I'm growing like the Hulk.

I fluff three of those fancy decorator pillows—the ones that always had to be removed before sleeping—pile them against the headboard, and as I ease my shoulders down against them, I swing my legs onto the bed. My head sinks into the pillows. The backs and heels of my shoes sink into the periwinkle quilt.

A satisfied smile accompanies me to sleep.

MURDOCK

"Wife-Number-One drowned," Murdock tells Barney. "They'd only been married fifteen months."

"He get a settlement?" Barney swivels sideways and leans back in his chair. He stretches out his long legs and crosses his ankles, the epitome of a cop with less than a week left on the force.

"They were young, students in college. Didn't have insurance."

“So, no benefit to knock her off.”

“Wrong there, old man. He dropped out of school and got himself hired in daddy-in-law’s hardware store.”

“Powerful motive there, Murdock. The great American dream. Give up a college career to work blue collar.” Barney pulls his body straight and shoves his legs under his desk.

“Guy was probably too depressed after his wife died to concentrate on school.”

“Hardly. He married wife-number-two five months later. And what do you suppose happened?”

“I suppose you’re gonna tell me.” Barney’s mouth stretches into a yawn wide enough to shove Murdock’s fist into it.

Stay professional, Murdock tells himself. You’ll see, old man. When I crack this case, you’ll be eating crow—well done and crisp. “Wife-number-two died of an ‘accidental’ overdose. Three wives. All dead. All accidents.” Murdock fights to keep a smile from bursting across his face. “Do you see a pattern?”

“By ‘accidental,’ you mean the coroner ruled out murder?”

“She had cancer, went to her brain. She took meds for her pain. The family doc thought she forgot, kept taking more. But an astute look—”

“Astute. Nice word.” Barney lifts his shoulders in a lazy shrug. “Maybe she wanted to save a loving husband more emotional

suffering. Or maybe she wanted out and maybe convinced George to help her do the Kevorkian thing.”

Barney makes a production of spreading his thumb and index finger up along his chin, pulling them down to a point, pushing them back up.

Murdock tightens his hand around a pen so he doesn't swat the mock thinking gesture right off of Barney's face.

“But maybe, just maybe,” Barney says, cocking his head and looking off into the distance, “the family doc—who knew her better than any rookie detective reading her post-mortem—was right. She forgot and took too many pills.”

The telephone rings on Barney's desk. He holds Murdock's gaze, ignores the phone. “Ya think?”

“Don't you get it, Barney?”

Barney inspects the fingernails on his right hand. “What was the payoff for Wife-Number-Two's death?”

The phone ringing scrapes against Murdock's ears like steel on glass. “It's not the damn money!” He leans forward over his desk, juts out his chin. “The man gets a high creating death. Makes him feel in control of his life. Prevents him from feeling like the loser he is.”

“And what university gave you a psychology degree?”

“I got a feeling, Barney. Gotta go with the gut.”

“Detective work is more than a feeling, Murdock. It's evidence. Hardcore evidence.”

“You’re old school, man. Nowadays the academy teaches you to be holistic. Trust your inner guide. You know, your intuition.”

“Since when does holistic mean ignoring hardcore evidence? Or the lack of it?”

Murdock nods toward Barney’s telephone. “I’m not ignoring anything. Including my gut.”

Barney lifts the receiver a mere two inches. Drops it back in place. His hand barely lands at his side when the phone calls out again. He gets to his feet. “Your gut need another jelly donut?” He picks up the receiver mid-ring, opens a desk drawer, and sticks it inside. He whacks the drawer shut with the front of his thigh. The metal drawer echoes with a vibrating sound as the phone continues to scream. “I’m gonna take a little cruise. I can bring you a Krispy Kreme, if you’re gonna be here later?”

“You brown-nosing for a retirement gift, it’ll take more than a jelly donut.”

“Don’t do me any favors, Murdock. Not sitting across from your baby-faced mug every day is gift enough.” Barney shoves his chair under his desk. Its chalk-on-chalkboard sound zaps the nerves under the fillings in Murdock’s teeth.

Barney strolls away, his middle finger erect over his right shoulder.

GEORGE

Gray Madison is not on time. She’s ten minutes early.

I'd thought about dusting the furniture when I woke this morning—after the best night's sleep I'd had in I can't remember when—but preparing for the assessor wouldn't benefit me, so I let that idea float away. No more Mr. Nice-Guy-who-helps-everyone-else-and-neglects-to-take-care-of-himself.

I wanted to be in my garden. The sanctuary I'd created for Alma and me, although she never wanted to stay outside. Didn't want the sun to touch her skin during the day—regardless of the UV number on the sunscreen—and didn't like the possibility of mosquitoes or spiders or other critters sharing space with her at night.

"I can see the garden from the back door," she'd say. "That's good enough for me. I just don't feel comfortable out in the wilds." Then she'd chuckle. "Just listen to those bullfrogs yelling at each other. You go out, though, George. Enjoy it."

The bullfrogs had not been yelling. They were singing.

The "wilds" were as wild as lawn grass.

So here I am, sitting by the pond. Smelling the gardenia perfume of the kuchinashi blossoms. Feeding pieces of bread to the fish.

Watching them swarm, gulping the throw-away morsels I give them.

Controlling where they gather by where I toss their food. Seeing myself in their position. Until last night.

"Anyone home?" a voice calls from the side of the house. "Mr. Luca? You back here?" The voice comes closer.

I glance at my watch. Takes me a second to figure out who it might be. “Back here.” I close the bag of bread, stand and brush the crumbs from my lap.

When I lift my head, there she is. The most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Sun gracing her with a halo around her short brown curls. She’s tall as a redwood, only soft looking. Like pussy willow. Her arms sway as she approaches and I see weeping willow branches flowing in a quiet spring breeze. I hold the bag of bread behind my back with my left hand, extend my right arm.

“George Luca. You must be Gray Madison. It’s a pleasure.” My right-hand feels like I submerged it in warm pudding. Her handshake ends too quickly.

“The front door is locked. Claire told me the house would be open.” Her high-pitched tin rebuke jolts through me, grates my nerves raw, transforms the angel dropped from heaven into a shrew in trick-or-treat costume. “I need to get inside, Mr. Luca. I’ve got hours of work ahead of me.”

“You’re early.” I sit back down. Nobody’s going to push me around anymore. I unwind the twisty holding the bread bag closed. “The house doesn’t open up until two sharp.”

I slip my hand into the bag, pull out a slice of white Wonder bread. “Want a piece?” I ask, holding the floppy slice out to her.

“I beg your pardon?”

“For the fish.” I study my watch. “You’ve got six minutes and forty-two seconds until the doors open.”

I’m not watching her now, have my eyes on an orange-spotted koi blowing bubbles near the surface. To my surprise, Gray Madison sits on an adjacent chair, puts her computer bag on the ground and extends her hand. “The one near the lily pad looks hungry.” She takes the bread I’m offering and suddenly her voice doesn’t seem so harsh.

MURDOCK

“So what’s taking so long on that case?” Chief Harriman asks as he zips his fly and proceeds to the washstand.

Murdock shakes his penis and steps back from the urinal.

“A first case shutdown needs to be cleared through my office. Needs to pass Peer Review. And I haven’t seen anything that says, CLOSED.” Harriman turns off the faucet, yanks a paper towel from the dispenser and dries his hands.

Murdock tucks himself into his pants, closes his eyes and his fly. He keeps his back to The Boss, needing a moment to think of a reply.

When he does turn, Chief Harriman is leaning against the sink, arms crossed over his Naugahyde chest. “Little birdie told me you blew a murder case.”

“Following a hot tip, chief.” Murdock sudses his hands. Watches Harriman’s motionless back in the mirror.

Harriman looks over his shoulder, the expression on his face as still as his back. “Find anything?”

A sour taste rolls around in Murdock’s saliva. He thinks of sticking his mouth under the faucet, swishing a gulp of water from cheek to cheek. Instead, he makes a cup with his hands. Fills it with water. Sips. Spits it out. “Being thorough’s what’s taking so long.”

Harriman glances at his watch. “You’ve got twenty-four hours. Then I’m reassigning you.” He lifts off the sink like a buzzard taking flight. “Twenty-three hours, fifty-nine minutes and fifty-three seconds . . . fifty-two . . . fifty-one.”

* * *

Murdock plops into his desk chair and flips open the forensic report on Alma Luca’s Cadillac. He’s concentrating so hard on the report—he’s read the results of the inspection so many times he could recite it by rote—he jumps when his phone rings. “Detective Murdock.”

“Hello, Detective.”

He recognizes the voice but can’t quite place it. “May I help you?”

“It’s Claire Reynolds. Alma Luca’s daughter.”

He snaps the file closed as if to prevent her from seeing it.

“I had an association with that name.”

His mind spins. Name? What name? “Go on.”

“The woman George was seeing. I think it’s Callow.”

“Good job, Claire.” He snaps his finger at the female two desks over. When he gets her attention, he covers the mouthpiece on his phone. “The telephone book,” he mouths, using his cheek muscles to widen his lips and exaggerate each syllable. His hand opens and closes in quick come-on motions, signally his need for speed. Mentally, he curses the taxpayers who won’t spring for a computer for his desk. “Your mother mention how to spell that name?”

“Get real.”

“Sorry, Claire. Bad joke. Anything else your mother told you about this woman?”

“Mother only mentioned her that once. The night they had a fight. But Zack may know something.”

Murdock’s colleague drops a ten-pound telephone book on his desk.

“Was that a shot?” Claire asks.

Murdock glowers at his colleague. She shrugs and sashays back to her desk.

“Would you believe a tree fell?” he asks.

A hiss escapes when Claire sighs and he visualizes a python strangling an unsuspecting buck. He breathes deep, his lungs filling to capacity, his chest expanding, and goes on the offensive. “Your brother hasn’t returned my calls. He hiding something?”

“Zack? You joke. He constantly complains his new company’s sucking at him like he’s a breast with the only milk supply in town.

Sorry, I don't mean to be crude, but that's my brother's life. Be persistent."

"Oh, I will. I assure you. I will!"

He flips through the phone book as soon as Claire hangs up.

Calla. Callaghan. Callahan. Callardo. Callaway. He skims down the list. Calloway. Caloca. Calrk. Calton. Retraces his finger's path back up the column of names. No Callow. He looks for Kallow. Kalo. Kalow. Goes back to Cowlo. Cowlow. Surveys Kowlo.

He slams the directory closed. "Damn."

Barney lowers a vegetable crate onto his desk. "What's the matter, kid?"

"Ever hear of an artist named Callow?"

The newspapers Barney lifts from the box throw a musty odor across the desks. "Of course."

Murdock couldn't have bolted faster from his chair if Barney had set it on fire. "You know her?"

"Don't insult my intelligence. Of course, I know her—well, at least know of her." Barney wraps a photo of his deceased wife in a sheet of paper and lowers it into the empty vegetable box. "Style's a bit weird for my taste." He places a paperweight snow globe at the end of another sheet of newspaper, folds in the two sides and rolls the paperweight in the paper until it's well padded. "If you're checking to see if I'd like a Kahlo for a retirement gift, save your money." Barney

grins and opens his bottom drawer. Removes several books and sticks them in the box. “Why this sudden interest in Kahlo?”

“George’s daughter just called. Seems George is porking this Callow woman on the side. His wife found out.”

Barney stops packing. “The famous artist, Kahlo?”

“No mention of her fame, but yeah, that’s her. What do you think of that?”

Barney slowly moves his head from side to side. “I think that daughter has seen too many Twilight Zones.”

Murdock shoves the phone book to the corner of his desk. He has no idea what that Twilight Zone reference means, but he sure as hell won’t ask. “I kid you not.”

He opens the forensic report once again and anticipates another objection. He heads it off. “Claire’s conversation might be hearsay, but the victim is dead. Judge’ll have to accept what the daughter says she heard.”

“And what exactly did Daughter hear?” Something demeaning creeps into Barney’s usually haughty tone.

Murdock gulps as if swallowing a wad of that newspaper, then chastises himself for not holding his ground. He sits straight and tall on his chair. “Let me tell you how it goes down.” He steeples his fingers, taps the fingertips together. “Daughter holds a clue, but it’s just out of her consciousness. I could pressure her. Harangue her day

and night. But do I? No. Like the good detective I am, I let her simmer with it. Like my prof said, truth rises to the top.”

Now he allows a smirk to rise to the surface. “And, sure enough—bingo, up pops the lead I need.”

“Hate to tell you genius, but truth doesn’t rise to the top. What does is cream,” Barney says.

Murdock’s smirk morphs into a genuine grin. “Cream? I’ll say.” He elongates his tongue and runs it over his lips. “It’s all over my face, you dirty old man.” He again swipes his tongue over his lips. “And what a sweet taste.”

“‘Cream’ as in ‘rises to—’ah, never mind.” Barney drops a handful of pencils and pens into the crate. “What’s this got to do with your alleged killer?”

“The victim knew her husband was sleeping around. A week before she died, she and hubby have a fight. She drives away. He runs to Callow’s place.” The smile that stretches Murdock’s lips tighten his cheeks and chin. He loves the feel. “Before today, all the daughter could remember was some association with an artist. Today she remembered the woman’s name. Now all I have to do is check the local art galleries.”

Barney sits on his desk. “This daughter didn’t mention Kahlo’s first name?”

“No, why?”

“Ask her if it was Frida. Frida Kahlo.”

Murdock tilts his head to the left, his jaw slack in surprise. “That her? The mistress?” He watches Barney’s lips widen, one corner of his mouth curved high. “What? You know something. What is it?”

Barney answers by swaying his head in short, fast, not-on-your-life NOs.

“Thanks for nothing.” Murdock turns to his spiral notebook and flips to Claire’s phone number. “Detective Murdock here, Claire.”

“You find her already?”

“Have a quick question for you. Do you have a first name for Callow?”

Murdock glances at Barney sitting on his desk, arms crossed. “It wouldn’t be Frida, would it?”

“That’s it!” Claire shouts and Murdock pulls the receiver away from his ear. “Naturally I thought of the famous Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo. So, I guess Mother didn’t mention a last name. But that’s her first name. Frida, yes. I’d swear to it. The woman you want is named Frida!” She sounds as if she’s just discovered a roomful of presents from Tiffany’s—all for her. “I definitely remember her first name. Mother told me George was out at Frida’s.”

The muscles in Murdock’s throat tighten. “Did your mother say George was out with Frida or at Freida’s?”

“Out with her or over at her place. What difference would it make? He’d still be cheating, right?”

Murdock's gut spirals in on itself, just like his case. He croaks out a dry, "Thanks," and hangs up. His smirk betrays him. Abandons him for the enemy. Switches sides and appears on Barney's face.

Barney chuckles and jumps off his desk, wraps his arms around the vegetable crate and lifts. "He had a date with Freida, right? Nice going, Murdock." He hoists the load onto his right shoulder and steadies it with his hands. "If you'd like to meet her in person, my retirement party's this Friday. Seven-thirty. The Bar and Grill on Main Street. Freida's."

GEORGE

"Claire is going to be surprised," I say to Gray Madison as she puts the finishing labels on the furniture.

Her lips curl in a slow, tired manner. She'd been working constantly for the last day and a half, checking and rechecking markings, referring to catalogs, making calls to colleagues. "My assistant will be here in the morning," she says. "It's not worth the expense to have me do it myself."

"So except for the three pieces you pointed out, none of it's real antique?" I don't understand what Alma was doing with this collection. I can't believe a woman that smart was taken in by fakes. Yet she spent a fortune on this collection—or was she spending a fortune in other things and using this for a cover-up? Or, did she need to create this facade about herself as a great personal collector?

“The reproduction is impressive, but the wood’s aging is irregular, the markings counterfeit.” She puts a hand on her hips and presses her shoulder blades back, her chest forward. “Let’s call it a day, my back’s killing me and I’m starving.”

“How about I take you to Frieda’s?” I’m not ready to be alone. “They have great cheese steaks, and a drink’ll ease your aches.”

She flicks her wrist to check her watch. “Why not? Let me gather my things.”

While she collects the labels and catalogs she brought and the lists of papers she generated, I excuse myself. In the bathroom, I brush my teeth and gargle, run a comb through my hair and straighten the collar of my shirt. When I’m satisfied I’m presentable, I open my wallet and study the contents.

Two ones and a half empty book of Forever stamps.

The twinge I get in my temple this time, I attribute to anxiety.

How will I pay for the bill at Frieda’s?

The man in the mirror cracks a weird smile. Let Gray pass the tab on to Claire.

* * *

We arrive at the height of happy hour. All the tables are occupied. Raucous laughter shoots out of the side room. A round of applause follows. I lead Gray through the crowd gathered around the bar.

“Hey, Jamie,” I shout to get the bartender’s attention. “Need a seat for a lady.”

Jamie spoons foam from a mug and tops it off with a dark beer. “Coming right up, George.” He delivers the mug to someone in a crowd at the end of the counter. He says a few words to one of the regulars, pours a shot and sets it down in front of him. The guy nods. “Over here, George,” Jamie calls out.

I deliver Gray to the bar stool the bartender bribed the customer to vacate.

More applause from the side room. “What’s going on in there? An Amway convention?” I think I’m pretty funny.

“Retirement party,” Jamie says. “What’ll it be, ma’am?” he asks Gray. “A cosmo, please.”

“My pleasure,” he tells her, then directs his attention to me. “The usual?” He’s studying me with a what-the-hell-are-you-doing-with-a-woman-so-soon-after-your-wife-died frown.

The old George would go on the defensive, justify his actions. But I’m the new George, so I just lift my shoulders an inch, keep my lips tight. “Make mine a cosmo, Jamie. I’m keeping the lady company.” Time to expand my experiences.

“Cosmo’s a sissy—”

The weight of a hand on my shoulder drowns out the rest of Jamie’s sentence and turns my stance to mush.

I glance at Gray, sitting on the stool, her eyes level with mine. They lock onto me, those dark chocolate truffles, just for a second, and in

that instant, my jello spine morphs into, well, if not steel, at least pretty firm tapioca.

Hitman stands behind me, his biceps ballooning the sleeves of his green tee shirt. Above the chest pocket three lines, embroidered in descending size, advertise HandiMandy's 'handyman' Jake.

"How ya doing, George?" He nods toward Gray. "Jake Turner. Pleased to meet you, ma'am." A sly, knowing smile glides across his face and he extends his hand to Gray.

Before she can take it, I shove my palm into his and lead him away. I feel like one of those miniature terriers guiding a great dane.

"We'll be right back," I call to Gray over my shoulder. To Hitman I say, "I need to talk with you, pal."

"You sly dog, you. I never would've taken you for a two-timer." He says something else, but the ruckus coming from the side room drowns him out.

We stop in the hall between the door marked LADIES and the one marked GENTS.

"I'm going to tell the police about you," I say. "And turn myself in."

He cocks his head to the right and his eyes shrink, a vulture ready to prey. "What are you talking about?"

He doesn't fool me with mock innocence. "You killed my wife."

"Drunk already?"

He turns to leave and I grab his arm.

What happens next occurs in snail time. His shoulder rotates toward me, his fist raises in a knot. It drifts toward my chin. I duck. The door to the men's room opens. Detective Murdock steps out. Hitman's fist floats over my head and lands smack on Murdock's jaw. Murdock sways, shifts his weight and plunges a fist into Hitman's gut. Hitman stumbles backward, breaking up a conversation between three guys. They catch him from falling. Hitman elbows one of them. Dives into Murdock. One of the guys head-butts Hitman's back. Another jumps on Murdock. The third man jumps on the guy who jumped Murdock, and the action returns to roadrunner speed.

A herd of drinkers stampede from the main room, joining the fracas.

A flood of customers surge from the side room. Most are in blue uniforms. Someone yells, "Police." A chair crashes against a wall. A bottle breaks against a ceiling fan. A siren cries in the distance, gains volume.

I slip back to the bar. The patrons from the side room extinguish the fight before the siren reaches the front of Freida's. A handcuffed Hitman, flanked by two men in blue, is herded toward the entrance. More handcuffed men are escorted from the area.

Gray's truffle eyes have melted into wide, scared globes. A sickness stronger than any I've known fills my stomach. "You better leave," I tell her. "I'm about to be arrested for my wife's death."

I spread my feet to steady myself in the spinning room.

Gray opens her purse and removes a couple of bills. She places them on the counter and slides off the bar stool. She stands before me, her eyes searching, rummaging in mine. Culling the authentic from the fake.

I blink and still she stands there. I blink again not wanting her to see the shame in my deception.

Finally, she says, "Mr. Luca," and I don't know what she means by that, and I want to say, It's George, you can still call me George, but she disappears in the crowd.

"Whiskey, Jamie. Make it a triple." My voice is high pitched, squeaky; a teen before puberty.

Behind me rolls a loud crash. A holler. A chorus of cheers. Another crash.

I sit on a stool at the now empty bar counter feeling as though I've fallen down the Rabbit Hole.

"Here you go, my man." Jamie pours the shots and sets the glass before me. He hunkers down in my face and whispers, "Here comes your detective," before he walks to the cash register and rings up my drink. Gray's exit saved Claire from getting stuck with my tab.

I gulp the alcohol. Cough twice into the back of my hand. Take a cool chaser of air into my lungs. Let it settle.

A pain splices my right temple. I wince and dip my head. A millisecond later, it's gone.

Murdock sits on the stool to my right. The one previously occupied by Gray Madison. I'll have to apologize to her from jail. I wonder if she'll accept a collect call.

MURDOCK

"I didn't kill my wife." The guy sounds as pathetic as every murderer pleading his innocence.

"Then, who did, George?" Murdock slips into his casual let's-just-talk-as-friends tone. He rubs his bruised jaw, trying not to let the throbbing distract him.

"That guy, Jake Turner."

"How's that?" He leaves his question open-ended, letting the perp provide whatever information he has. He imagines the video of this interview used as a training guide at the academy. Won't his old prof be proud.

"It's my fault."

Bingo. The curtain's about to part on Door Number One.

A tingle radiates down Murdock's forearms as he fights the urge to rub his palms together. His left eye twitches as he tries to keep the delight off his face.

"I'm the guilty one."

Excitement pushes against Murdock's skin, like a balloon overfilling with air, on the verge of bursting. He forces his leg to stop bouncing.

"I said I'd pay him to kill her."

Eureka! His stomach tosses a hat up his throat. Wait till I rub this salt into Barney's tired old beefsteak body.

* * *

"Doesn't add up, Murdock," Chief Harriman says. "You have no proof. It's the widower's word against the handyman's and the handyman's got an alibi. So come at me with this again."

"Turner's sticking to his story. He didn't take the buy seriously. Went to the funeral out of respect. Thought the guy was talking about not paying for drinks when he talked about not being able to pay him off. Thought the guy had some handyman work for him."

"And forensics? They've got nothing. It was an accident, detective. Live with it."

"But the guy admits—and the bartender heard—"

"The bartender heard a frustrated man bitching about his wife." The Chief glances at his desk calendar. "Close the damn case, Murdock. Release the husband. Let him get on with his life."

"But—"

Chief Harriman gives him the cold glare of black glass.

Murdock clenches the anger and frustration and shame he feels in his fists. "Yes, sir."

"Now get back to your desk."

"Some party Barney threw, hey, Murdock?" a passing blue brother says.

"Jaw's looking better," another goads.

Murdock slumps into the chair behind his desk and looks across the scratched, empty surface of Barney's desk. Hanging over the back of his deskmate's empty chair is a folded piece of paper with capital letters handprinted in black magic marker: **GONE FISHING**.

He's in no mood to answer the phone when it rings a second later, but he does. "Detective Murdock," he grumbles.

"You've got a present in your desk drawer," says the female voice.

"You again. Who are you and what do you want?"

"You've got a present."

"Another wild goose chase? No thanks," he says, but he slides open the top drawer.

"Not that one, detective. The one below it."

The heat in his body flames his cheeks and he keeps his head down. A giddiness churns in his stomach. No sense looking around the room. They'll all be watching him.

"Go on," the voice says. "Open it."

He slowly pulls the drawer open, cautious for jack-in-the-box snakes or exploding confetti. He shakes his head and lets the realization that he's been snookered sink in.

Nothing pops out of the drawer. Nothing explodes. He sneaks a peep at the Chief's office. The female who sits two desks down is staring at him, phone at her ear. "Go ahead," she says. "They're strawberry, your favorite."

The Chief salutes him with a donut in hand.

Murdock lifts the box of Krispy Kream donuts from his drawer to a room full of laughter and applause. Black capital letters across the top of the box spell out, **DONE FISHING?** Across the underside of the lid he reads, **WELCOME TO THE PRECINCT, DETECTIVE.**

POSTSCRIPT

Jake Turner came in first place in the National Body Building Contest three months later. The following year he was killed in a drive-by shooting following a photo shoot for a uniform manufacturer. There was suspicion that the disgruntled second-place contestant was responsible, but the case went unsolved.

Alma's daughter Claire sold Alma's house at the beginning of a housing boom, but since the taxes had not been paid on it for years, only the state government profited by the sale.

Alma's son Zack was arrested crossing the border with contraband and sentenced to ten years in jail. The company he had started with Alma's money was sold by his wife to pay for the house she bought in Marseille for her and her daughter.

Chief Harriman continued as Department Head and trainer of new detectives for the local police force.

Gray Madison created an educational television show in collaboration with George Luca on recognizing fake from authentic antiques. Netflix picked up their show for international syndication and is funding the next two seasons. There is talk that The Association

of Art and Antiques Dealers, LAPADA, wants to acquire a classroom version of their program for franchise training purposes. Negotiations are still underway. Gray proposed to George on numerous occasions, but he enjoys playing the field.

George Luca adopted the motto: It's never too late to start living. He went six months undercover assisting Detective Murdock expose a money laundering scheme involving antique furniture and pieces of art. For his bravery George received the key to the city. He is never at a loss for a date.

For his part in solving the money laundering scheme Murdock received the Governor's Accommodation Award. He is currently up for a second promotion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

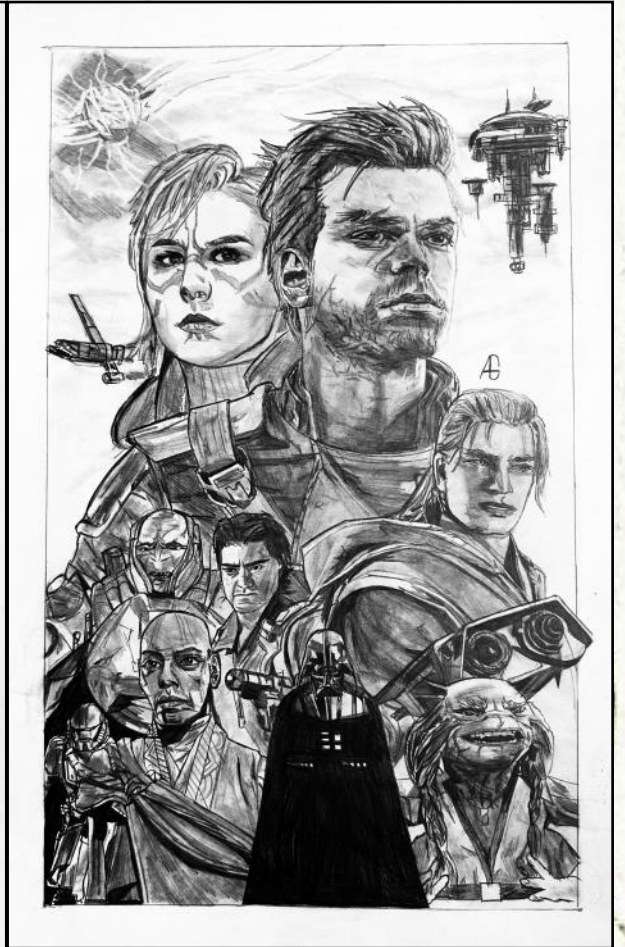


Marjorie E. Brody's short stories have been published in literary magazines and anthologies, e.g., the Short Story America Anthology (vols. I-V), Twin Bird Review, All Things If, and Short Stories by Texas Authors. Some of her stories were professionally produced on the stage and one was adapted into a film. Her poetry has appeared in the Black Fox Literary Magazine, Eccentric Chai, and Twisted Endings. Marjorie is a Pushcart Prize

nominee and a multi-award-winning novelist for her psychological suspense, *Twisted*. She welcomes you to visit her at www.marjoriespages.com .

ARTWORK

by Addisen Gensburger



View Addisen Gensburger's
portfolio [HERE](#)

FACT

A Cloud Weighs Millions of Pounds!



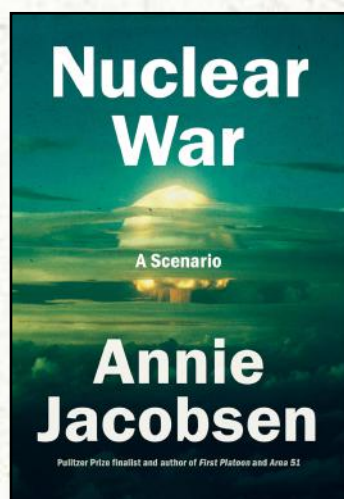
Answer: Thus, a 'typical' fair weather cumulus cloud "weighs" about 1 billion 400 million pounds, or about 800 million pounds less than dry air of equal volume.

from the National Weather Service. Read more [HERE](#).

NUCLEAR WAR: A SCENARIO

A BOOK REVIEW

by WILLIAM GENSBURGER



If you want to be scared to death, then the book you should read is 'Nuclear War: A Scenario,' by Annie Jacobsen.

Obviously, the plot is pretty well explained by the title, as the book investigates the history of nuclear weapons, the massive buildup during the Cold War, the variance since then, and, most importantly, the minute-by-minute of what happens when a nuclear war is initiated.

Back in the 1980s during a time when it seemed possible that the world might have World War III using nuclear weapons, before the fall of the Soviet Union, I had pondered the mental exercise of whether or not a nuclear war could be survivable. Certainly, we have seen our share of motion, pictures, depicting small scale, terror attacks, using nuclear weapons, large, global warfare, and so on, so

we have an idea of just what it would be like. This book, however, takes those notions and makes them appear to be childish at best.

A nuclear war in this day and age would be the end of absolutely everything. Sure there would be pockets of survivors, and eventually, the planet would heal itself after a few thousand years. But for people who might miraculously survive the initial impacts of nuclear explosions, the aftermath is an unimaginable and endless tale of horror leading to a painful death. It is that simple.

So why should you read this book? After all, it is hardly cheerful. The answer is to fully understand the very delicate and precarious position that we are currently in, the politics that have led up to this position, the various parts of government that maintain this balance, and perhaps the most important lesson of why we should be very vocal to our elected officials, that there is never a situation that would justify full-scale nuclear war. Our voices need to be heard.

This book is both a compelling and page-turning read. The crisis begins as a solitary nuclear ICBM is launched from North Korea to America. North Korea, not announcing a drill, and not responding to communications confuses the West with a single missile launch, rather than a barrage. Surely they would know that it would be taken seriously. As the minutes pass, and the procedure for the situation

rapidly escalates, we are taken through the process that leads to the US military's most defensive position. Def-Con 1.

To make matters worse, there is also no communication with the leadership in Russia, China or elsewhere to verify the intent of the North Koreans.

One of the things you realize in reading this book is how uninformed we, as citizens or residents, are. We won't know when there's a launch until it's over. And by then there's very little we can do, and nowhere to hide. While the military has a massive series of underground bunkers, as one observer noted, most things run on diesel fuel, and after a prolonged period that will run out and the bunker will not be of much help to those within.

Everyone should read this book, especially politicians. There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that there is no winning a nuclear war and that if one should start, even under the guise of being a limited strike, it would quickly escalate to the same finality. Perhaps it is time for the world to actually live and act the word 'civilized' and put the massive amount of money devoted to weapons of destruction all over the planet to better use.

Publisher : Dutton (March 26, 2024), 400 pages

ISBN-13 : 978-0593476093

BUY IT [HERE](#)

AN EVENING OF CONVERSATION EVENT WITH BESTSELLING AUTHOR MICHAEL CONNELLY

by Jill Hedgecock

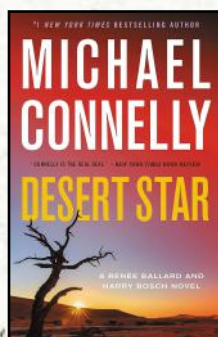


On April 5, 2024, Michael Connelly and his Los Angeles Police Department consultant, Rick Jackson, sat across from each other on stage at the Village Theatre in Danville, California. Interview questions posed by Jackson, a former LAPD homicide detective, spanned Connelly's early years to present-day accomplishments. Michael Connelly is the bestselling crime fiction author of thirty-nine novels and one work of non-fiction. His breakout novel, *The Lincoln Lawyer*, was made into a Hollywood movie in 2011. His twenty-book series with main character Harry Bosch became a hit TV series which is currently in its seventh season. The evening was peppered with wonderful insider tidbits about Connelly and his career.

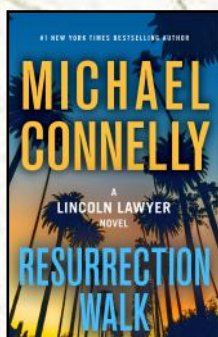
Connelly was meant to follow in his father's footsteps and become a part of the family construction business, but his heart wasn't in it.

Instead, a fascination with Raymond Chandler's books influenced Connelly's desire to become a novelist. While attending the University of Florida, Connelly compulsively read Chandler's novels. A defining moment that shaped Connelly's author career occurred when he came home from college to discuss his future with his father. His father supported Connelly's desire to become an author but advised him to have a backup plan. So, Connelly changed his major to journalism with a minor in creative writing.

As a journalist, Connelly chose to become a crime reporter. He started out working for small papers in Daytona Beach and Fort Lauderdale then moved on to work at the Los Angeles Times. His early attempts at writing books in his spare time resulted in two novels that remain unpublished to this day. His determination to write books didn't waver.



[Click cover to buy](#)



[Click cover to buy](#)

One of my favorite moments of the evening was when Michael discussed being an extra as a drunk Santa Claus on the set of the Bosch series. He described how he was stuck sitting in a chair in a heavy, red suit for four hours, inhaling the scent of cream of mushroom soup

(which he despises) that had been used to mimic vomit. His “performance” can be seen in the pilot, but he declined to take part in the reshoot for the series. Who can blame him?

Connelly's kindness and generosity was evident when the event organizer announced every attendee would receive a signed, hardcover copy of one of his latest releases, 'Resurrection Walk,' part of his 'Lincoln Lawyer' series, or 'Desert Star,' part of his 'Harry Bosch' series. Even more worthy of mentioning was that he purchased all copies through an independent bookstore, Rakestraw Books, to support the local community. As a bonus, Connelly agreed to be photographed with any attendee who would like their picture taken with him.



The evening was a benefit for The Eugene O'Neill Foundation. During the event, Connelly indicated he admired O'Neill's groundbreaking style and shared the man's desire to write from reality. As he followed LAPD detectives during his journalism days, he used his experiences to collect details to include in future novels. One example was when he made a mental note to include information about fingerprint dust in a novel. He had overheard a police detective caution a co-worker to be careful going through a turnstile that had been dusted for prints because fingerprint dust is difficult to remove from clothing.

The Eugene O'Neill Foundation supports emerging writers. Shortly after the Foundation purchased Eugene O'Neill's former ranch, Katharine Hepburn initiated the idea of opening the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site to artists. Two types of fellowships, named after

the late Travis Bogard, a professor emeritus of Dramatic Arts at the University of California, Berkeley, are offered by the Foundation. The Eugene O'Neill Foundation is nestled in the oak woodland hills of Las Trampas Regional Wilderness Park. The Foundation offers fellowships for writers and artists at the National Historic Site, an idyllic setting for creative endeavors. To apply for their Artist in Residence or Day Use Program, visit <https://eugeneoneill.org/fellows/> .

ABOUT JILL HEDGECOCK



Jill Hedgecock is the author of five young adult suspense novels, including series starters 'Between Shadow's Eyes' and 'Rhino in the Room.' To learn more, visit <https://amzn.to/3vXOazy> or www.jillhedgecock.com.

A FOOLPROOF DINNER

Writers and Others can Prepare in Under 10 minutes

by William Gensburger



Who has the time to cook a deluxe meal that requires an hour or more of preparation time? Certainly not if you are writing and do not want to stop for dinner. And yet...it's your turn to cook.

Baked Chicken with Potatoes and Broccoli

is guaranteed to be a tasty treat. And, the best part, while the cooking time is 90 minutes in the oven, the prep time is just ten minutes.

Ingredients:

Bone in, Organic Chicken Thighs. (1 or 2 per person)

Potatoes (1 per person)

Salt, Pepper

Paprika, Onion powder,

Chile powder

Ginger powder

Garlic powder

1 lemon

Avocado oil

Soy sauce or Liquid Aminos

Directions:

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees



On a greased tray, or using parchment, lay the chicken thighs spaced out evenly. Dribble a little avocado oil on the outside skin, then lightly sprinkle the salt and pepper, Paprika, Onion powder,



Ginger powder, and garlic powder so the skin is lightly covered.

Slice a lemon and dribble lightly over the top of chicken, placing the slices between the thighs.

Wash the potatoes and puncture skin with a fork.

Place tray with chicken in the oven and the whole potatoes on the rack where it fits.

Set timer for 90 minutes.



Broccoli: either frozen or fresh. Have a pan with an inch of water ready on the stove. When the chicken is done, set the oven to warm, bring the pan of water to boil. Add broccoli, lightly salt, drizzle with avocado oil and soy/liquid aminos,

cover and steam for five minutes until emerald green and just cooked, but still crunchy.

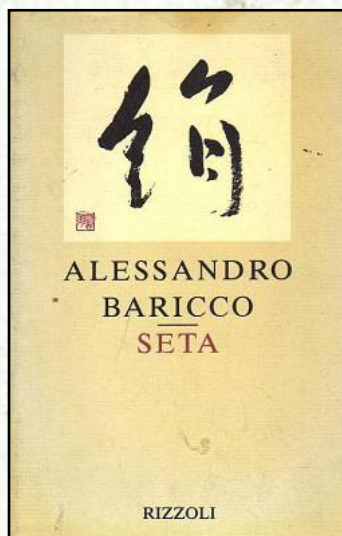


Serve and enjoy:

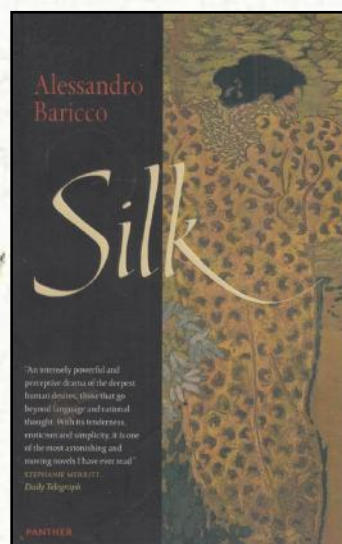
SILK

A BOOK REVIEW

by MICHAEL BARRINGTON



Silk, by Alessandro Baricco, is a startling, sensual, hypnotically compelling novella about a French silk merchant, Herve Jancour's several dangerous journeys to and from Japan to obtain silkworms from one of its islands. Invited to stay in the court of an enigmatic nobleman, referred to as the "master of all that world might take away from the island," he becomes enchanted by his reserved and beautiful concubine.



They do not touch. They do not speak. Though their bodies remain apart, they only meet in the presence of the master, or another woman, the reader can feel their vibrating and intoxicating chemistry. A glance takes the place of a kiss, a

cup of tea sipped from the same place on the rim becomes an amorous embrace. Even the single note she gives him he cannot read until his return, and when he does, he becomes a man possessed. "Come back or I shall die," she begs him.

I was spellbound with the story, and the powerful, evocative but terse descriptions: "Once he had held between his fingers a veil of Japanese silk thread. It was like holding between his fingers nothingness."

It is a small book of less than one hundred pages, but that belies the fact that some chapters are simply a few sentences. It reads almost like a fable, an allegory but written with poetic license. The word choices, sentence structure, chapter sequences and layout, all create a delicate air of mystery, wonder, and unrequited love.

It's a book that needs to be read slowly, and possibly several times. Words are at a premium. On each of his four journeys to Japan, it's as if the author had cut and pasted the same section. But a close read shows that he can change a single word to impact a whole chapter. He reaches Lake Baikal which "the people of the place called the 'sea.'" In his three subsequent journeys, it becomes 'the devil,' the 'last,' and 'the saint.'

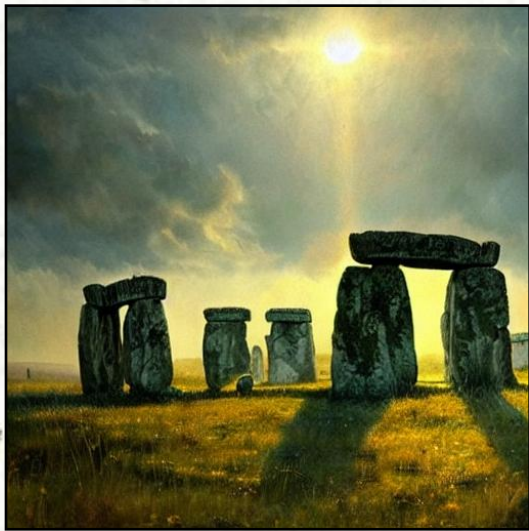
I am amazed how much emotion is conveyed in such a short story. As one critic writes, "it is beautiful, sensual, desperate and heartbreakingly sad."

Translated from the Italian of Alessandro Baricco by Ann Goldstein. A must read! Buy it [HERE](#).

MAGIC AT STONEHENGE

A Short Story by MICHAEL BARRINGTON

An icy November wind swirled the dense mist over the Salisbury Plains almost obscuring Stonehenge. Professor Isaac Cedric Effingham, known simply as ICE to students and faculty at Merton College, Oxford, walked seven times around the circle, first clockwise, then anticlockwise as prescribed by the



Druid code of conduct. Although not religious or superstitious, his critical eye sought more clues to his understanding of their purpose as he edged closer, scrutinizing each upright stone. Even after countless visits, their sheer size never ceased to fill him with wonderment. It was he who had shocked the world by proving that each one of the almost thirteen feet high, seven feet wide stones, each weighing around twenty-five tons, had been transported from

modern-day Pembrokeshire 150 miles away in South Wales, 5,000 years ago.

The bad weather had taken him by surprise, but his heavy topcoat, and sturdy boots, together with a warm scarf and deerstalker hat, helped keep out the bitter cold. A small wooden door at the base of a stone suddenly caught his eye. How was that possible? he mused. How come he had never noticed it before? Bending down, he realized it wasn't locked, and after pushing it open, he could hear the chatter of voices.

Descending a flight of narrow winding steps, he passed a sign that read The Missing Bride Inn and found himself in a lounge with bright oil lamps hanging from dark oak beams. People were sitting, drinking, and laughing. A log fire blazed in a large open grate.

"Welcome," a tall, tuxedoed, handsome man standing behind a bar called him over.

"Welcome to the Writers and Artists Guild. We've been waiting for you. Come and have a drink. The first one's on the house."

"Then I'll have a martini," he answered.

"You mean a martini, shaken, not stirred?"

"Well, yes, if you say so."

"My name is Bond, James Bond," the bartender said, offering his hand.

"That's an interesting name. I may have heard it before. Just can't remember where.

“And you can call me ICE. Everybody else does.”

“Then you’re welcome, ICE, and I must say, I really like your topcoat.”

“And aren’t you going to introduce me, James? I’d cut up my heart for you to wear if you wanted it.” ICE turned towards the sounds of the female voice. “And I’ll have another sherry cobbler please, with a sucker.”

Seated on a bar stool was a stunningly beautiful woman. ICE gasped. Where had he seen her before? With her deep green eyes, raven-black hair and wearing a gorgeous ankle-length velvet gown, it was as if she had just walked out of her plantation home. He racked his memory, without success.

“I’m so sorry, Scarlett. Allow me to introduce our guest. ICE this is Miss O’ Hara from Tara Hall, in Georgia.”

“I’m so pleased to meet you,” she said. “And may I ask what you do for a living?”

“Yes, of course. I write books and am an expert on Stonehenge.

“Well, that’s interesting,” she replied, “I came by here just to take a look at it myself and to get away from death, taxes, and childbirth. There’s never any convenient time for any of them.”

ICE smiled. That last remark sounded familiar, perhaps something he had read somewhere. But his memory failed again.

“I’m actually on my way to Ireland to trace my ancestors.”

“Madame, would you please stay focused?” a voice with a heavy French accent asked. A very short man who was seated next to her, and wearing a brightly colored coat and a floppy hat with a feather, was looking studiously at her. He held a large sketching pad and charcoal in his hands.

“And James,” he said, “*s’il vous plait*, another absinthe, and cognac.”

“Certainly, Toulouse, coming right up.”

“Perhaps Monsieur Lautrec,” she said, turning towards him, “if you have time, of course, you might sketch Mr. ICE. He has an interesting face. It’s not unlike Clarke Gable’s. And now I will give you my full attention.”

“Oh, please,” ICE interjected, embarrassed at such generosity. “That is such a kind suggestion, but I couldn’t possibly accept.”

Just then, a loud guffaw erupted from a corner table.

“Sit down, Ernie,” a dark, curly-haired, pipe-smoking, but pretty, young woman was shouting. “You’re just showing off again.”

“But you should have seen this matador.” He had taken a table napkin, lowered it and with his head following the movement, swung his arms in the motion of a slow sweeping veronica. Then gathering the napkin to his waist spun his hips that made the napkin swing in the stiff arc of a rebolera as it passed the bull’s nose while he calmly walked away. “Absolute perfection,” he added. “Simply perfection.”

“Pay no attention to Hemingway,” she said as ICE and James arrived to see what the noise was about. “He can’t make his mind up

whether he wants to be a bullfighter or a writer. He's just published 'Death in the Afternoon,' and won't shut up about it. He's obsessed."

"Maybe when I get some time, I should educate myself about the art. My name's ICE, by the way, and it's got nothing to do with the weather. My real name is Isaac, but nobody ever uses it. And you are?"

"Just call me George. That's the name I write under. Surname, Elliot. Then she turned her head to search for the nearest spittoon.

"Don't want to get into it just now," she said, "but it really irritates me that publishers believe women do not write as well as men. In fact, I'm on a mission to liberate women from male dominance. My books have had good sales, and people have given a positive reception to my last one, 'Middlemarch.' However, in all the reviews, I insist that this is just my nom de plume. I want to be recognized for who I really am."

"And with a passion like yours, I'm sure you'll succeed."

"Let me introduce you to a couple of other interesting people," Bond said, steering him towards a man in naval uniform. That's Ian Fleming. He has quite an interesting character. In World War II he formed a unit of commandos, known as No. 30 Commando, composed of specialist intelligence troops. 30AU's job was to be near the front line of an advance—sometimes in front of it—to seize enemy documents from previously targeted headquarters. But in his final years, he worked as an officer in the Royal Navy's Naval

Intelligence Department. I have it on good authority that he also worked for MI 5. But more importantly, he attends these gatherings because he is writing a series of spy novels based on his experiences.”



helping of alcohol.

“How about another wee dram of usquebaugh, James?” he said, using its Gaelic name.

“You should always carry a flagon of whiskey in case of snakebite and, furthermore, always carry a small snake,” then let out a bellow of a laugh. After moving to the bar, Bond poured the man a double measure of twenty-five year old, Glenmorangie single malt, which he grasped momentarily in his beefy hand, looked at it solemnly as if afraid to drink, then unexpectedly held it aloft and shouted, “Lang may yer lum reek!”—(long may your chimney smoke, or to your

The man smiled as they approached. “Nice boots,” he said, pointing at ICE’s feet.

Before he could respond, a tall, burly, bearded Scotsman in a full highland dress complete with kilt and sporran interrupted them by slapping Bond on the shoulder.

His eyes and face had the look of somebody who’d had a liberal

good health.) Then he added, “The drinks are on me.”

It took several minutes before the cheering died down and James had replenished everybody’s glasses.

“Who is that man?” ICE asked discretely. “He might be somewhat intoxicated, but he is also full of his own importance.”

“Well, done, ICE. You’re quite perceptive,” Bond replied. “That’s Walter, Sir Walter Scott. He may not attend our meetings frequently, but he is a prolific writer. His latest novel, ‘Ivanhoe,’ has just been optioned as a movie for a huge amount. So, yes, today and as usual, he is full of himself and out to impress.”

“But you must meet Jane—she needs cheering up. She has been attending the meetings for years but is stuck and can’t finish her novel. She’s quite depressed.”

After brief introductions, a small petite woman in her thirties, quite pretty but her face now stained with tear marks, explained she had created five sisters in the Bennet family but couldn’t decide how the father’s favorite, Elizabeth, should get married.

“I have this strong-willed, charming but self-assured young woman who seems to push away her suitors. I can’t find the solution. Without a wealthy partner, her life will be ruined.”

ICE could see her lip beginning to quiver as she spoke, and reaching into her petticoat, retrieved a dainty lace handkerchief. After

dabbing her mournful eyes, she looked pleadingly at ICE as if he might save her.

“Far be it from me to even suggest I might have a solution to your dilemma, but in my work, I am convinced that Stonehenge could never have been built without collaboration, compromise, and teamwork. Why not have your characters work together but as opposing forces? Have your female become humbler and more empathetic while maintaining her signature confidence in who she is. And have a suitor realize just how arrogant and assuming he has been.”

There was a short pause and ICE wondered if he had offended her.

“Oh, my goodness, Professor,” she exclaimed. “I do believe you may have given me the answer. However could I repay you?”

“Finishing your novel would be payment enough. And do you have a title for it?”

“Not yet, but I’m thinking about ‘Pride and Patience’ or something similar.”

“Then, I wish you good luck,” said ICE as they turned and walked away.

“So what next, James? What is the program?”

“Well, we always invite a well-known writer as a keynote speaker and this time it was a tossup between Harper Lee and her book ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ and Ngozi Adiche’s ‘Americanah.’ We went with Adiche. I heard her in London, last year, and she is a dynamic

speaker. We really wanted to extend our reach. Are you familiar with her writing? But before I tell you more, we also always invite a magician to our event. This year, as you can see, it's David Copperfield. He's over there doing card tricks. Let's watch him for a moment, then we can sit down and talk.

After he had finished mesmerizing his audience, James quickly introduced ICE.

"Nice boots," David said, "and I love the topcoat. It's perfect for this kind of weather."

"I wish I could stay for your show tonight, but unfortunately, I'm expected back in Oxford. And I've heard so much about you, especially that amazing illusion where you walked through the Great Wall of China. Maybe you will do something equally dramatic here at Stonehenge."

"So sorry you can't be here, and I'll try to work that site into my act," David replied with a laugh. "Hopefully there will be another time, but you and I will always be connected—by magic, of course."

"So tell me, James, what is the history of this place?" ICE asked as they sat down to enjoy another martini, shaken, not stirred.

"I'm not too sure where to start. There has been an Inn on this spot for hundreds of years. Stonehenge was originally privately owned farmland as far back as anyone can remember. A man called Black Harry built the inn and called it The Pot of Gold. Some say they called him black, as he had a black patch over one eye. Others, that

he had a long black beard. He never shared what had happened, but rumor said he lost it as a pirate with Long John Silver's crew. They found buried treasure on an island, lots of gold coin, pieces of eight.

But they fought among themselves, and Black Harry took a knife in his eye. Only a few men lived to tell the tale and get back to England: Long John Silver and his parrot that cried 'pieces of eight' whenever they met a stranger, Jim Hawkins, a young man who had stowed away on Silver's ship, Ben Gun who had been marooned for years but showed them where the gold coins were buried, and Black Harry.

The story told is that Black Harry built this inn with his share of the coins and from then on some folks referred to him as Goldfinger. You have only seen a fraction of the inn. And if we had time, I would give you a tour for your eyes only. It is extensive and can house up to thirty guests. He married and had a beautiful daughter, Elvenia, which means magical, whom he adored. She met a sea captain, and they were married in this very room. Their initials are carved into the oak beam over the fireplace. As the guests were enjoying themselves, Elvenia and her husband played a game of hide-and-seek. It lasted for hours and into the night until all the guests had left.

For a final game, Elvenia hid in her husband's huge sea chest, which was padded and comfortable, but once inside, it self-locked and she could not get out. Her husband, seeing that the locks were secure, never thought to open his sea chest. No one ever discovered Elvenia. The following morning, the husband walked around

Stonehenge seven times, hoping, praying she would return. Then, as the sun rose over the Salisbury Plain, he could not contain his grief and shot himself.

In despair, Black Harry set fire to the inn and rode off with his wife on his black horse. No one ever saw them again. Local people say that on a stormy night in November, if you listen carefully, you can still hear a horse's footsteps and two people loudly weeping.

"Such a tragic story," ICE said.

"Yes, but you have to live and let die," James replied.

"But how did the inn survive?"

"Since it is underground, the fire damage was only superficial. The Guild took it over shortly afterward, refurnished it and renamed it The Missing Bride. We meet here every month."

"That's amazing," ICE replied, but not fully comprehending everything. "And now, before I go, please tell me about your speaker."

"Ngozi Adiche will discuss her book, 'Americanah,' with us. It's essentially a love story and traces the lives of Ifemelu and her childhood sweetheart, Obinze. They are from Nigeria, but become separated when she goes to study in America and stays with Aunt Uju, who is never short of advice on how to acculturate. 'The problem is,' she says, 'that there are many qualified people who are not what they are supposed to be because they won't lick ass, or they don't know which ass to lick, or they don't even know how to lick ass.' It's about love, loneliness, and race. But it's also a poignant,

funny, and scathing look at the reality of being a new immigrant in the USA—from an African perspective.”

“I’m so sorry I will miss her presentation,” ICE said. “It sounds like something I would be very interested in. But I’ve really enjoyed my time here and so thank you, James, for everything. And now I must leave.

“Then let me escort you to the stairs,” James said. “That’s as far as I may go. It’s been a pleasure and remember you only live twice.”

The frosty night air hit Isaac Cedric Effingham with an arctic blast. He shivered and pulled his deerstalker hat closer around his ears. Then he realized he was no longer wearing his topcoat, and his bare feet were freezing. When he turned around to look for the door so he could return for his coat and boots, all he saw was the cold Stonehenge stone—and the mist.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael Barrington, is an international writer specializing in historical novels: *Let the Peacock Sing*, *The Ethiopian Affair*, *Becoming Anya*, *The Baron of Bengal Street*, *No Room for Heroes* and *Passage to Murder*. He has published more than fifty short stories. He also blogs on his website: www.mbwriter.net .

Revelation

Poetry by William Gensburger

W

here go we from here?

Blight upon empty choices,

Escape or destined absence?

Unstoned turns, cloned sterility,

Engrams processed, packaged and

Purchased for judgment rains,

Should the unproved God

Again wipe clean our faceless void,

And take back the light first made.

THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

A Short Story by DENICE PENROSE

The phone rang, sharp and shrill, shattering sleep. Veronica groaned. “Ronnie, I’m calling about Mum.”

Lucy never phoned. Veronica sat up as lightning fear shot across her mind. “Is everything okay?? And don’t call me Ronnie, you know I hate it.”

“Sorry, Veronica. No, Mum’s fine, physically. But she’s been doing some odd things. I’m really worried.”

“I’ve been meaning to call her for ages, but there’s never enough time. What do you mean ‘odd things’?”

“She’s changed since she went on that cruise. She’s really not herself. She’s hardly ever home, so I can’t rely on her to babysit anymore. She’s gutted the house and is talking about selling it and moving.”

“She can’t sell our home. Not that I’d want to live there- it’s a dreadful pokey place. Besides, we may need it to pay for her care one day.”

“I know. Look, you’ve got to come down here and talk some sense into her. I have had no joy. You’re the eldest. She might listen to you.”

“It’s so hard to get away – I have so many commissions I can hardly keep up.”

“How long has it been since you last went to see her?”

There was a long pause as Veronica worked it out. “I have spoken to her on the phone.”

“Yes, but how long since you actually saw her?”

“Nearly a year.” Veronica swallowed.

“I knew it! Right, it’s your turn to deal with things.”

A week later, Veronica set off, deciding not to call ahead. A stealth arrival would allow her to see exactly what was going on and evaluate the situation properly. Maybe it wasn’t as bad as all that. Lucy had been known to exaggerate on occasion. During the three-hour drive, Veronica ran through the conversation in her mind. Lucy had said something about gutting the house. If her mother had done that, she’d have to arrange contractors to sort out the mess. At least she had a good selection of reliable people on her books.

Veronica arrived before lunch. Another car was in the driveway, forcing her to park on the street. Mildly annoyed, she headed up the drive, opening the door with her key. “Mother? It’s Veronica. Where are you?” She peered into an unfamiliar living room and dining room. Was she in the wrong house? Where was her mother?

“Mother?” she called, louder this time. She heard a noise upstairs. Veronica looked up and saw a slim woman in a pink silk dressing gown and blonde hair. She’s really not herself. “Who?” she began, “Mother?”

“Mother, are you alright? Why are you still in bed at this hour? Are you ill?” Veronica rushed up the stairs.

“Veronica, how nice to see you. You should have let me know you were coming.”

“Lucy said something was wrong. I came as soon as I could.”

Veronica pecked her mother on the cheek, catching a whiff of expensive perfume mingled with an oddly spicy scent.

Mother had lost a lot of weight, but there was a bloom of color in her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled. The silk dressing gown was exquisite and looked suspiciously like Victoria’s Secret. Mother didn’t look ill at all. “What is going on?”

“Maggie, what is it? Are you coming back to bed?”

Veronica’s jaw dropped.

“Stop catching flies Ronnie, it’s really unattractive.”

“Mother! What are you doing?”

“Honestly Ronnie, I think you’re old enough to know the answer to that question.”

“And just who is that?”

“Tom is a friend. We met on a cruise.”

“Mother! How could you? But you don’t know anything about him. You don’t know where he’s been.”

“I know exactly where he’s been.”

“Mother! Don’t be coarse.”

“Then stop being so silly. Honestly, Veronica, you do overreact. Go make some tea, and we’ll be down shortly.”

Veronica was familiar with that tone of voice. She used the same one on her children when she wasn’t about to argue with them. Fuming she stomped down the stairs. Well of all the nerve! Shacked up in bed with a strange man in the middle of the day! At her mother’s age! Whatever was Mother thinking? What would the neighbors think? It was just as well she’d had come to sort things out.



Halfway down the stairs she stopped. The house was completely different.

Lucy had been right when she said it had been gutted - everything she’d known was gone. But what Lucy hadn’t said was what had taken its place.

While the kettle boiled, Veronica looked around, appraising the house with professional eyes. It was light and airy. In place of old brown sofas

and 70's patterned curtains, were elegant Amethyst sofas with silver cushions, from a very upmarket catalogue. Muted silver curtains hung at the windows. The walls were a soft dusky pink, and a new rug in complementing colors lay on polished hardwood floors. Drab family portraits had been replaced by pretty watercolors. It was a beautiful room. Who knew there was such a talented designer in this little village? She'd have to find out who they were. Such talent shouldn't be hidden away.

The transformation continued in the dining room. An elegant round, oak table was surrounded by bucket chairs in burgundy flocked velvet, accentuated by burgundy drapes. A breathtaking landscape painting adorned one wall. It was original oil, and by a talented artist, who'd signed only the initials MG.

The kitchen too had been redone, old pine cupboards replaced by sleek white, navy speckled countertops, and shiny new appliances. The whole house reeked of casual elegance, which didn't come cheaply, as Veronica knew too well. Where had her mother found the money for this? She really had to get the name of her mother's decorator! The house would be easy to sell looking like this, although she doubted Mother would be going anywhere anytime soon - the woman she'd met upstairs was clearly very much in command of her facilities. Veronica on the other hand was feeling very confused.

Veronica carried the tea tray to the conservatory. This too had been transformed with sunny, yellow-cushioned cane furniture and huge palms. She sat looking at her watch, tapping her feet impatiently. She really needed to get to the bottom of all this quickly, so she could go back home tomorrow.

Finally, Mother joined her, elegant in fitted beige slacks and a cream silk blouse. Behind her trailed The Voice. He was tall, tanned, grey hair speckled with dark. She looked more closely at warm brown eyes, and a friendly mustached face and she realized, he was probably around her mother's age. Not a toy boy then. His clothes were well-tailored, and she'd even go so far as to call him distinguished, a little too suave to be trustworthy.

"Ronnie this is Tom," Ronnie ignored the hand he offered.

"It's nice to meet you," he said warmly. "Maggie has told me a lot about you."

"I wish I could say the same! What are you doing here?"

"Ronnie don't be so rude. Sit down and pour the tea. I brought you up to be better than this."

"She's concerned about you. Why don't I leave you to chat, and I'll come back later?"

"Perhaps that might be better. Are we still going out tonight?"

“Of course, I’ll pick you up around six.” He stooped and kissed her mother gently.

“Mother, what on earth is going on?”

“Oh Ronnie, isn’t he wonderful? I’m glad you’ve finally met him. I’ve been hoping you’d come and meet him.”

“I’ve been really busy. But never mind that – what does he want? Is he after your money?”

“He most certainly is not! In fact, he has plenty of his own. “

“But then what is he doing with you?” Ronnie asked.

“Ronnie! We met on the cruise. We liked each other immediately. We’ve been inseparable since. Oh, Ronnie, I think I’m in love with him.”

“Mother!”

“Ronnie do grow up. I’m older, not dead, and I want to enjoy my life. In fact, I’m having a ball”

“So that’s what this is all about – trying to regain your youth?”

“It’s more than that. I loved being a wife and a mother, and watching you grow up. For so long, my life was focused on everyone else. I’m enjoying myself.”

“You sound like you regret it?”

“No, Ronnie, not for a moment. But you’ve all got lives of your own, and I want mine.”

“If you’re lonely, you could have said. I should have visited more.”

“Yes, you should have visited more, but I know you’re busy. I know what it’s like to have a young family and a husband, and you have your career on top of that. Anyway, I would still have wanted Tom in my life.”

“But what about Dad? What would he think?”

“I loved him, but he’s been gone a long time. Don’t you think he’d be happy for me? I don’t want to be the old woman sitting in a nursing home filled with regrets. I want to be the one I read about on Facebook who everyone is wondering what she’s up to.”

“You’re on Facebook?”

“How else do you think I keep up with my grandchildren?”

Ronnie hung her head feeling chastised. “I’m sorry. I’ll bring them to visit more often.”

“That would be lovely, but I think you owe Tom an apology. You were awfully rude to him.”

“Oh, alright, I’ll apologize. Mother, please don’t call me Ronnie.”

Veronica changed tack. “What have you done to the house? Wherever did you find such a wonderful designer?”

“Ronnie,” she sighed. “I designed and decorated it, with some help from Tom. Oh Ronnie, you really have to stop looking at me like that.”

“I didn’t know you were so artistic.”

“Where do you think your talent comes from? I planned on going to art college until I met your father.”

“But I’ve never seen you paint or draw.”

“No, there was never any time when you were younger, but I started again a few years ago. I didn’t really think I was that good, but Tom encouraged me to hang my pictures in the house.”

“You painted those? They’re beautiful.”

“I know. I’ve sold quite a few too.”

“But what about all the old furniture and paintings? What have you done with them?”

“Your Dad chose that furniture—it was always too big and chunky for my taste, but it was good for a family. The sofas were worn, so I got rid of the lot. The family portraits are in the loft. They were very drab.”

“How could you take down the family portraits? Some of them are quite valuable.”

“If you like them so much, you can have them.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Tom is a bad influence. Look, I don’t want to fight. I’m going to put my things in my room.” Mother opened her mouth.

“No, don’t say anything more. I need some space.” Veronica stomped out. Maggie smiled softly, waiting for the next outburst. How could she make Ronnie understand?=
=

Veronica flounced back into the conservatory a few moments later.

“Mother, what have you done to my room?”

“You don’t have a room. You don’t live here anymore. You have your own home and family, and I have an art studio. The light in there is perfect.”

“But my things? What did you do with my stuff?”

“It’s all in the loft. You can take anything you want.”

“But mother, those things, this house, our childhood. How could you throw it all away?”

“Ronnie, those were good times, happy times, but I am not going to live in the past. Neither should you.”

Maggie looked at her watch. “I have a hairdresser’s appointment. As you’re so concerned about the stuff why don’t you sort through it while I’m out? Anything you don’t want can go to charity.”

Veronica groaned when she saw the mountain of boxes in the loft. Not only had Lucy tricked her into this visit, and now her mother had tricked her into cleaning out the loft. Fortunately, the boxes were labeled, and she saw hers immediately. Then, she noticed some sketchbooks, on top of a pile of faded photo albums. She carried the pile to the guest room and began leafing through them. Her mother’s name was inside the front cover. The pages were filled with exquisitely detailed drawings, so accurate she mistook them for

photographs at first. Talent like this was too special to be buried in an attic!

Veronica flipped through the photo albums, running her fingers down the pages. Her mother was so beautiful in her wedding pictures. Then came the baby pics, and Veronica saw how as she and Lucy grew, mother's clothes grew less fashionable, her hair more simply styled, weight slowly increasing, gradually replaced by a dowdy widow. Ronnie thought about her mother's immaculate appearance at tea this morning. Mother had emerged from that cocoon into a butterfly.

Veronica's wedding photos were in the next album, and she stared at her own radiant face. She looked so happy there, her face unlined, not a touch of the grey she fought relentlessly. She was thinner now, hair still immaculate, but it took so much concealer to hide the bags under her eyes. Trying to have it all, she was run ragged balancing family, business and keeping up appearances. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been as happy as in that photo, or as happy as her mother looked now. There was a lesson here, and suddenly, Veronica knew she didn't want to repeat history.

Laughter echoed from outside. Ronnie looked out to see Tom and her mother in the garden. Mother looked gorgeous, younger even. There was no mistaking the happiness that radiated from her. How could she have been so wrong? Veronica cringed when she

remembered how rude she'd been. Cheeks flushed; she went downstairs.



“Mother, Tom I’m so sorry. I owe you both an apology. I’m really sorry. Mom, it’s good to see you happy. I’m pleased for you.”

“Thank you pet. I knew you’d come round.”

“Just so you know, my intentions are honorable—I want to make an honest woman out of your mother if she’ll let me.”

“And I told him that I wanted my daughters’ approval before I accepted, but you never visit, so Lucy said she’d get you here.”

“Lucy! I should have known! You’d never believe the things she told.”

“It’s good to know I can still surprise you, although I didn’t plan on you arriving at quite such an inconvenient moment.”

“Yes, I think I need to give you back your key. I will phone you beforehand next time. And bring my family.”

“I’d like that. I’ll phone your sister, and we can all go out for dinner together.”

“Oh, I’ll do that. It’s the least I can do after what she’s put me through.”

Veronica picked up her phone imbuing her voice with leaden tones, “Lucy I’m at mother’s. It’s serious. We have to talk. Can you come round now?”

“What’s wrong? What happened? You were supposed to sort everything out. Ronneeeee what have you done?”

Veronica laughed. “I haven’t done anything, but Mom’s helped me come to my senses.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Denice Penrose is a freelance writer, who has a patchwork of jobs on Academic Research Projects. She lives in England with her husband, and kowtows to the six cats, who are their furry children.

Follow her on Twitter @denicepenrose or through her blog: the-write-link.webnode.com

NATIONS APART

An Novel Excerpt by EMIL REM

“Pops, can we go visit Italy this summer? I have a social studies course on it next September.”

How could I refuse?

“Lex, if you want to understand a country better, you should compare it to another completely different in character. How about if we start in Switzerland and end in Italy?”

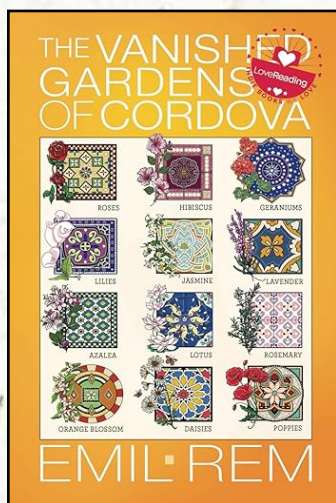
I never realized the two would be sooo different.

Arriving at our downtown Zurich hotel by taxi from the airport, we were not met by a glamorous, smiling, cosmetic-laden receptionist in her twenties, but a man in his thirties wearing a grey suit with every crease in line. He was as stiff as cardboard. Everything was formal and to the point. No smile. No words of welcome.

Zurich became our home base as we travelled by train to various towns and sites in Switzerland on day trips.

Our first excursion was to the lovely medieval town of Lucerne. Set beside a lake, we had to traverse an ancient narrow wooden zig-zag pedestrian bridge to enter the town. The whole length of the bridge was covered in a wooden sloped roof. Why? To guard the city. If invaders arrived, local archers would man the bridge and fend them off. The roof protected them from arrows. The narrowness of the bridge prevented a mass attack on the town.

Crossing the main square, Laura espied a gift store. It displayed various handmade Swiss cuckoo clocks. Since a child in the Philippines, her dream was to visit Switzerland and purchase such a clock. The store was full of them in every size and colour. Naively, I asked the elderly owner “Are there any for sale?” She glared at me. “We do NOT have sales. EVER.”



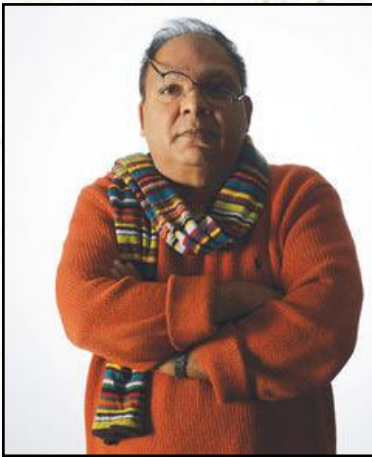
The clock cost hundreds of dollars. There was a saving grace. The 20%+ sales tax could be refunded as we were visitors. “Do you have a refund tax form? We are leaving for Italy next, by train.”

“No sir. I will write you our standard invoice. Present it on the train to the Italian border customs and let them stamp it for you to process.” No smile, no have a pleasant trip. Nada.

The Vanished Gardens of Cordova, by Emil Rem, is his third novel. Using his signature blend of personal memories interwoven with history and depictions of his ongoing travels, the author takes us through Spain and Gibraltar—creating an insightful narrative around a vivid host of characters and experiences on this journey to rediscover the ‘vanished’ landscapes of his culture and his childhood.

Discover the book [HERE](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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

Learn more on his website: <https://emilrem.ca/>

JOHN 16.33

A Poem by ROLY ANDREWS

The ship and the promise contained within were a mirage.
She cursed her damned hope.
She cursed the wind.

Why did it blow so shallow, so hollow?

Whispering zephyrs offered little but vacant noise.

Leave me be, she cried.

She needed more than words.

She needed salve to heal her wounds.

Love to give her strength and dreams to nourish and savor.

Raising her hand against the breeze,

She shouted, enough. I alone will fight the fight.

I alone will forge my path.

The wind stopped.

She smiled and continued walking.

This time searching for salvation on her own terms.

Nb: *This is a companion piece to John 3:8 – published previously.*

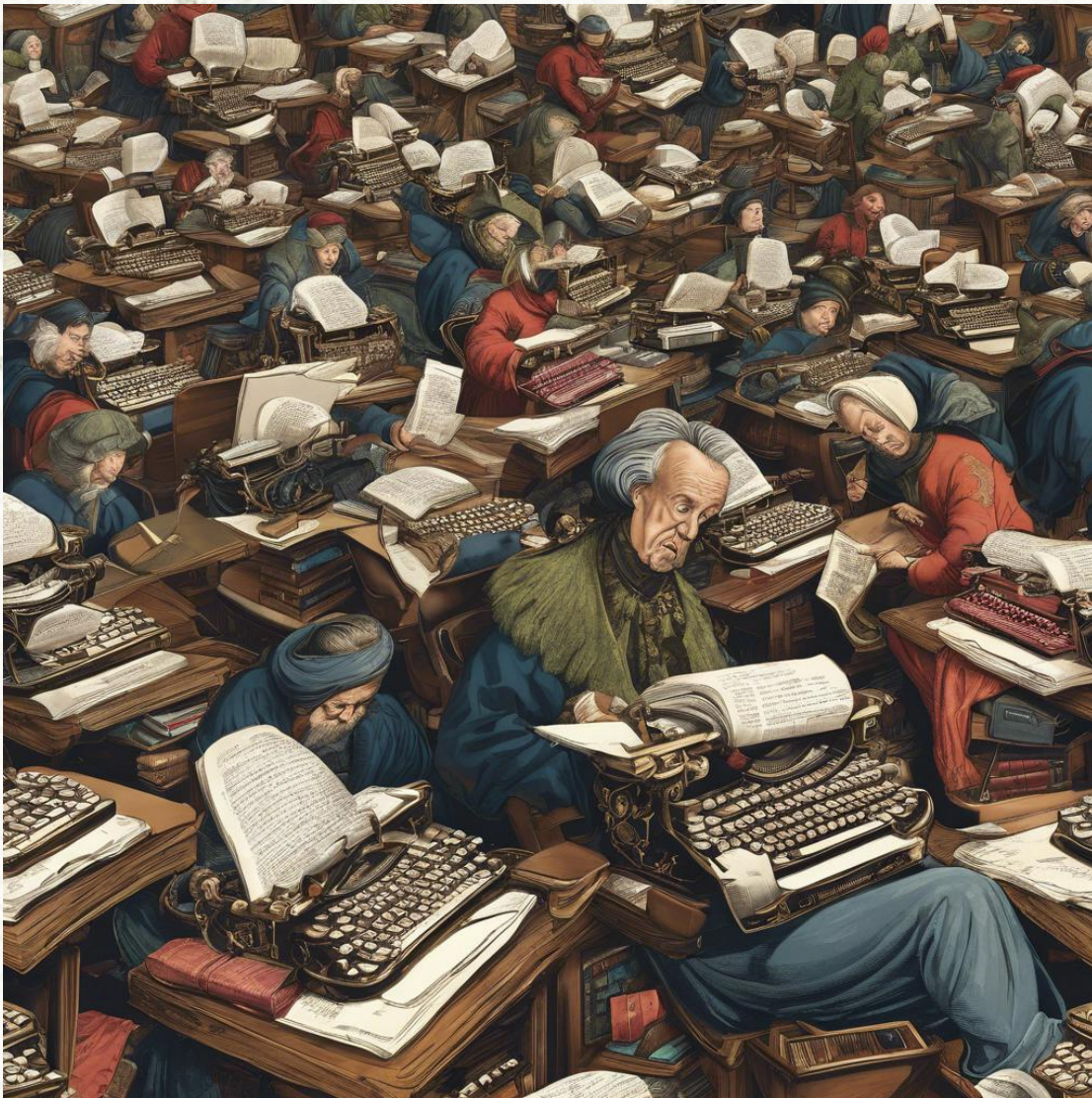
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roly Andrews lives in Nelson, NZ. In his spare time, he enjoys tramping. After many years of practicing, he is still trying to learn to



play the trombone! A champion for everyone, he has mentored rough sleepers and supported people affected by suicide. He advocates for the rights of people living with disabilities.

You can find him at <https://rolyandrewsauthor.com/>



FACT

**Did you Know that Identical
Twins have different
fingerprints?**



**Mystery writers might find
that interesting.**

Source: [science.org](https://www.science.org)

POLL

Who was the best movie President of the United States?

While the country is embroiled in the nasty politics of an election year, and without commentary about any of the candidates, I thought it would be fun to see who was the best movie president.

Here are the candidates:

Kevin Kline: Dave 1993

Michael Douglas: The American President 1995

Jack Nicholson: Mars Attacks 1996

Bill Pullman: Independence Day 1996

Harrison Ford: Air Force One 1997

Morgan Freeman: Deep Impact 1998

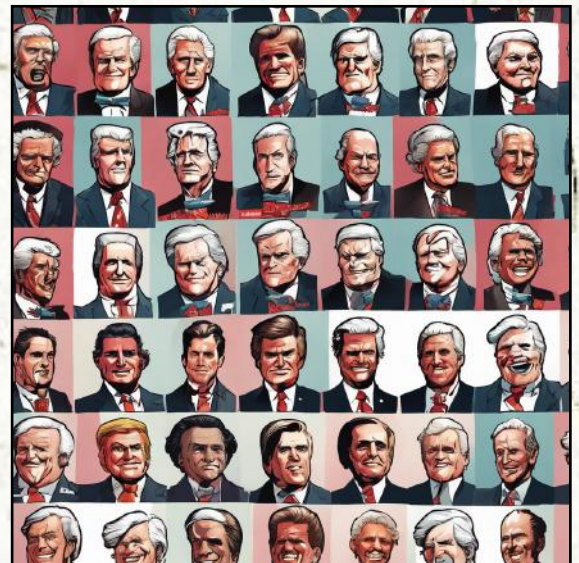
John Travolta: Primary Colors 1998

Jeff Bridges: The Contender 2000

Billy Bob Thornton: Love Actually 2003

Geena Davis: Commander in Chief 2005

Jamie Foxx: White House Down 2013



To cast your vote click [HERE](#). Your answers are anonymous. Please select only one answer. More than one selection will void your result.

©2024 William Gensburger
All Rights Reserved
www.BooksNPieces.com





Dear Reader,

We've reached the end of this issue. I hope you enjoyed it. If so, please let me know [HERE](#).

There is more to be found on our website at www.BooksNPieces.com and be sure to sign up for our mailing list.

~ William G