

# B&P

BOOKS & PIECES MAGAZINE  
NOVEMBER 2024

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TO READ**

## Reading That's Out of This World!

### IN THIS ISSUE:

**Zeke Jarvis  
Alfred Garrotto  
Cary Barney  
Tim Hanson  
Franklin Dong  
Zary Fekete  
Alysa Thompson  
Betsy Robinson  
Jill Hedgecock**

### Featured:

**Nathalie  
Plamondon-Thomas  
Sebastien de Castell**

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

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# INSIDE THIS NOVEMBER 2024 ISSUE

STORIES | POETRY | ART | PHOTOGRAPHY | MUSIC | INTERVIEWS | COOKING |  
FACTOIDS | BOOK REVIEWS | MOVIE REVIEWS | PRODUCT REVIEWS

*(note: Everything is Hyperlinked)*

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• **Tim Hanson** • **Franklin Dong**  
• **Zary Fekete** • **Alysa Thompson**  
• **Betsy Robinson** • **Jill Hedgecock**

**HAPPENINGS:** **Out of Poland**

**VIDEO | PHOTOGRAPHY | FACTS | TIPS**

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## INKDROPS: November 2024

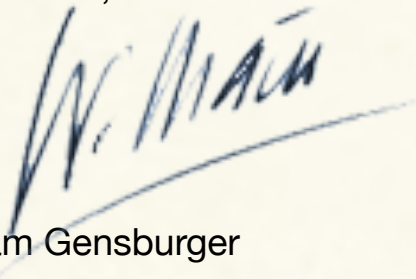
The year is rapidly running out. And quite a year it has been.

As we prepare for next year, we would like **your feedback**. What do you enjoy about the magazine? What would you like more of? Less of? Things you would like to see that we do not have? What would make this an outstanding magazine for you to read? Please email me at [editor@BooksNPieces.com](mailto:editor@BooksNPieces.com) and let me know.

Would you be interested in a poll of your favorite short story, poem, article of the year?

Please **share our magazine** with your friends and family and your **social media** contacts. It is difficult for any publication to grow, and usually, word of mouth is the best way. **If you enjoy this magazine, please help us spread the word.**

Enjoy this issue, and please let us know what you think.  
All the best,



William Gensburger

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# Facts

## **BEST PIECE OF ADVICE**

“Never criticize your spouse’s faults; if it weren’t for them, your mate might have found someone better than you.” —Jay Trachman





# Eat the Rich

A short story by Zeke Jarvis

The thing about the guy was nobody really trusted him when he first got into town. He was like a ghost, coming in without anyone really seeing him but still having some kind of presence in the town. Or over the town. But our town was going through some tough times, so we couldn't really afford to chase him away, either. Mayor Bob talked him up about what he'd bring to the town, like jobs and development. He bought three lots together, sight unseen. The old Jenkins place, the Harpers' right next to it, and the empty lot behind the Harpers'. That was fine with everyone. The guy knocked both houses down and built, and that was fine too. This was still before he'd actually got to town.

When he did get here, he brought some exotic animals with him. It sounded cool in principle, but it actually freaked a lot of us out once he got here with them. Most of us didn't see the animals when he first moved in, but we'd hear things. Things that didn't quite sound like a lion or tiger—definitely weren't wolves, but something else, and he never talked to anybody what they were. Mayor Bob asked him once about opening up the yard to tours now and then, letting the community see the exotic animals. I guess the guy just laughed and told Mayor Bob to get off his property.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the guy went and bought one of the cemeteries not long after getting to town. Like I said, the town didn't have a

lot of money, and graveyards aren't really profitable in a town like ours, and I guess he made a good offer. The guy bought it not long after Mayor Bob went to visit about the animals. At first, we didn't think much of it. The guy was obviously kind of an oddball, so maybe he just liked the idea of owning a cemetery. But then some people saw things, driving by it at night. Like the guy was letting his animals run loose.

The first person to see something was Gary W.—and you know Gary W. likes to drink—so we just kind of laughed it off.

“Sure Gary, maybe he has werewolves running around checking for zombies.” But then other people started seeing it too. Never quite seeing what exactly was there, only that it was too big to be a raccoon or a dog, and it didn't look like a person. And we went to visit our loved ones buried there, things were different. Not ruined, not dug up, but there was a kind of energy that made us feel uncomfortable. It didn't take long and we were all creeped out whether we went inside the cemetery or not. Felt a little shaky when we went by it. Kids would draw weird pictures in school. Teens would dare each other to go in at night, but they'd always chicken out, which was probably best. After a while, we asked Mayor Bob to go talk to the guy, and Mayor Bob tried, but the guy told Mayor Bob that he'd bought the land and that was that. It was true, so Mayor Bob couldn't do much but come back to us and apologize.

There was talk of going and pounding on the guy's door, telling him he couldn't let wild animals run loose over our dead loved ones, but people lost their nerves when it came time to choose who would head that up. Those growls and howls were so strange, and you couldn't really tell when the guy was in the house. Most of us never saw him.



The only person who didn't lose nerve was Kay Lerner (you know she's a little off, but that comes in handy sometimes). Kay told us not to worry about it, which, of course, worried us. Or, it made us worry more and differently. After a couple of weeks of knowing that weird animals were running loose in the cemetery, nobody could sleep well to begin with. We were all tired and jumpy and generally on edge. Most people had stopped visiting their loved ones' graves all together, and, even if she was a little off, none of us wanted to see Kay get hurt.

Kay didn't go knock on the guy's door, and she didn't talk to Mayor Bob. She just asked a group of ladies to watch outside the cemetery as she went in one night. She went over to where her mom and dad were buried, and she started laying things out on the ground. It didn't take long, and some shadows started prowling around. The ladies outside started yelling, but Kay didn't pay any attention at all, just kept laying things down and talking to the graves. When the guy eventually came to the front gate, Kay stood up, even before he went in.

The guy looked at all the women, said, "You shouldn't be here," and went into the cemetery, closing the gate behind him.

Kay and the guy had words, though none of the women outside could quite make out what was said. Eventually, Kay did come out. She stopped by the women and said, "I thank you for witnessing. You can go home now."

They waited a bit after Kay left, then, they did go home. The guy stayed in the cemetery, the shadows prowling around him. It was two days later that Kay was found. Her body was on the side of a backroad when a group of teens found it. Her throat was ripped out and part of her face was eaten off. Most of us didn't see it, but everyone who did said that the half of Kay's

face that was left looked shocked or sad or something. They couldn't quite describe it, but it was clear that whatever did it wasn't human.

On the one hand, we all knew that the guy's exotic animals had done it, probably with him training them to. On the other hand, not a single one of us could prove it, so there was nothing that we could do. Just talk in hushed tones and get more creeped out about what was happening in the cemetery.

What some rich prick was letting happen to the bodies of our parents, our siblings, and, for a few, our children. The night of Kay's funeral, all of the women who'd been standing watch had the exact same dream. Kay told them not to worry but anything, she'd take care of it.

Leading up to the funeral, there was some back and forth between Mayor Bob and the guy about what should happen to Kay's body. At first, he didn't want Kay to be in the cemetery, but he wouldn't explain why, and Mayor Bob was sure that, if she didn't end up there, there'd be torches and pitchforks.

Eventually, the guy just shrugged it off and let Kay be buried in there. That was his second mistake, we all figure. His first was sending those animals after Kay. Or maybe those were his second and third, and his first was to buy the cemetery in the first place.

Whatever the case, it was only a few days later when the howling and yowling started. Everyone in town heard it, even if you didn't exactly hear it. You felt it in your bones. At first, nobody wanted to check it out, and we all stayed in our houses. But, then, after it went quiet all of the sudden, some of us got even more spooked, and the phone calls started. So Andy (our sheriff), headed over to the guy's place. He called to the guy, but nobody answered, so Andy opened the front gate, pulled out his gun, and walked to the door. He looked around, waiting for some kind of bear or big



cat to come after him, but there weren't any to be found, so he knocked on the front door. Still nothing. He called to the guy again, looked around, and, eventually, figured that he had to bust down the door.

Poor Andy. When he went in, he saw something in the shape of a man, but all the parts of a man were gone. Eye sockets empty, all the teeth ripped out, no insides to speak of. It was like someone had put a vacuum tube up inside the guy and sucked out everything but the skin, hair, and bone. Not any blood, just a lifeless husk sitting in a chair waiting to be found. Andy ran out of the house to throw up, and none of us blamed him.

The official story was that the exotic animals must have attacked and killed the guy, then they must have escaped into the woods in the area, but nobody believes that. That's because of the ladies' shared dream and one other detail. That detail has to do with the gravesites of Kay and her two parents. Now Kay's grave, you'd expect to have fresh dirt, because she'd just been put in, but it looked for all the world like her parents' graves had fresh dirt, too. We only ever noticed because a few of us went into the cemetery to see if the animals were there. The new dirt on the parents' graves didn't make any sense, but nobody wanted to question it. Especially given that we were finally sleeping all right again (all except for Andy, that is).

The night after the guy was gone, we all slept like babies. The town itself was quite as a grave, and we all hope it stays that way. //

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Zeke Jarvis (he/him/his) is a Professor of English at Eureka College. His work has appeared in Moon City Review, Posit, and KNOCK, among other places. His books include, So



Anyway..., In A Family Way, The Three of Them, and Antisocial Norms. His website is [zekedotjarvis.wordpress.com](http://zekedotjarvis.wordpress.com)





## An Interview with

# Nathalie Plamondon-Thomas



2021 Canadian Presenter of the Year Nathalie Plamondon-Thomas is a Confidence Expert. She is the international No.1 Bestselling Author of seventeen books about success, communication, wellness and empowerment. She has proven that negative self-talk, imposter syndrome, resistance to change, past trauma, and low performance can all be addressed with increased confidence. She is the Founder and CEO of the THINK Yourself® ACADEMY, offering keynotes and trainings, leading-edge online courses, laser-focus business strategies and one-on-one transformation coaching.

### **Q: How did you start your career in writing?**

Firstly, I must mention the elephant in the room. Picture yourself as a French Canadian with very broken English. The idea of writing a book in English or having a “career in writing” was really not part of what I thought could be possible. The voice in my head was telling me: “What? You want to write books, in English? It’s never gonna work, you’re not good enough!” And unfortunately, I know I am the not the only one. Research shows that 70% of our thoughts are negative and that 85% of people lack of self-confidence in at least one area of their life. So back then, I did not know what I know now about neurosciences. I was a personal trainer, fitness

instructor and nutrition and wellness specialist in the fitness industry. I realized that my clients would have better results if I was able to give them a more global approach and deeper advice than the ones that can be shared while doing bicep curls. I started a series of conferences which were very popular and well attended. Many were asking to receive my power point presentations and my notes after participating in a conference so I thought that having a book on the topic would be a perfect complement for them to get to the next level. But first, I had to get rid of the negative voice in my head. So I studied neurosciences and created a system to transform negative self-talk and limiting beliefs so that I could tackle my first book. Fast-track 17 books later, I now share that system in my books, in my online courses, on stages around the world and with my one-on-one coaching clients.

**Q: How does it feel having successfully published seventeen books about success, communication, wellness and empowerment?**

It makes me realize that if me, a small town girl that did not even speak English can do this, that means that everybody can. I know that each book has been better than the previous one, that I gained experience writing them, I now have a very efficient and solid system that contributes to fast tracking the process. It makes realize that like anything else, we start being uncomfortable and with practice, we get better. But, perseverance is not the only factor that I want to point out here. I now am able to work smarter. Seeing my clients skip over all the mistakes I made and use my systems to succeed faster than I ever did is really what provides me with the best



feelings. That learning can now be transmitted to others so that they don't need to write 17 books to get it right.

**Q: Tell us what it was like for you publishing a book co-written with Jim Britt and Kevin Harrington from the TV Show SHARK TANK, and endorsed by Tony Robbins.**

When I started speaking on Confidence and Mindset 15 years ago, I cannot say that people were lining up to hire me. But now, I am very busy. Highly successful entrepreneurs in the major leagues have understood that Mindset and Confidence is everything. When Jim Britt contacted me on LinkedIn, I actually asked for a Zoom conversation “face-to-face” so that I could see it was really him and not just someone impersonating him. We had a glorious conversation which in the end, we were not really sure who was interviewing who. It was a perfect fit. I have learned a lot in the process of getting to know them better and we continue to meet monthly in a mastermind where we support each other to get to the next level in our respective business and life. Jim often invites surprise-guest luminaries to our mastermind calls, including legends like Denis Waitley and Mark Victor Hansen. Conversations and open-questions with these notorious writers and entrepreneurs is continuing to benefit to the book experience. My mom used to say that you can't put your hand in a bucket of glue, without some of that glue sticking – I think she took this from Stephen Covey and she was only telling me this so that I would stay away from the bad boys at school – but someone, still today, I love and take every opportunity to learn from everyone around me. Surrounding myself with driven speakers, writers,

entrepreneurs that understand me and “get me” has been a huge key to my personal success.

**Q: When did your idea for your latest book, *Think Yourself Confident*, start to form?**

The book idea goes back almost 20 years. Let’s go back to the days when I was just starting out teaching fitness, at a gym in Toronto. I was not super confident; I’m sure you’ve been there before, maybe not in a gym but in some other setting where you were brand new and a little out of your element. You’re not sure what you’re doing, you’re not popular, you don’t know anybody, or you’re new in the area and haven’t really found your feet yet. That’s where I was in my first few months at this gym. So what happened between me begging my boss not to remove my class from the schedule because of the low numbers, and being awarded fitness instructor of the year for the whole country, less than a year later?

The gym was introducing a new dance program. We put together a group to demonstrate it at the next instructor’s meeting of the Greater Toronto Area; there were about 100 people in the audience, all local fitness pros. So picture this: You are on stage in front of 100+ fitness pro, all much better than you, you are really intimidated but you are “giving your all”. You are starting to feel pretty good and you can just feel all the eyes in the crowd turning towards you. You know you are drawing attention and everyone has this shocked look on their faces! You are thinking "Oh my gosh, they're so impressed with my dance skills! They had no idea I was this good at dancing!" You’re having the best time on stage and can really feel all the energy coming from the audience.



I don't know what this would do for you, but for me, it made a huge impact on my life. It was a real turning point. We finished the number, and I was amped. My confidence was through the roof! That performance totally changed me. I started strutting around in the gym and putting my hand up to become team leader, I was so confident that my teaching style exploded, and my classes started to get packed. Everybody was so impressed with how I well I was doing.

Much later, I was chatting with one of my colleagues in the locker room, and she said to me: "I'm so impressed with you, Nathalie. Even after what happened to you that day, you're still so confident, and you've been acting like you own the place instead of being embarrassed. Everybody really respects you because you didn't let it bother you at all."

Excuse me?! What was she talking about? Well, it turned out that, unbeknownst to me, I'd had a wardrobe malfunction that day, and my breast was sticking out during the whole performance. That's why people were looking at me with shocked looks on their faces. They were looking at me in amazement, alright. But for a very different reason than I thought!

But I had no idea, and for weeks afterward, I was this super confident person. Once I heard about this, of course, I kind of wanted to disappear, but only for a few minutes; by then, it was too late, I was already the queen of the gym, boob malfunction or not. Because, honestly? I still felt absolutely amazing. Although the story I'd had in my head was not the right one, it completely changed my mindset, and it just hadn't mattered. One of the most embarrassing moments of my life had a much different impact for me than it might have, because of that story of success I had in my head. What mattered most was my mindset around it.

The book came from this lesson. That is when the system started to take form and I was able to create a process to apply it to your daily life. It took many years and many books in the THINK Yourself® SERIES to really gather case studies, testimonials, facts and to perfect my system to create my signature THINK Yourself® CONFIDENT book. It is a cumulative of everything I have learned from the past 15 years working with my clients and learning from my audiences around the world.

**Q: What are some of the main points that you discuss in your book, Think Yourself Confident?**

Statistics show that 85% of people suffer from a lack of self-confidence in at least one area of their lives. Draining negative self-talk creates procrastination, stress, anxiety, and burnout. People know what they want or need to do, and yet they do the reverse—they resist change and can't adapt to the fast world we live in. That makes them feel powerless, frustrated, and insecure. In a work environment, this can lead to a demotivated and unhappy team, low overall performance and a high employee turnover rate. With the layers of stress people are already buried under, important decisions are clouded by emotions or limiting beliefs, instead of being based on skills and experience. Bottom line: whether on a personal or professional level, most people admit to not working—or living—at their full potential.

The book explains my D.N.A. System, through which readers discover 15 proven Keys to Confidence, real-life, simple skills and strategies to transform your inner thoughts and beliefs into a serving force that will empower you to be your best and thrive through change. In one sentence:



this book ignites performance and gets you the tools you need to **THINK Yourself® CONFIDENT.**



**Q: Share with us, readers, what your company, THINK Yourself® ACADEMY, is and what it offers?**

The THINK Yourself® ACADEMY, offers keynotes and trainings, leading-edge online courses, books, laser-focus business strategy and one-on-one transformation coaching. By offering a full package to organizations and associations of entrepreneurs, we are able to really address the challenges they face with stress, adapting to constant change, employee rotation, imposter syndrome, low performance, negative mindset, etc. I often use the fitness industry as an example: If you want to lose 50 lbs and you hire a personal trainer, you cannot expect the pounds to magically disappear after ONE session. So, yes, a keynote, a conference, a book gets people started on a mindset journey, but if it ends after the one hour keynote. People go back to their busy agendas, put their notes on the shelf and it becomes shelf-help. In order to make a difference, there is a series of events, products, books, courses, strategic coaching that are involved in the

process. Hence the vision to create the THINK Yourself® ACADEMY as a one-stop shop for all-things-mindset related that really unlock full potential.

**Q: How would you describe your writing style?**

As some of my books were conferences that I recorded and transcribed as the first draft of my manuscript, and because English is my third language, my writing style is very easy to understand. I have been crown the Queen of Metaphors many times as I used stories and analogies to make it easy to relate to a concept. Neurosciences in laymens' terms.

**Q: For aspiring writers, what is your advice for them?**

Here are a four tips:

1. Before giving everything you got to ONE book, identify if you potentially have a book series in your head.
2. Break down your book into 3-5 or 7 parts and for each part, divide in 3 or 4 pieces of content per part. For example: if you choose a 5-part book you will have about 20 chapters to write. Then write a weekly blog for 20 weeks about each of these sub-ideas. After 5 months, you will have blogged your way into a book.
3. Collect testimonials and case studies that you can use in your book.
4. Allow your book to be “old” as soon as it will be released. As we all evolve very fast, it is perfectly normal for our books to needing to be updated every so often. So just write, publish and allow yourself to be done with it even though you will always feel that you could add more. You will do so in the version 2.0. of the book. Just publish it and the next one will



have what you forgot. Don't let perfection keep you from becoming a published author.

### **Q: Do you outline your books or just dive into writing them?**

#### **Where do you get your ideas from?**

I follow a plan. I break it down in parts and only have to write one part at a time. I have blogged my way into some books, I have transformed recorded online courses into some books, I have also written a book that would become my blog for the next 6 months: 27 tips to live a vibrant life. I was tired of the panic every week not knowing what to write on my blog so I rented a house in California with a pool for 2 weeks and I wrote 27 tips. It became a No.1 bestseller (THINK Yourself® HEALTHY) and gave me content for the next 27 weeks for my blog. Win-win.

Where do I find my ideas: I listen to my clients problems. What is the advice that I keep repeating like a broken record? What is googled the most about this topic? I go into social media groups and see what challenges are people facing. Then I find solutions and publish the answers. I do the same when creating online courses. I survey my audience and I tell them that I am about to launch a new course on a certain topic and ask them what they would want to see covered. I also have a button on my website for people to be alerted when the course is ready. I wait until I have enough people interested and then I create the course for them. So I really listen to what people want. I use to create content about what I wanted until I realized I needed to respond to a demand instead. During the pandemic, I created a lot of content for entrepreneurs: THINK Yourself® A MARKETING PRO, THINK Yourself® A SALES PRO, THINK Yourself® A TECH PRO, etc. As I had moved my business online 4 years prior to the pandemic, a lot of

people came to me saying: “I know you want to teach me how to be confident, but what I need right now, is to know how you build your Academy and how to transform my social media fans into paying clients.” So after multiples one-on-one sessions with entrepreneurs asking me the same thing over and over, I created the online courses responding to exactly what they wanted. I am very close to my followers and I create what they need. It is no longer about how I can be successful but more about how I can serve.

**Q: Tell us, readers, what other projects you are working on, if any.**

As I am writing this outside in my bathing suit in the middle of the cold canadian winter, I am in Palm Desert for two months and I have been able to automate my business so that I can work only 9 months per year. So my project right now, beside working out, hiking, spending time a the pool and playing cards with my husband, is to do some long-term planning as I review my multiple projects on my Trello Board. I am having each idea re-audition to deserve a spot in my calendar. I have learned that I am at my best when I take some breaks and when I work smarter. I have been the Queen of NOs lately. There are so many things I could be doing and I have been saying No to everything in order to evaluate what I really want to say YES to.

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

Email: [nathalie@thinkyourself.com](mailto:nathalie@thinkyourself.com)

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



Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/nathalie.plamondonthomas>

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

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/nathalie-plamondon-thomas-6b3262a/>

Instagram: @nathaliepthinkyourself - <https://www.instagram.com/nathaliepthinkyourself/>

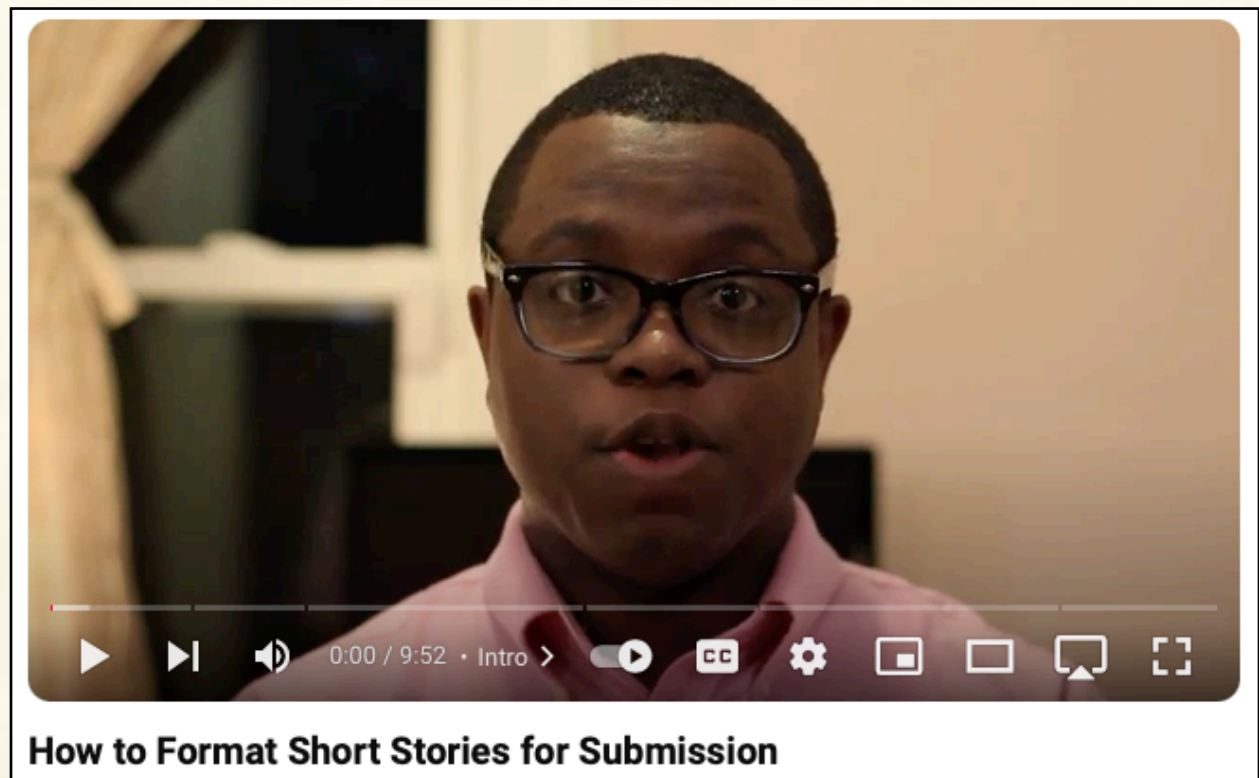
YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/c/NathaliePlamondonThomas>

Book your FREE 15-min Virtual Coffee: [www.thinkyourself.com/schedule](http://www.thinkyourself.com/schedule)

Downloadable Speaker Kit: <https://thinkyourself.com/speaking-kit/>

Books: <https://www.amazon.ca/Nathalie-Plamondon-Thomas/e/BooJEEQTGC>

Podcast: <https://thinkyourself.com/podcast/>



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# Love Emeritus

A Poem by  
Alfred J. Garrotto

‘I love you’  
and its evil twin  
‘Luv ya’

how they flow across the tongue  
glib but tired half-true habits  
drones in need of overhaul

soundless noise  
unmeant unheard  
invalid password  
instinct-blocked from other’s heart

what eager understudy  
waits in wings of romance —  
love’s more genuine self?

what if?  
what if instead I said,  
“I cherish you.”

ahh, ‘cherish’ . . .  
to hold another dear  
take care of  
protect  
foster

‘cherish’  
all-in



naught in safe reserve  
Cupid's sharpest arrow  
costing the lover  
delighting the beloved

'cherish'  
now there's love's worthy sub

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## ABOUT THE POET



Alfred J. Garrotto is the author of 16 books (fiction, nonfiction and poetry) covering a wide range of topics from mystery to romance to classical and the Arts. He has been previously published in Books & Pieces Magazine. You can find him at <https://www.facebook.com/AlfredJGarrottoAuthor/>



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si=OV\\_AW545ABhRCc0w](https://youtu.be/QLAGwDH_-R0?si=OV_AW545ABhRCc0w)

# Salou

## A Short Story by Cary Barney

*Registration records showed that Mr. Atta stayed at the Casablanca Playa Hotel in Salou on July 16 and at the Montsant the next night. But the police do not know where he spent the rest of his time.*

*(New York Times, May 1, 2002)*

**K**aren's father slowly turns his head from the TV and fixes her with his eyes across the kitchen table. The TV is on during dinner, as always, in its alcove next to the refrigerator. It's one of three in the house: a huge one in the living room and another small one in her parents' bedroom. All three have been showing the same thing for the last two days, like all the televisions in the Netherlands, like all the televisions in the world. The towers fall over and over again.

He doesn't say anything, but Karen can still feel his eyes on her. She just nods. He probably takes it as a gesture of surrender, an admission she's been wrong to defend immigration, wrong to take part in her high school video project interviewing Muslims about the prejudice they encounter in Rotterdam. Wrong to have Arab boyfriends.

"Normal people like you and me who love peace and just want to live their lives," he says quietly, not mimicking her. He's not that cruel. She closes her eyes and nods again, hoping he will stop looking at her. He's waiting for an answer. She won't give him one, but not for the reason he thinks.



His point made, he turns back to his plate and twirls another forkful of spaghetti. Karen's brother Anders noisily slurps the last strand of his through puckered lips. Her mother offers the breadbasket but Karen isn't hungry anymore. The names and faces of the hijackers are being shown again, and now she's sure. One of the nineteen faces on the screen is the guy she fucked on the beach two months ago in Salou.

There were final embraces and wishes of good luck as he left the safe house. He would not see these men again in this world. They'd finished their business a few days early, Osama having sent the message not just to go ahead but to hurry up before their plans were detected. Now, it was best that they disperse. He had four days until his flight out of Madrid. They suggested he lie low, rest up, get ready. Enjoy himself, they even said. Well, maybe he would.

It was a short drive down the Catalan coast in the rented Hyundai. He checked into the beachfront hotel and carried his athletic bag up to his room, which was clean, light, and sparse, with twin beds, desk, chair, bare tile floor. He made his ablutions in the small bathroom, unrolled his mat, oriented himself by the sun, and prostrated himself for the noon prayer. He murmured the prayer, hoping for peace to enter him. It was badly needed because for the first time in months, he was alone, his voice the only one praying. On his own, it was hard to drown out the background noise, a constant hum of voices drifting up to him from the palm-lined *passeig maritim*, along with the splash of waves and shrieks of bathers further off and Vespas pattering by just outside. He closed his eyes, prayed more insistently, and felt the world begin to disappear.

When the noise seeped back into his consciousness, he heard beneath it another sound, far off, a short burst like the whistle of a kettle quickly

removed from the flame. His prayer trailed off, and he listened more closely. It was a human sound, human voices screaming briefly, then a few minutes later screaming again, many in unison. He checked his Casio watch. Every four minutes, the screaming returned. He went out to the balcony and scanned the view. Far out there on the point was a mad, twisted tangle of orange track: a roller coaster. He waited, watching a distant train climb the incline to the first drop. He listened to the screams again and heard joy in them, along with terror. These people were terrifying themselves for amusement. They had no idea what was coming.

He could stay and listen to it over and over. Or he could go out and experience it himself. A few minutes later, he was back in the car.

Fucking Salou. She hadn't wanted to go that summer. Her friends had invited her down to Tarifa, at the opposite corner of Spain, where right now they'd be partying on the beach, watching the windsurfers.

"You're too young," her mother said.

"Petra was there last year, and she was only sixteen."

"When you're eighteen, you can do what you want."

"This might be the last year we vacation as a family," Karen's father said, eyes on the road. Some family, she thought. Anders had his Gameboy plugged into the cigarette lighter so he could play nonstop from Rotterdam through Belgium and France to the Costa Dorada. Tinny explosions and gunfire leaked from his earphones while her parents chose the next CD. Her father imposed his love of Deep Purple and Focus, and her mother, when she took the wheel, was all Fleetwood Mac and Abba.

Summer traffic piled up and came to a near standstill. Next to them was an aging minivan with plates in Arabic, a large family crammed inside and voluminous baggage strapped to the roof rack. "Another one," her father



shouted over the music as the minivan pulled ahead. They were trying to merge into their lane, but he didn't let them. "On their way to the ferry to Morocco or Algeria. Hope they don't come back." He was off on one of his stupid rants about how Europe was going to disappear, how all the women would be forced to wear burkas. "And my daughter wants to marry one of them."

Karen knew not to take the bait. The two boyfriends she'd had in quick succession, awkward and courteous Amin, tall and goofy Yousuf, had been taken aback by her forwardness, which made them cute for all their macho swagger. She'd enjoyed flaunting them before her father's radio-induced prejudices. If he'd been a little intelligent, he'd have seen they were less likely to cause trouble than the boys in her usual druggy gang. At any rate, both were obedient mama's boys and had dropped her because their families would never have approved. You see, Poppa, it cuts both ways.

Once again, the opening chords of "Smoke on the Water" rattled the speaker behind her ear. She turned away from it, slumping against the car door to gaze out as the suburbs of Paris went slowly by. Ten hours to go.

The Port Aventura lot was almost full. Attendants in day-glow vests and straw fedoras motioned the Hyundai into a spot. He got out, crossed the blazing asphalt desert to the gate, bought an all-day ticket and found the end of the long line. It snaked through zigzag stanchions in the shade of a gaudy fake pagoda. A sign in English, Spanish, Catalan, French and German told him he had a two-hour wait for the highest roller coaster in Europe.

He watched the others in the line, families, adolescents, couples with skins in various shades of tan, pink and white, waiting patiently for their minute and a half of simulated peril. He closed his eyes as the line inched

forward. This, the Dragon Khan, was for his edification, a necessary supplement to all the hours on the flight simulator, a way of helping him imagine the terror they were about to unleash, as well as demonstrating once again the empty frivolity of a civilization to be destroyed.

Or would it just be fun? He deserved some fun, didn't he?

The padded restraints came down and latched the passengers into place. Some spoke loudly, others giggled nervously, others were grimly silent, wishing they hadn't been talked into this, but too embarrassed after the wait to bail now. He was in the first car with three teenagers bolted in on his right. The train started to move. A slight dip and turn outside the boarding platform and they engaged the chain that started dragging them up the incline. No way out now. There would be no way out either in two months when it would be for real. He watched the vast sky the thin track was carrying them into and forced his nerves into line. This was good practice. They reached the top of the climb and tipped over into a small drop and a turn. Then came the real drop. He closed his eyes, felt his body try to pull free from the restraint, a lightness in his head. Is this what it would feel like when his soul left his body? The screams around him, in the scant seconds of dropping, stretched out into a wall of sound, and he saw before him the screaming faces of the people trapped in the tower as they saw the plane approaching.

Then they were upside down, and he remembered where he was, feeling the G's on his body like everyone else. A few more twists and the air brakes slowed the ride. They coasted into the boarding station, where the next batch of riders had already taken up position. The restraints floated up with a hiss. He unbuckled his seatbelt, climbed out, stepped off the platform, and got back in line. He wanted more.



They pulled in at nine-thirty in the evening, but this was Spain, not the Netherlands, and the streets were lively. They trundled their bags upstairs to the timeshare where they'd spent two weeks every summer since Karen was a toddler and immediately went out again to eat.

Karen took a small bite of her calamari sandwich and put it back on the plastic plate. She watched the *Passeig Maritim*, where the slow, unending river of people, families mostly, flowed in both directions, eddies forming around those who stopped at ice cream stands and Top Manta sales or scanned outdoor cafés for empty tables. The cacophony of voices, Dutch, German, and English, was punctuated by giggles, guffaws, and occasional wails of unhappy children. Neon Ferris wheel lights blinked in sequence above the tops of the trees, and there were still people strolling on the beach. There was fun to be had, but the girls and boys she'd run the streets with here, summer after summer, had all probably moved on, free of their families, and now she wouldn't know anybody. How would she survive two weeks here?

Karen watched her brain-dead brother play with his Coke bottle, and her mother with her copper hair like a halo of wires, nibble at her salad, and her father gobble his pizza, all four of them without a word to say to each other. Her brother would spend the two weeks with his Gameboy, barely noticing where he was. Her mother's tan would turn to cowhide on the beach, and her father would go out every morning to the newsstand for his right-wing Dutch paper, *De Telegraaf*. She could hear him already, reading anti-Muslim editorials out loud as he did every evening at home.

"Coca-Cola," said Anders to nobody.

Karen stood up, leaving half her sandwich. “I’m going to look for my friends.” Or for almost anything other than this, she said to herself.

“Don’t stay out late,” said her mother as Karen turned to lose herself in the crowd.

He found a palm tree to lean against a few feet from the bar, close to the chain-linked fence that delimited the outdoor disco, and looked at the beer in the plastic cup in his hand. Why had he ordered it? As a Muslim, he wasn’t supposed to drink it. But under certain circumstances, he was required to. Was this one of them? In Florida, it had been important to blend in, drink, eat pork, skip prayers, not go to the mosque, frequent strip clubs, and appear thoroughly lapsed; a bad Muslim. He’d gotten very good at it, too good perhaps because nobody was paying any attention to him here. Had he ordered the beer because he liked it? It was cold and fizzy and a little bitter and it relaxed him. It was forbidden, but was anything really wrong with it? He made himself stop this train of thought. Through small cracks like this doubt could sneak in.

But it was just a beer. After that time at the strip club in Orlando, he knew better than to drink anything with vodka in it. He’d started shooting off his mouth and the others had to get him out of there. That’s what they did, keep each other strong and in control. He missed them now, the brothers he’d found. How easy it was in their company to feel sure and secure, already gone, far above the world. Now he looked at these northern European kids with their *cubatas* and *caiperinhas* and wondered again why these infidels poisoned themselves. To dance? He watched the mass of dancers, all carried away in their brainless ecstasy, as the music zapped and swooped up and down over an industrial booming meant to shut out thought. How easy it was to program people’s bodies to such simple,



totalitarian code. Programmed himself to the real and only code, he took it all in, trying to maintain a healthy level of contempt for it but also knowing he'd have to venture out there if he hoped to get laid. There were virgins waiting for him in heaven, of course. But what if there weren't? He recognized the seeds of doubt again and eyed the exit. Maybe he should just go.

Then a girl was suddenly in front of him, shouting in his face, words he couldn't make out, a smile stretched across her cheeks. She had shoulder-length hair dyed light purple, a sweet heart-shaped face, and radiant, perfect teeth. She wore a tremendously oversized sleeveless black t-shirt and a short red skirt. Like all women here, he told himself, she was a piece of meat, a whore. He'd seen them on the beach that afternoon, all showing as much skin as possible, some with their breasts out. He'd looked, sure he'd looked, with desire and contempt, as he was looking now. As long as contempt was there, he figured, the lust he felt would not condemn him in the eyes of Heaven. He would shortly win redemption a thousand times over.

He nodded, pretending to understand what the girl was shouting at him, and next thing, she took his hand and led him out into the middle of the writhing bodies. They were Dutch, Belgian, English, all six or eight years younger, but if he moved like everyone else, he wouldn't be noticed. I'm not bad at this, he told himself, and anyhow it wasn't really dancing so much as swaying slightly within the confines of the bodies packed around him, trying not to spill his beer. The girl kept shouting at him, in English or not he couldn't make out over the detonating beats, though he caught her name, Karen, after she shouted it a third time. He assumed she was drugged, which later on might make things easier. That's what they did,

these decadent Westerners, fog their brains to hide from truth and make themselves easy to fuck. He bought them each two more drinks before she led him off the floor and out of the chain-linked enclosure.

“You wanna go down to the beach?” she asked, and it was the first time he understood more than her name.

He'd looked more interesting than anyone else at the disco, standing all alone there in his chinos and polo shirt, incongruously lost in thought. He was as much as a decade older than she was, but right away she could tell he was far less experienced. Dancing, he'd jerked and twitched and generally looked uncomfortable, but she liked that, found it endearing. When she'd asked him his name, he'd spoken so softly she could barely hear him, though the noise of the disco faded gradually as they walked. When she took his hands, went up on tiptoes and kissed him, he didn't open his mouth. Okay, she thought, shy. That was kind of refreshing. Maybe he'd relax once they were away down the beach toward Cambrils where there were fewer hotels and people.

Her sandals dangled from her hand as they walked. “The sand's so cool at night. Aren't you going to take off your shoes?” Without a word, he bent down and took off his trainers. He wore no socks. She broke free and dashed the short distance into the lapping surf. “Come on.” She watched him hesitate, then carefully roll up his trouser legs just above the knee.

The beach was divided by breakwaters, and as they strolled down the damp sand, she pointed out which sectors corresponded unofficially to Germans, to locals, to gays. He just nodded. She pointed out the *segunda linea* apartment block where her family had their apartment. “They're waiting up for me, but it's okay. We get enough of each other during the day. My parents come out here early and grab an umbrella and a pair of



beach chairs and sit there and have the same conversation they would have if we'd just stayed home. My brother looks for his friends and they spend the whole day at the video arcade. I used to have friends here too, but...well, I'm always looking for new ones." She sidled up to him and smiled, but he didn't return her look. Was he worried? "I'm eighteen, you know." He nodded in acknowledgment but still didn't meet her eye.

They were reaching the next breakwater, the one she liked. Just come out and ask him. "Have you ever made love on a beach at night?"

She took his silence for a "no" and gently pulled him down behind the granite blocks. "It's okay," she told him. "This is a great spot. Nobody will see us. Or if they do, they won't care." She kissed him again, this time working his mouth open. "It'll be beautiful."

He'd been starting to think maybe this wasn't the best idea. He wasn't supposed to talk to anybody, be seen with anybody, let alone do this. Her tongue was soft and lazy in his mouth, filling it with the taste of Coca-Cola and rum, and he was liking it. He felt his concentration, his discipline



melting away. He'd been wrong to want this. Her hands were on his belt buckle now, his hands about to go hungrily for her breasts. Instead, he put his palms up and said, "Wait." Immediately, he caught himself. That wasn't good enough, he knew. It wasn't a "no." Did he intend to go on when he felt ready?

She certainly took it that way. She sat up next to him, her hand on his

thigh. “It’s all right if we just talk for a little.”

Talk could be dangerous too, he knew, but he was sober enough to control things, to say just enough but not too much. “Egypt,” he said when she asked where he was from. And why not tell her a little more? “But I live in Florida.”

“Really? In Miami?”

“Further north.”

“I’ve never been to the USA. I really want to go some time. What are you doing there?”

“I’m studying to be a pilot.”

“Wow. Like an airplane pilot?”

“Yes.”

“Like, have you flown a plane?”

He hesitated. “Just practicing.”

“That must be exciting.”

He nodded.

“A lot of responsibility, though,” Karen said. “I mean, for all the lives on board. I don’t think I could handle that.”

He’d enjoyed the risk, but it was time to change the subject. “What do you do?”

She started talking about her family and Rotterdam and high school, which she hadn’t finished yet because she kept flunking math, and the documentary video she’d made with Piet and Katje on how the immigrant and refugee community deals with Dutch Islamophobia and how much she learned from the experience and all the beautiful people she’d met. He recognized it, the well-meaning pseudo-solidarity of Westerners which would not hold up under the shock it was about to receive. Now she was on



about how she'd like to work in the movies, maybe as a director, dropping names of her favorites, none of whom he recognized. He nodded through it all, his mind elsewhere, on the movie Osama was directing and that he himself would shortly play a lead role in, that would be bigger than every movie ever made put together, and everyone would see it, and nobody would ever forget it, not like the disposable spectacles the decadent west manufactured to distract people from the injustices their governments practiced upon Muslims and its godless attack on Islam and he'd better not be actually saying all this aloud, no, she was still talking, a wind-up doll, her head full, he was sure, of western vanity and the detritus of junk culture and pornography and the illusory world where we are all individuals and special and beautiful. Her words flew by and none of them landed, except "beautiful."

"It's so beautiful," she said, about who knows what, and used it again for the waning moon reflected on the waves, the lights of the fishing boats far out on the Mediterranean, and something started to boil inside him. These non-believers had no concept of the one true beauty, in all its harsh, demanding absoluteness. Soon, they would see.

"Anyhow," she said, finishing whatever she'd been talking about, and looked at him. "Are you even listening?" He nodded vigorously, and the girl laughed. "Of course you weren't. Who can blame you? You can tell me to shut up, you know." She paused. "This is the best way," wrapping her soft, warm body around him and moving in for a kiss he couldn't avoid now or know where it would lead.

At first, it was okay. The guy wasn't a great kisser, but he let her lead, roll on top of him, ease his cock into her, and set a slow, languid rhythm in sync with the waves. It felt like a nice take-that to her father. She came quickly as

always and thought she'd try for another if he held out. But his face, when she looked at it, was a knot of contortion, his eyelids clenched, his brow almost meeting his cheekbones, his mouth a tight, angry grimace as his thrusts became more and more rapid and violent. "Hey," she whispered, but he didn't seem to hear. She felt him suddenly pull out and shove her off of him onto her back. Okay, maybe another position would work and he'd get done, she thought. She reached down to help him back in, but he'd gone soft. "It's all right," she said, reaching up to gently touch his face. It wasn't the first time this had happened with a guy. But he didn't smile back. He was scowling, snorting, his eyes wide and furious, and then his hands were on her neck.

Before he could apply any pressure, there was distant laughter down the beach. He jumped up and pulled his pants back on. Karen scooted away and stood up, facing him. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" she said. He didn't seem to hear. He grabbed his trainers and set off barefoot up toward the *passeig* at a quick, automaton march, silhouetted by the streetlights. She shouted after him. "What were you going to do, asshole?"

Don't turn around. Don't turn around.

He had succumbed. He had given in.

He knew he'd be forgiven. He'd gotten away before weakening himself further. But he'd come so close.

He had let his body, the body he would soon discard, impose its will. He had allowed it to obliterate his mind, make him forget his mission.

It had only been a moment. But a moment was enough. Through small cracks...



But doubt had not seeped through. The struggle with his body was a test he'd succeeded in passing. Hadn't he vanquished his body in the end? Hadn't he controlled it?

If she'd screamed louder, if she'd attracted attention, everything they'd been planning, had been working toward, would have been lost. If she were following him now to denounce him to the *Mossos d'Escuadra*, he'd have single-handedly destroyed their holy mission.

But he had stopped himself. He might have felt like hurting her, but he had stayed in control. Hadn't he?

He looked back briefly. She wasn't following him.

The girl's cunt had felt good, too good. And he'd held back on purpose. He'd allowed himself to feel no pleasure.

Now, he knew he was lying to himself. He'd wanted to finish. He'd wanted to lose himself in her. He had to admit it.

Then, it was his body that held him back. His body wouldn't obey, wouldn't release him. His body had saved him.

Or was he fooling himself now, trying to make sense of it, trying to make it fit what he needed to believe?

He shouldn't be thinking about this at all. In that way, yes, his body had led him away from his purpose and was still doing so now.

He'd stay in the next day, not go out, not risk being seen by her or by anybody. The day after, he'd get up before dawn for the drive to Madrid. The Hyundai had no cassette player so he wouldn't be able to play any of the tapes he'd been given at the safe house, of prayers and sermons to keep him strong. But he would stay strong.

Think only of what's ahead, not what you leave behind.

Think only of what's ahead, not what you leave behind.

Karen told herself she should leave, not risk his coming back. It had been stupid of her to shout after him. But after a few minutes, she stopped worrying about it. Something in his abrupt exit told her he was too ashamed, too humiliated, and more likely to just hide away, if she was reading him right. Not that she'd read him very well earlier. He hadn't been all that attractive and had barely spoken the whole time, but he hadn't looked dangerous.

Dangerous. What would he have done if he hadn't realized there were other people around? If he'd tried to strangle her, would she have been able to fight back? He was stronger than he'd looked. Would she have ended up floating on the tide in the morning, a grim surprise for those who came down to see the sunrise over the Mediterranean? There are people who killed, she knew, but she didn't think she'd ever met one. Maybe he wasn't one. But what she'd seen in his eyes was bad enough.

Where had she seen hate like that before? The fans when Eindhoven played Ajax? The enraged faces of the *anime* characters her brother incessantly watched? Or her father that time when they stood behind a Muslim woman taking too long in the supermarket line, and he said between gritted teeth that he'd like to tear her *hijab* off?

No, nothing compared.

Karen didn't want to cry, but she was crying. Don't go back yet, she told herself. If they're waiting up, I don't want them to see me like this. There was more laughter down the beach. Someone was having fun. She lay back on the sand with a sigh, listened to the gentle wash of the waves, and looked up at the stars. The blinking lights of a plane crossed the night sky far above.//



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CARY BARNEY was born on Long Island, raised in Massachusetts, and has lived since 1991 in Spain where, retired from teaching, he writes poetry and short fiction. Stories have recently appeared in Teach. Write., Verdad, and Fiction on the Web. Poems have appeared in Tipton Poetry Journal, Third Wednesday, Danse Macabre, Big Windows Review, Quail Bell Magazine and California Quarterly. His book of poems *Maritxu: A Love Story* was published by Lemon Street Press in 2020, and a bilingual collection, *Alza la vista/Look Up*, by Ediciones Éride in 2024.



**September 11 attacks**

Wikipedia • The September 11 attacks, commonly known as 9/11, were four coordinated Islamist terrorist suicide attacks carried out by al-Qaeda against the United States in 2001. On that Tuesday morning, 19 terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners scheduled to travel from the East Coast to California.

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# Baggage

A Short Story by Tim Hanson

*For my sister, Katie, who stormed many glass castles with me and helped me find strength I never knew I had.*

**F**or the first time in years, I'm relying on notecards to speak. That's to be expected, I suppose, with my brother's dead body lying only a few feet behind me, so perfectly prepared that it's easier to believe he's just enjoying a good sleep. In fact, that's how my brother supposedly went. As his obituary states, "Raymond Bauer went peacefully in his sleep, surrounded by loved ones"—not including me. He'd been battling cancer the last two years, so how peaceful his end could have been is up for grabs, but obituaries aren't the place for gory details.

There are several things going through my head now as I shuffle through my notecards, making sure everything's in order: why hadn't I taken the plane home when Raymond's wife called last month and said things had taken a turn for the worse? why hadn't I visited more, even before that awful death sentence was passed? why had work seemed so much more important, that next meeting, that next promotion, all those conference rooms filled with people I didn't give two shits about taking precedence over my best friend?

More than these questions, though: why did the airlines have to lose Raymond's fucking painting?



Raymond was five years older than I was, and for a project in high school, he painted me a landscape right out of our shared childhood, perfectly capturing the rolling hills leading to the glass castle where an evil king had imprisoned the virtuous queen. That was the story I had written, my own talent that paled in comparison with Raymond's, whose skill was renowned throughout our small town—but he never made me feel that way, not intentionally, and no one encouraged my writing as he did, not only giving compliments but prodding me to dive deeper into my imagination: who was the queen? why had the evil king taken over? what was the importance of the glass castle sitting high above this green land?

More than these questions, though: what were we going to do to save it?

We marched gallantly through our backyard, Illinois blurring into that whimsical landscape existing only in our minds, until Raymond painted it his senior year, won first place at the art show, and then handed the painting to seventh-grade me and said, “This was the realest thing I ever knew.”

In high school, the art teacher was quick to tell me how much he'd loved that painting and how he actually teared up when Raymond had explained its significance, and I could tell by the anticipation in his eyes that he was excited to see what Raymond Bauer's sister had in store. How disappointed he must have been when he saw my first efforts, for I never could draw or paint or sculpt. Words were my clay, and the English teachers who had loved Raymond but saw little promise in his talents recognized that his little sister had the gift for storytelling, raising me to his level—but only to them. For everyone else, I was still just Raymond Bauer's sister.

Unlike my brother, I left my hobby behind in high school, focused on Business in college, and was earning nearly six figures by the time I turned thirty. My brother, on the other hand, got his teaching certificate (in Art, of course), fostered others kids' talents just as he'd tried to foster mine, and worked on his own creations over the summer.

He never made it big, no installation to speak of, no notoriety except among the children who adored him, and certainly no real money despite his enormous talents. I'd encouraged him to pursue something that would reward him more, that would better show its appreciation ("You can still do your art on the weekends," I added), but he'd just smile, shake his head, and say, "Kristen, you don't understand. I can't leave the kingdom. Who will protect the glass castle if we're both gone?" I rolled my eyes, and in the patient tone of a parent, I implored him to just think about it. Of course, he never did.

How long I've stood here silent before Raymond's family, his fellow teachers, and his students, I don't know, but it feels like an eternity. My eyes fall on random words and phrases, written and rewritten feverishly on notecards last night, and they read now just as they did then: inadequate, trite, pathetic. Perhaps words cannot capture the husband, father, educator, and brother this man was, or maybe I'm just out of practice. Or maybe I'd never been as talented as I'd thought I was, my English teachers' and brother's words meant more to soothe an ego kicked around by people who were constantly comparing this child to her older, far more talented brother.

Or maybe there's a better explanation: everything I've written the last two decades has been speeches. In the beginning, they were written out word by word, but over the years, I slowly resorted to bullet points, as my



ability to lead a room and respond to its temperament improved, my improvisational skills becoming my greatest asset when presenting to an audience. The only things I usually write out now are my PowerPoints, around which my whole speech revolves, and that was the tactic I was going to take with this. A eulogy, after all, is just a speech, and for this speech, that painting was going to be my visual aid, around which I'd construct everything. I'd placed that painting in my checked bag, sandwiched between layers of clothes to keep it protected. (I couldn't look at it for more than a few seconds when I placed it there, lest I break into sobs and soak it with tears that still hadn't come in the great torrents I'd expected them to, and I thought then, crazily, how Raymond would have wept, how Raymond always felt what he should have felt one hundred percent, which was why he was the artist, the caregiver, the teacher, the man who'd attracted a packed house at his end; and who would come to your funeral, Kristen, just who the fuck would come to see the sister of Raymond Bauer?)

Last night, I was supposed to write the speech: I would have the painting sitting next to me, and I'd write my eulogy, explaining how Raymond had given me this picture to explain what words couldn't say. However, there was only one problem with that: the airline had lost my baggage. They had an idea where it may have ended up, but it was all guesswork, and I began to worry I'd never see the painting again. And I wondered why I'd never taken a picture of it because now the concrete memory I could hold in my hands was just fantasy, susceptible to revision and erasure like any other memory, and then a more immediate problem presented itself: how the fuck was I going to write my speech now without a visual? I tried, God knows I did, but without Raymond's brush strokes, color choices, and deft hand to be the center point of my speech, my words were meaningless.

“...I didn’t create that place, Kristen, you did...”)

Be that as it may, Raymond had brought it to life, and now it was gone, just as he was.

My hands involuntarily balled into fists, but then I went with it and crumbled the notecards into a tight ball and left them lying useless on the podium. It was a terrible speech, anyway. Tears threatened to make an appearance, but not the tears deserving of this occasion and the man serving as its star: they were tears of rage, inadequacy, and impotence, tears of having thought for two decades I knew so much more than he had and had accomplished so much more, and now I had no idea what to say or do, not here or anywhere. I’d beg the audience’s forgiveness, most of them strangers, and simply say Raymond was much better at this sort of thing, he always was

“...that’s not true, Kristen...)

and then I’d take my seat and wait until the service was over and they planted my brother in the ground. Just sit down, Kristen, before someone leans over and whispers, I expected more from the sister of Raymond Bauer.

“They don’t want to hear a speech. They’ve heard plenty of those today. And they don’t

want to see my painting, either. They want you tell them a story about the famous duo of

Kristen Bauer and her older brother...

...so tell them that story.”)

But the words won’t come—because they don’t exist. No words could paint the purple and crimson hues burning above that pink-tinted glass castle, into whose walls you could peer and see every possible future, every



unexplored past; nothing could be said or written that would capture the bricked pathway winding up the steep hills dotted by trees of yellow and red, an eternal autumn that was the season of our childhood, our imaginations combining to stave off the worst feelings of inadequacy every new school year brought me.

“I only painted what you told me, Kristen. I was the recorder; you were the creator. So

create it again.”)

“My brother and I...we walked through dreams,” I begin, closing my eyes against the coming tears. “We walked through dreams he later painted. They were dreams I dreamt that kept me safe in childhood. That made an unsensible world make sense. And my older brother, as he did for all his students, he let me dream, and he helped me dream with such clarity and explain those dreams so clearly that he could see them, too. That’s how he painted them years later.”

I open my eyes, but the world is a kaleidoscope of wobbling colors, which makes it all the easier to slip back into that shared fantasy from so long ago, when our story was still those sentences immediately following ‘Once upon a time.’ And how quickly the story begins telling itself, the dream falling from my mind and repainting this drab world so that a little girl could go on adventures with her big brother, so that he could help her battle evils and save the day for so many others like us. “We were knights, and we were wizards, and we were the wise people that could make sense of things, the heroes that raise the sun after an eternal night has robbed the world of everything bright. We walked a perilous path, yet we feared nothing as we ventured upward toward the beautiful castle, made of a pink glass that

offered hope and dashed it out just as quickly. No, we didn't fear that castle suddenly shattering when we entered it, not when we were together.

“This world of ours, much like our own, was one of dangers, yes, but it was one of untold beauties. My brother helped me find that beauty. He helped me shape nightmares and stories I was too ashamed to tell into the best moments of my youth. He helped me find an escape, and he helped me make sense of things, to understand that the colors he used to paint fantasy and the words I used to capture fiction were the truest things we ever knew, and they offered secrets that would make our lives all the more wonderful.”

(“There it, sis. The story. Now lead us home. Take us down that winding path, away from

that beautiful castle, and bring us back home.”)

“In high school, my brother painted that world and gave me the portrait. I, on the other hand, let my hands wander away from the keyboard.” I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and smile. “He was an artist, and I was a storyteller, and together, we made magic.” It was long past due for me to write those words down, this story, our story, the one I'm writing now, to capture that world in writing. “Raymond may be gone, but his magic lives on. In me, and in his family and friends, and especially in his students, of whom I was the first.”

Three pews from the front, a girl who cannot be older than fourteen, bows her head and cries, and she looks so familiar, she may as well be the reflection I cast in those waters we poured so long ago, Raymond, in rivers that ran the length of our kingdom, which flowed into a sea that stretched on for all of time.

(“Very good, Kristen. Now end it before the epilogue becomes its own novel.”)



I laugh through tears. I never knew how to end things, but that's okay, for I don't see this as an ending. In fact, I see that bricked path now, winding its way out of church, back up the mountain and toward that glass castle, where trouble is no doubt brewing once again.

“My brother and I walked through dreams. Now...let's walk that path together, shall we? And I'm sure we'll hear my brother's voice encouraging us along the way. He was always so good at that, and nothing will make that end, especially not death.”

No, this is not an ending: it's just the beginning of a new story, one that feels so wonderfully familiar.//

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



For the last sixteen years, Tim Hanson has taught high school English, a passion rivaled only by his love for writing. His short stories and essays have appeared in nearly two dozen journals and anthologies, and he recently won Flash Fiction Magazine's flash fiction contest. You can read more about Tim at [TSHanson.com](http://TSHanson.com).

## An Interview with

# Sebastien de Castell



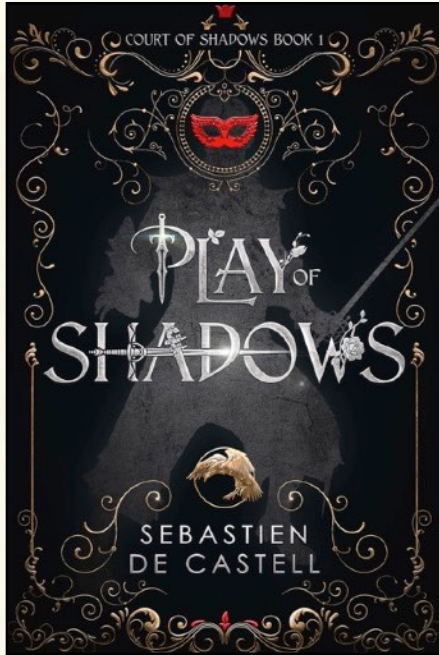
Sebastien de Castell had just finished a degree in Archaeology when he started work on his first dig. Four hours later, he realized how much he actually hated archaeology and left to pursue a very focused career as a musician, ombudsman, interaction designer, fight choreographer, teacher, project manager, actor, and product strategist. His only defense against the charge of unbridled dilettantism is that he genuinely likes doing these things and that, in one way or another, each of these fields plays a role in his writing. He sternly resists the accusation of being a Renaissance Man in the hopes that more people will label him that way.

Sebastien's acclaimed swashbuckling fantasy series, *The Greatcoats*, was shortlisted for both the 2014 Goodreads Choice Award for Best Fantasy, the Gemmell Morningstar Award for Best Debut, the Prix Imaginales for Best Foreign Work, and the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. His YA fantasy series, *Spellslinger*, was nominated for the Carnegie Medal and is published in more than a dozen languages.

**Q: When did you begin writing the prelude for the *Court of Shadows* series?**

In August of 2020, during the pandemic, I found myself in Mont St. Michel in France. Mont St. Michel is a tiny island with a Medieval





monastery at the top, connected to the mainland by a causeway that used to be submerged during high tide, cutting the island off entirely. It's one of those places that's full of beauty and mystery that fills one's imagination with visions of swordfights and skullduggery. At this particular point in time, travel was permitted again and I'd gotten all my vaccine shots, but I still assumed the place would be mostly deserted. To the contrary, Mont St. Michel was absolutely packed with tourists.

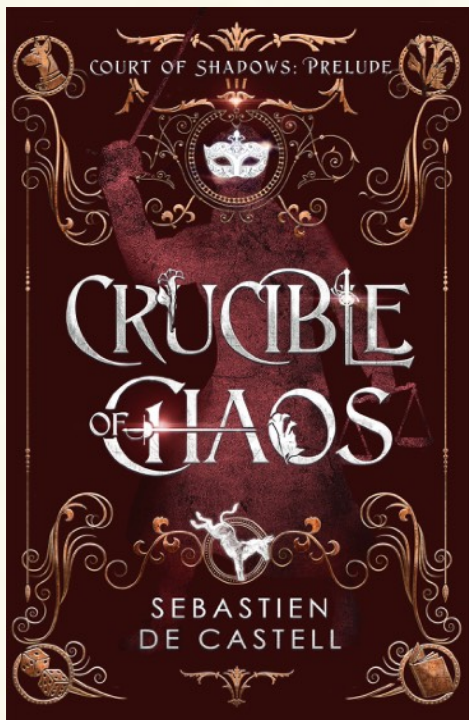
Everyone had to wear masks, but still, the sheer weight of numbers meant that ascending the roughly four blocks from the bottom of the island to my little hotel took almost half an hour. I was rather disheartened by the experience. Luckily for me, jetlag kicked in, and at three o'clock in the morning I was wide awake. I decided to go out and take a walk to clear my head and suddenly found myself in what felt like an entirely different world.

Most tourists don't spend the night on Mont St. Michel, and those that do don't venture out into the night. So there I was, strolling through the winding streets of this Medieval town, utterly alone except for the hordes of cats who live on the island but only come out at night. I felt as if I'd traveled back through time, exploring alleys and graveyards all by myself. It was positively magical.

When I returned home, I began writing *Crucible of Chaos*: a fantasy mystery set on an island inspired by that strange, wonderful night on Mont St. Michel.

**Q: How many books do you plan to have for the Court of Shadows series?**

Crucible of Chaos acts as a prelude to the series, which will have four more books, beginning with Play of Shadows, coming out this March. However, each book works as a standalone as well, and can be read in any order, so readers aren't forced to wait to get the end of the story.



**Q: What will readers find inside your new novel, *Crucible of Chaos*?**

There's swashbuckling adventure, of course, as that's one of my favorite aspects of writing the Greatcoats novels, but *Crucible of Chaos* is also very much a mystery novel. Estevan Borros is my "swashbuckling Hercule Poirot", and part of what I love writing about him is the way he investigates crimes, unconcerned whether the means by which those crimes are committed is a sword blade or a supernatural curse.

**Q: What themes are explored inside your new novel?**

Theme is such an integral part of a novel, but one best discovered by the writer rather than planned. I begin with a sense of a mystery or question I want to pursue and let the themes reveal themselves through the characters. In the case of *Crucible of Chaos*, the question of faith and devotion are central to how the characters deal with the strange events



threatening the island. Many of the monks come to blows over which gods they should worship, whereas Estevan's allegiance is to the law – and specifically, to the entirely human notions of fairness and decency that underpin those laws. When he finally solves the mystery at the heart of the book, that question of faith becomes even more crucial to what happens next.

**Q: Who are the cast of characters inside of *Crucible of Chaos*?**

*Crucible of Chaos* features a relatively small cast compared to most of my books. This is by design: I wanted Estevan to feel alone, always at the edge of failure, never quite knowing who to trust. That said, once I began writing the book, I found he needed someone he felt was truly on his side, which is how Imperious the mule became such a vital – if unexpected – sidekick.

The main characters we meet are:

- Estevan Velejan Duerisi Borros, also known as The King's Crucible due to his duty as the Greatcoat sent to investigate crimes of the supernatural. Estevan is my reimagining of a kind of swashbuckling Hercule Poirot with a dash of Fox Mulder from the X-Files. He's fascinated by the supernatural, but his passion is solving mysteries, whatever the cause.
- Imperious: Imperious is . . . well, he's a mule. Perhaps the most cantankerous mule in all of Tristia. But he's also loyal to a fault, and patient enough to listen to Estevan's musings while offering an occasionally helpful grunt or bray.

- **Caeda:** a high-spirited and enigmatic young woman who seems intent on assisting Estevan in his investigation and yet whose own motives are shrouded in secrecy.
- **Brother Agneta:** a religious inquisitor whose own methods of investigation are rather more extreme than Estevan would like.
- **The Wolves, the Trumpeters and the Bone Rattlers:** three factions of monks warring against each other over whose gods are the ones that should be worshipped in Tristia.

**Q: Will most of the cast of characters be found in the upcoming books?**

No, each book in the Court of Shadows is set in a different part of Tristia, a troubled country reeling from the aftermath of a long interregnum and a war that nearly turned its citizens in to slaves of an enemy nation. I wanted readers to be able to enjoy the books in any order, and so each volume of the Court of Shadows works as a standalone even as it slowly builds the broader mystery of who or what is plotting against the people of Tristia.

**Q: Is it easy combining the historical and fantasy genres together?**

Every genre has its benefits and challenges. Fantasy affords you the means to create a world perfectly suited to your themes. However, any narrative world, whether adapted from our own or entirely invented, has to have internal cohesion. You can't introduce magic spells that can turn lead into gold without having that radically affect the economy. You can't have orders of traveling, sword-fighting magistrates without inventing a cultural



context in which trial by combat is more widely accepted than it was in our own world. So, it's all a process of creating a world that's internally consistent, not merely in terms of physics or geography but also of culture and sociology.

**Q: How would you describe your writing style?**

I've always been influenced by noir (or hardboiled) writers like Raymond Chandler as well as by fantasy novelists who also borrowed from them stylistically like Roger Zelazny and Steven Brust. But I'm also a fan of William Goldman (the legendary screenwriter who gave us *The Princess Bride*) and Aaron Sorkin (whose lightning-fast dialogue was at the heart of *The West Wing*).

I try to bring those influences into my own style, aiming for something that's readily approachable to most readers, but where every word is intentional. Writing schools and books often skim over prose these days, treating it as if it were simply a varnish you paint over the more important structural elements of character, plot and theme. But if you think about it, the prose – the words on the page – is the entirety of what makes up a book. The prose is the book. So, I try to craft my words so that there's a flow and rhythm to them that the reader never needs to notice or think about, but which pulls them along on the journey from the opening words until the final sentence.

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

My books have been translated into fifteen languages and are in all the usual bookstores and online retailers around the world. The best way to reach me online is through my website at [www.decastell.com](http://www.decastell.com), and if

someone wants to write to me, they can do so at [www.decastell.com/contact](http://www.decastell.com/contact). I reply to every e-mail I receive.



Click to watch: <https://youtu.be/ZPHjb0MqX9g?si=15mqxDRtqOsRymZi>



# HAPPENINGS

## Author News & Events

*Out Of Poland*, the Award-Winning World War II Epic from the critically acclaimed writing duo of Breakfield and Burkey has just been named a Screenplay Finalist from the 2024 Page Turner Awards.



Beneath the storm clouds of a deadly war, three men are poised to unlock the secrets to redeem the world.

The setting is Poland 1939; Germans are marching toward Warsaw, running their armor and devastating swarms of armed soldiers, along with their cavalry. Fighting against the Nazi military machine is a death wish realized all too clearly.

The path of the invaders is paved with death, destruction, pillage, and women brutalized at the hands of soldiers with no honor. As much as the citizens of Poland pray for a different outcome, everything they have known, loved, and grown up with is devastated.

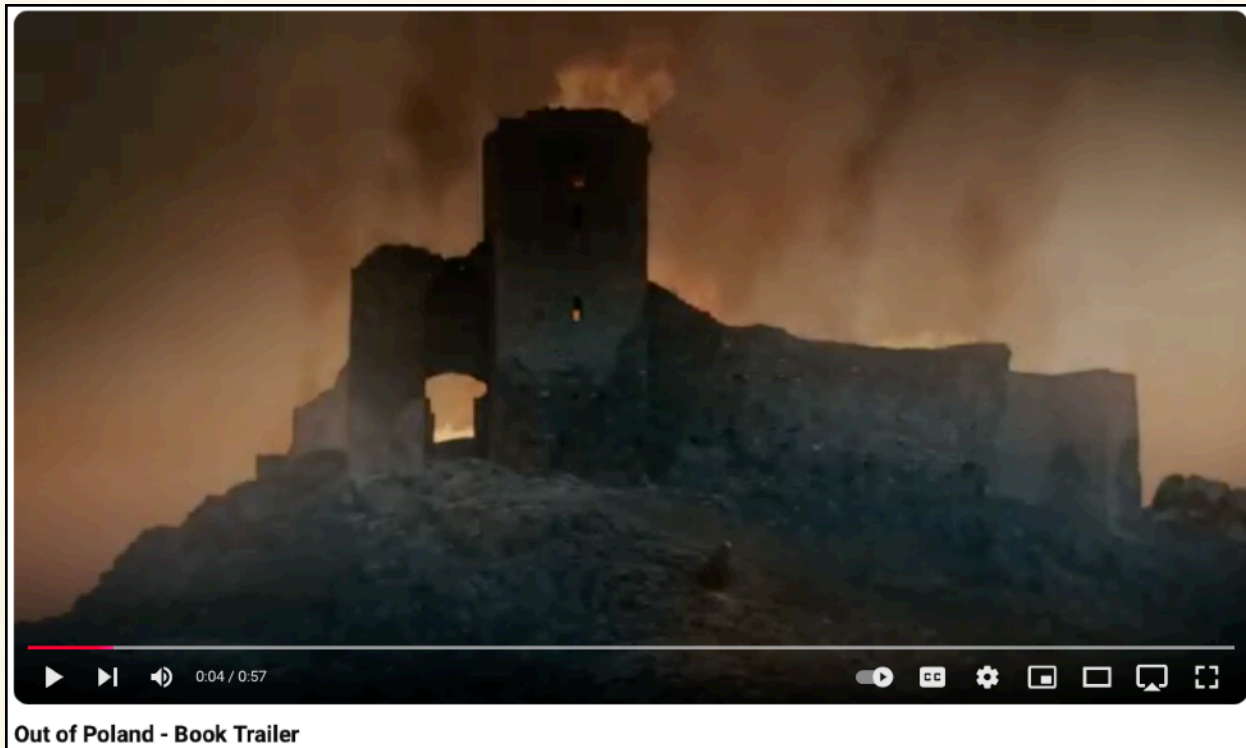
Three young men are tasked with finding and extracting the German military communications device, Baby, that is kept under heavy guard. Polish patriots die to aid the three in getting the information and then fleeing with the prize. The race is on as the Germans try to match wits with the clever patriots who risk detection at every turn.

The Ambassador Ferdek Watcowski, insists that his son Ferdek along with Wolfgang and Tavius, take their families and flee while there is still time to reach a border. The goal of their journey is to escape with Baby intact.

Poland's military is so outclassed by Hitler's forces that survival is key to fighting another day. Facing great peril and odds against their survival, the men resolve to make a difference so that those who died helping them would not have sacrificed in vain. They vow to undertake a lifetime of fighting tyranny.

Successful survivors must look ahead.

Buy the book on Amazon <https://amzn.to/3YNuWYX>



Click to watch: <https://youtu.be/ivk6HcadiMM?si=gOJqjBWc7f5GhZD9>



# The Ways of Love

A Short Story by Franklin Dong

The sun was falling like a helpless thing when I got off from work. Clouds crouched and crowded along the skyline, allowing the orange sunlight to barely squeeze through. There was a line outside the elderly home. There was a ringing ache in my head. There was just enough time to wait, and so that was what I did.

The woman in front of me turned around to look at the people behind her, scowled and shook her head. Her red coat seemed to be reflecting the dying light from the sky, and as she turned and the coat flowed in the air, she seemed, for a second, a flower petal in the gentle breeze. I wanted to talk to her but didn't know how, so I bit my lip and just stared. The doors opened and the line slowly began to move forward, the air suddenly filled by the quiet shuffling of feet.

"Who are you here to visit?" The receptionist asked the woman in the red coat when it was her turn. "My father." She answered, rummaging through her pockets for her identification. After receiving an approving nod she turned and strode down the hallway, and I stared at her silhouette as it vanished at the end of the corridor. "Who are you here to visit?" The receptionist spoke pointedly, his voice amplified mechanically through the microphone on his desk.

"Sorry - I'm visiting my father too," I responded hastily.

"Are you two together?"

"What's that?"

“The woman just now - are you visiting your father together?”

“Oh no, no, I don’t know her.” I shook my head, showing him my identification. “May I?” He looked slightly confused but nodded curtly, and I took it as my sign to proceed.

The heels of my boots clicked crisply on the marble floor as I walked up the stairs of the elderly home. Along the walls were paintings of oceanside views and coastline cliffs almost too saturated in color to be done by a human hand but also too beautiful to be held in such harsh skepticism. The hallway was wide and the ceiling high above, and the few lonely rays of the sunset drifted wearily through the windows on the walls.

I had to check with a nurse that I was going to the right room: I had almost forgotten where they put him. The nurse seemed to be quite taken aback by my question, looking at me carefully with a slight scowl before checking with her registrar and pointing me to the right place. There was no need for that attitude, I thought to myself as I knocked on the door. How was I supposed to know? They were the ones that built this place like a maze, after all.

My father was wearing a blue striped shirt that was wrinkled in all the wrong places. He was sitting in the couch chair beside the window, watching the television with his back turned to the door. He barely turned to look when I entered and quickly shifted to return his gaze back to the television set.

“You scared me.” He grunted. “I thought you weren’t coming until later.”

I stopped to look around the room as the door shut softly behind me. It was not a big room and the bed filled up half of its space, the patched-up bed sheets crumpled messily above it. I took off my coat and laid it on the bed. “Don’t put it there. Pick it back up.” I stopped suddenly. “Your coat’s



dirty. I don't want it on my bed." I turned and thought about it some more, but eventually picked up my coat and folded it into a thick square and held it in my hands.

"I thought you weren't coming until later." He said again. "You scared me when you came in."

"Florence is taking some time off of work later so I'm going home early to see her," I said quietly. He made no sign that he heard me and instead bit into his upper lip and squinted his eyes at the television. I cleared my throat and continued. "Did you go out at all today? The weather is getting warmer." Still, he was silent. It was then that I finally seemed to hear the sounds from the plasma screen that seemed inches away from my father's face. It was a news segment on some business conglomerate that was quickly dissolving due to a public corruption scandal with the high executives.

"What a shame." My father whispered. "Look at that - what a shame."

The news story went on and I didn't know what to say. I looked around again, hoping to find some new detail about the room that I hadn't noticed before, but quickly realized that was also a fruitless endeavor since the walls remained empty and dusty.

"Hey, look, I brought you something." From my back pocket, I took out a small golden locket with a matching chain and handed it to my father, who at first made no movement to look except glimpse at it with the side of his eyes but eventually picked it out of my hand to examine it with a slight frown. "It's a picture of Florence and I," I said with a smile. "We had our anniversary a few days ago."

"It's quite nice." He nodded, turning the locket around before handing it back to me.

“Open it and look,” I said. “The picture is inside. You haven’t opened it yet.”

He took it back and pushed the small locket open with a click. It was a small photo of my wife and I laughing at the camera. We were so close that her hair was brushing against my face and I couldn’t tell if that was the reason that my eyes were shut or if it was my almost pitiful attempt to distill my happiness perfectly for myself in that moment. I looked at my father, who regarded it with the same lack of expression.

“It’s quite nice.” He repeated, and this time, put the locket directly into my hand.

“I wanted you to keep it.”

“What for?”

“I figured - as a memory.” My voice almost trailed off in a raising tone as if I was offering a suggestion to him. “As a way of remembering.”

When he didn’t answer, I closed the locket and turned it in my hands and put it on the bed. “I’ll let you keep it.” I was almost expecting him to say something or to finally raise his voice to complain that he didn’t like it or that the locket was too dirty to be on his bed or I wasn’t smiling the right way in the picture, but he just looked ahead into the television set, and remained silent.

“This is a big story, right?” I said. “All of my colleagues were talking about it. One of the largest companies in the world coming apart like this. It must be embarrassing.”

“This was a great company.” He said slowly. “It’s difficult to maintain what you have built these days. It’s difficult.”

I let out a breath and frowned because, yet again, I didn’t know how to respond.



“I doubt your colleagues really know anything about this. No, they don’t really know anything.”

“Why is that?”

He turned and looked at me as if I had just said something incredulous and offensive. “Well, why would they?” He said with a slightly raised voice. “They’re not businessmen. You’re not a businessman. You don’t understand any of this.”

I looked away from him and into the eyes of the reporter on the screen and felt a crawling sensation from my chest, tugging at the edge of my throat. I felt confused and ashamed. Even though there was no one around us, I was so seen and nakedly perceived. The moment passed and the crawling bile settled down in my stomach with a hiss.

“I saw mom yesterday,” I said finally after gathering up the courage. “She’s doing well.” I looked closely at him, but my father had no reaction, so I kept on before he could say anything. “She liked it a lot when I showed it to her.”

“She liked the news story?”

“No, this -” I pointed, “the locket. We talked about my anniversary with Florence and she said how she only remembers a few of your anniversaries.”

The news story ended and the channel cut to advertisements, and suddenly the screen was filled with so much colorful nonsense that there was no point for my father to pretend that he could not hear me. For a few seconds, I felt something in me grow incredibly still and my palms began to sweat and I wiped them on my coat with force. I waited; I listened.

“Your mother and I are very different people, you know this. I used to tell her this story all the time because it helped me explain things to her.”

He paused. “There was a river where I grew up, and a willow tree beside the water, and a line of reeds that grew on the riverbank. The tree had always been tall and stood there firmly, not shaken by anything. But the reeds were nothing alike - with every passing breeze they swayed and bent to the direction of the wind. They had no backbone. They were weak and fragile.” He paused, rubbed his face and snorted through his nose. “I remember when I was older, there was a storm. A big storm. Something that we were all dreading. I remember running home when it first arrived and seeing that the roots of the willow were being pulled from the ground. I remember crying at the sight of it. I kept running but heard a loud crash and saw the willow uprooted and tossed into the river by the storm. But when I came back the next morning, all of the reeds were still standing in a straight line on the river bank, as if nothing had happened.” He stopped again and looked at me, and I recognized with disgust a sparkle of light that I had wished not to see. “Like I said, it’s hard to maintain anything that you’ve built these days. Nothing lasts forever. Not anymore.”

The words fell around me and I felt naked again as if the edges of my skin had begun to peel off slowly and I was standing in the same room that I had stood in for all of my life and the couch chair that my father was sitting in was going to open its mouth and swallow me whole. I gritted my teeth and stared.

“There are only two kinds of people in this world.” My father said with an air of finality. “You are either a willow or a reed. Your mother and I are different people.”

“That is an oversimplification.”

“Why?”

“Well, what does that make me?”



He looked at me and opened his mouth to speak but then seemed to swallow his words. He turned back to the television as the news segment resumed. “Your mother and I are completely different people.” He muttered again. “You know this.”

The night had begun to fall when I left my father, and its long casted shadows had wrapped itself around my frame when I arrived home. The apartment smelled like rosemary and butter, and my wife had set the table for the two of us and gave me a warm smile when I pushed open the door.

“How did it go?” She beamed and gave me a hug. “Did he like the locket? I know he did. He always likes my ideas.”

“He loved it. Thank you.” I smiled and squeezed her shoulder. “Let’s sit down. I’ve been waiting all day for this.”

Dinner was slow, and so was our conversation, and there was something incredibly hard to chew in the food that I kept mulling away at it silently, my jaw clenched tightly shut and my focus shifting away from my wife. By the time I had regained enough self-awareness to feel guilty, she had already noticed.

“What is it?” She asked with a frown. “Did you two start an argument again? It is always the same with you two, isn’t it?”

I did not answer; I felt like some part of me simply could not. I remained silent and my mind drifted further away from her, away to some distant shoreline where the river ran up to my feet and I could stare at the laughing faces of the reeds.

“Give it some rest. Give yourself and your father some patience.” I heard my wife say from across the table. “What did you two talk about? Care to share?”

She looked at me with a soft and inviting glint in her eyes. I opened my mouth and tasted the ensuing silence, placing it on my tongue and weighing it carefully before speaking.

“Nothing in particular.”

“Is he getting outside often these days? The weather is getting warmer.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“What did he really say about the locket? Did you even tell him that it was my idea?”

I sighed and let go of the fork in my hand and saw Florence flinch slightly as it clattered onto the plate. We sat in silence for a moment.

“You know, I find it hard to speak with him sometimes.”

“I understand. I really do. Won’t you talk about it?”

“And every time that I see him it reminds me of family and how I’ve never really gotten a choice in mine.”

“But you have me,” Florence said softly, beaming. “I’m here for you. I’m here to listen to you. Now, what happened with him today that’s got you so down?”

“Nothing, nothing.” I waved my hand impatiently. “But it did remind me of something that I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

“What’s that? Go on.”

“I want a kid,” I said, looking up at her. “I want to have a kid.”

My wife seemed to freeze and there was something in her reaction that greatly upset me - her mouth hung slightly ajar and the incredulous look on her face seemed to coincide with a sight of alarm. It angered me; it felt like some sort of betrayal. “Say something,” I grunted.

“You are being irrational.” She finally said, leaning back slightly. “You are angry. I know you might be upset after visiting him, but -”



“This is not about my father.”

“I don’t think you quite know what you are saying.”

“This is not about my father; it is about us. This family.”

“You are not speaking with a clear head.”

I blinked.

“We should not do this right now.”

“Right now is the best time.” I leaned forward. “I’ve made up my mind; it’s our anniversary. It’s the perfect time to talk about this.” I scowled when I saw her look down into her hands. “I thought you would agree with me. I thought we looked at it the same way. I thought you supported me; isn’t that what you just said?”

“I was looking forward to our dinner.” She said quietly. “You’ve made sure that I cannot enjoy it anymore.”

“Me? I made sure of that?” I asked. “It was me? It was my father. Do you know what he said to me? Do you know?”

“What?”

“There are only two kinds of people in this world, Florence. Only two! Those who live and die for what they believe in and those who sacrifice everything they believe in just to stay alive. The willow or the reed.”

“You are not making any sense.”

“Understand me! Listen to me! Look at me!” I yelled. “I want a kid. I want to build something with you. Something that lasts. This is a choice that I’m making, don’t you see? A choice that we all have to make in life! And you’re running away from it!”

“You are scaring me.” She said quietly. “I need to go.” She stood up slowly and backed away from the kitchen table, looking at me all the while as if I was a wild animal that would run after and attack her once she’d

taken away her gaze. She turned the corner and walked briskly to the door and a moment later, I heard the door click and she was gone.

The same tingling feeling of nakedness ran up my body again, and I became even angrier. But I did not feel sorry for my wife; I only felt sorry for myself. I was angry at her, just like I was angry at my father. I picked up the bottle of wine in the middle of the table and poured it into my glass, swirling it between my fingers and raising it to take small sips, feeling the cold spice tingle my tongue. I thought about the woman in the red coat that I had seen earlier in the day and wondered how her visit with her father had gone. I wondered about her name. I wondered if she had children of her own. I wondered about having children and being a father. I wondered about what kind of man that would make me feel like I was.

I leaned back in my chair and sighed. The day was done, and in a few hours it would be tomorrow again. But there was so much that I wanted to say, and I felt so unbearably empty at the realization that I still did not know how to say anything. So I drank some more wine and closed my eyes. I dreamed of many things. That long, lonesome river, that terrifying willow that stood with its back turned against me, and some field of reeds that managed to bloom into little yellow flowers that climbed on top of each other and danced in the wind. I dreamed that I was a cowboy, walking barefoot into that riverbank and looking across the border for the ways of love. I felt like I could sleep forever, and all would be forgiven. //

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Franklin Dong is a student and writer based in New York City.



# Her Phone

A Short Story by Zary Fekete

She came into the study hall room with a flounce. I was the only tutor on duty that day. She carelessly tossed her bag onto the floor as she sat in the chair across from mine. To cover my nervousness, I stacked my notebooks off to the side and checked the tip of my mechanical pencil.

She began to apply some lipstick. Her lips were full and pouty, framing perfect teeth. She used her phone to check for stray marks or blemishes on her face. Of course, there were none. Blond hair. Sculpted eyebrows. Just the right amount of flush in the cheeks to show she was alive and with a hint of innocence lightly veiling availability.

Her name was Amanda. We had a few of our classes together but not Spanish. I was a student Spanish tutor. She was in Spanish 1. That's why she was here today. For my help.

"How long will this take?" she said, not looking at me, still stuck to her phone.

"I...it shouldn't take long," I said. "You needed chapter 4 recorded?"

"4...and 5, too. I want to finally get through this, and they all told me that you have the best pronunciation."

I did. My parents had been living in America since before I was born, but they were originally from Colombia. We still spoke Spanish at home and

they still called me chica. They wanted the language to remain alive in me in case I should ever want to do something with it.

During the last three years Amanda had acquired something of a reputation here in the school. She had rifled through three boyfriends, leaving each one behind her as she made her way up. Her current guy was Carl, probably the best-looking guy in school.

But recently cracks seemed to have been appearing on her perfect veneer. There was a rumor going around that Carl had taken her some clinic across town, somewhere where nobody knew them. Just a rumor. But...

As I looked at Amanda, smoothing her perfect hair, I realized that she probably didn't remember what she had done. It was back in ninth grade. We were in Short Stories...reading a piece by a Colombian writer, Hernando Tellez. The teacher had asked me to read. I fell into the rhythm of the piece and suddenly I was pronouncing the name of one of the characters. Usually, I Americanize my pronunciation, but I was lost in the text and the name came out distinctly Colombian. I froze and stopped speaking.

And then, behind me, I heard her whisper, "Well, she would know how to say it." There was a titter of laughter that followed from the back of the room. My face began to burn.

And now, here she was. I finished checking my pencil and opened the book to chapter 4. She glanced up. "Oh, here," she said, holding up her phone. "Just put it on mine. That way I don't need to figure out how to get it on here later."

She slid her phone across to me. Her screen saver hadn't faded yet. It was a pic of her and Carl. And then the screen turned black.

I picked it up and looked at her. "It's off," I said. "Can you...?"



“Password’s ‘3465’,” she said, and leaned back in the chair.

I typed in the code and the screen came alive. Her home screen had the usual series of buttons, heavy on the social apps. I slid right a few times and found the recording app.

“Listen,” she said. “I’m gonna go to the nurse’s station. Can you do this by the time I get back?”

I looked up from the phone at her. Before I could say anything, she was gone.

The room was quiet. I could hear a teacher’s voice from the next room. Somewhere down the hall there was the sound of cheerleading practice. I sat there for a moment. Her phone had gone dead again. I typed the code and it lit up.

I hovered my finger over the screen for a second, waiting. Then, before I gave myself a chance to think about it, I tapped her photos app.

A second later a timeline appeared. I scrolled back a few weeks. I tapped into a folder. It was from the prom last month. Lots of selfies. Lots of Carl.

I clicked back and scrolled again. There was a whole row of Carls and Amandas sliding across the screen. Cheek to cheek. Arms up at the sky. Heavy photoshopping. Sun beams and artistic flares.

And then, just from last week, the thumbnails changed. It was... no. Was it? I clicked into the folder. And then I stared at the screen, unblinking.

There were several shots of a familiar plastic stick with a small slit on one end. A solid blue line and a faint pink one just below the slit.

I glanced up at the door. The teacher from the next room had lapsed into the silence. I could hear the sound of the wall clock whirring as the second hand crawled around the dial.

I looked back at her phone. And then, without really realizing it, I reached for mine. I clicked the photo icon, held it above her screen, and pressed record. As it recorded I refreshed her screen saver so it showed her and Carl. Then I typed in the code, and panned my phone across the pic of the plastic stick for a second.

Before I had time to change my mind, I clicked off my phone and slid it back into my bag. I scrolled to her recording app, opened the book, and started to read chapter 4.

That night, in my room, I pulled out my phone again and spent a long time looking at the recording I took. The plastic stick shook slightly in the recording. I must have been pretty nervous.

I opened my Snapchat. I took a slow breath. My thumb hovered over the send button. I blinked a few times and finally looked out my window at the moon. It's not easy to kill.//

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zary Fekete grew up in Hungary. He has a debut novella (Words on the Page) out with DarkWinter Lit Press and a short story collection (To Accept the Things I Cannot Change: Writing My Way Out of Addiction) out with Creative Texts. He enjoys books, podcasts, and many many many films. Twitter and Instagram: @ZaryFekete



# Frozen Cookies

## A Poem by Alyssa Thompson

Growing up we spent every summer at Great Grandma's,  
usually in the pool, splashing and playing.  
My father would be grilling while she made sides,  
moving around the kitchen with a grace that never faded.

I still remember the smell of her rosemary potatoes,  
her brown sugar carrots.  
I try to replicate them but it's never the same.

The adults would eventually pull us from the pool,  
ignoring our cries for more fun, for "one more jump."  
We loved being in the water,  
I loved being in the water.

My mother would fill my plate,  
making sure I got my vegetables and not just chips.  
Sitting my plate down at the table,  
I would ask her for coffee milk.  
(As a proper Rhode Islander.)

I'd look out the window as I ate,  
watching the birds and squirrels roam her yard.  
The crab apples were always falling from the tree.

Once I finished my dinner,  
I would ask Great Grandma for a cookie.  
She always kept my favorite in the freezer,  
at least in the summer.

I wish we could go back to those days.  
I was happier and unaware of death.

I still had my great-grandma.

## ABOUT THE POET



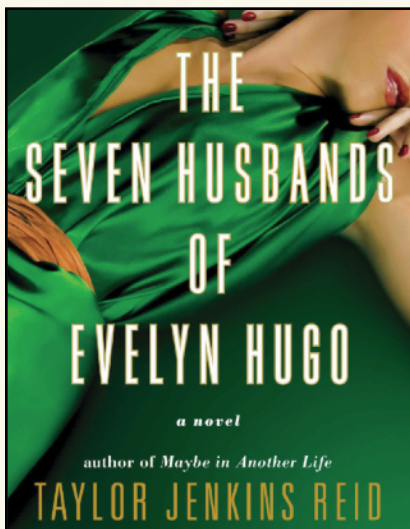
Alysa Thompson comes from a family of writers and has grown up with a desire to continue that tradition. If she isn't writing, then you can find her curled up with her animals and taking part in some kind of art project.





# The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo

Reviewed by Jill Hedgecock



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“The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo” (**Atria Books, reprint, 2018, paperback, 398 pages, \$9.99**) by Taylor Jenkins Reid is the compelling story of a Boomer-era Hollywood star, Evelyn Hugo, reflecting on her often-scandalous rise to stardom. Hugo’s retrospective story is intertwined with the life of a young journalist who signs on to write Hugo’s biography.

While Hugo’s life is the predominant tale, journalist Monique Grant’s story is also compelling. Grant is in the midst of the fallout from a recent divorce. Suffering from a lack of confidence, she tends to let opportunities slide past her. As a result, her career at “Vivant Magazine” is stagnating. But when summoned to 79-year-old Hugo’s Upper East Side apartment on the pretense that Hugo will grant an exclusive interview to “Vivant Magazine”, Monique is instead offered the opportunity of a lifetime — to write Hugo’s biography.

Hugo's story begins with a recounting of her childhood growing up with Cuban immigrant parents in New York's Hell's Kitchen. She is a teenager when she marries her first husband, Eddie, in the 1950s. Eddie agrees to take her to Hollywood, where Hugo aspires to become a famous actress. Author Taylor Jenkins Reid does a fabulous job of reminding readers of the era that Hugo grows up in — a time when Hollywood movies and producers focused on building careers of talented actors and actresses. Hugo knows how to play the game and soon divorces her first husband to marry a handsome actor who is also a rising star. And so it goes, with an unapologetic Hugo divorcing and marrying men that serve her changing needs. There are twists and turns along the way as Hugo describes her complicated life, and Monique also finds herself changing in unexpected ways as a result.

“The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo” is a *New York Times* Bestseller, an Amazon Editor's Pick for Best Literature and Fiction. This is the perfect novel for readers who want to immerse themselves in the golden days of gossip columns, and the days when the lives of Hollywood's rich and famous could be scripted by Hollywood agents and movie producers. Fans of “The Girls in the Picture” by Melanie Benjamin and “People We Meet on Vacation” by Emily Henry will likely enjoy this novel.

Taylor Jenkins Reid is the author of multiple New York Times Bestselling novels, including “Carrie Soto Is Back”, “Malibu Rising”, “Daisy Jones and The Six”. Other books by Reid include “One True Loves”, “Maybe in Another Life”, “After I Do”, and “Forever, Interrupted”. Her books have been chosen by Reese's Book Club, Read with Jenna, Indie Next, Best of Amazon, and Book of the Month. Her novel, “Daisy Jones and The Six”, is a



limited series on Amazon Prime. She lives in Los Angeles. Follow her on Instagram @tjenkinsreid.

### ABOUT JILL HEDGECOCK



Jill Hedgecock is a local author of several novels featuring animals. Her newest release “In Shadow’s Reflection” is the third novel in her Doberman series.

[www.JillHedgecock.com](http://www.JillHedgecock.com)

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

**NETFLIX ORIGINAL**  
*the seven husbands of Evelyn Hugo*  
★★★★★ ALL SEASONS  
A spellbinding story about love,  
glamour, and the price of fame

**▶ PLAY** **➕ MY LIST** 🔥 🔖

0:07 / 1:23

**The Seven Husbands Of Evelyn Hugo | Unofficial Trailer | Netflix**

Click to watch: <https://youtu.be/CjqOzXXJoLw?si=qoLtf5CmbCoQUy7G>

# We All Smell

## An Article/Sample by Betsy Robinson

An [article](#) by Scott Sayare in the *New York Times* (June 14, 2024) tells the story of 72-year-old nurse Joy Milne who smelled her husband's Parkinson's:

Joy's had always been an unusually sensitive nose, the inheritance, she believes, of her maternal line. Her grandmother was a "hyperosmic," and she encouraged Joy, as a child, to make the most of her abilities, quizzing her on different varieties of roses, teaching her to distinguish the scent of the petals from the scent of the leaves from the scent of the pistils and stamens. Still, her grandmother did not think odor of any kind to be a polite topic of conversation, and however rich and enjoyable and dense with information the olfactory world might be, she urged her granddaughter to keep her experience of it to herself.

Milne's husband died in 2015, but she went on to diagnose others' early Parkinson's and has made a wonderful contribution to medicine with her hyperosmic sense.

I skimmed this very long article with great interest—not in diagnosing Parkinson's or even in Milne's ability, but because I was thrilled to finally



have a word, “hyperosmic,” for what I’ve called my “canine olfactory system.” I am hyperosmic.

Like Milne, I never talked about this other than saying I was sensitive to smells. And because mentioning people’s odors is rude, it wasn’t until I was in my 40s that I began talking about and exploring my sensitivity. It happened when I attended a healing school and began identifying what specific smells meant. Fear stinks and since I felt so much of it, I was self-conscious. Finally, one day I blurted my insecurity in class and was both stunned and relieved that nobody seemed to know what I was talking about—but they were interested.

Fear has a particularly strong odor, but all emotions have odors. All people have odors. Dogs know this and have no judgment about it, and despite our personal oblivion, we know it too: We employ scent dogs to track people; hunters know to stay downwind of their prey, but still, we would rather not discuss our odors that are apparent to all nonhuman species and apparently there is now a thriving industry of full-body deodorants.

This is ridiculous. No matter how much stuff you slather on, dogs and hyperosmics still smell you. I know when somebody is angry or seething in resentment without them saying anything. I also know when they have cancer.

Frustrated at our species’ mass delusion that we successfully hide our scent and feelings, I wrote a novel, *The Last Will & Testament of Zelda McFigg* (Black Lawrence Press’s Big Moose Prize-winner, 2015), about a protagonist with a perpetual stink. I hoped that by exaggerating all the human traits we are so invested in believing we can hide, and writing it with

humor, I could nudge people toward self-acceptance. Predictably, readers have broken down into those who love Zelda and those who find her disgusting. (I will not psychoanalyze the responses, but draw your own conclusions.)

My new novel, *Cats on a Pole* (Kano Press, July 2, 2024), goes further into the hyperosmic world. Without having the descriptor, I wrote the story of a hyperosmic woman who is overwhelmed by the smells and energies that bombard her. She really has no recourse but to learn self-acceptance whose side effect is nonjudgment. The book has humor in it, but nothing close to *Zelda McFigg*. Still, I hope it does its bit to nudge people into self-acceptance.

The truth is we all smell. We can accept that or we can continue to delude ourselves and waste enormous amounts of money on products that promise to make us as odorless as AI—an intelligence with no body. Do we really want that? Or we can delude ourselves into believing that we're pure and odorless and it's only the "others" who smell.

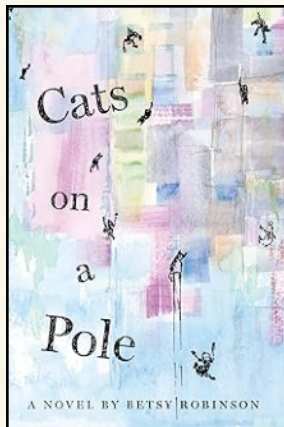


### **The Aroma of Energy**

Excerpted from *Cats on a Pole* (Kano Press, July 2, 2024)

Who cares? thought Harmony, who had been hired for her current position after three weeks as a temp with “above-average organizational skills,” according to the *Your Garden* HR department, who found her ability to sort and traffic and make lists “very competent.” She’d been so excited, believing she would write articles and become part a plant-loving community. But a year into the job and the resounding silence of the tomb,





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she decided that she really wasn't that fond of people after all. She liked plants. So it was fine. For a while. The one big drawback was that Joseph, her boss, was the only male employee, he was gay, and although she had no interest in physical contact, it was now five years later and she hadn't met even one attractive, available straight man.

“When stuff is stuck, it stinks,” she'd told her therapist, trying to describe the problem. “I'm stuck.”

“What exactly do you mean by that?” Dr. Thompson had asked.

“The energy. My energy. When it's all stuck in a missile, it starts to stink. I stink. I know if I could get myself to meet someone, it would start to move, but I don't like bars or singles activities or people. Basically I don't like anything.”

With a quizzical look, Dr. Thompson had told her the hour was up, and for next session, she should think about interests that could expose her to people she'd like.

And this morning, she'd suddenly realized she did like something: energy—the energy that stank so much when it didn't move. All her life she'd felt it, smelled it, dodged it, reveled in it. Kathy Smith, her video aerobics teacher, had great energy. The way she looked into the camera so sincerely and assured Harmony that she could do just eight more leg lifts made Harmony believe she really could—that she could have “nice” energy like this pretty blonde white woman, that even if she could never really *be* nice, maybe she could do good things with her energy. Energy—good or bad

—it interested her—this was the epiphany that had set her back five minutes.

“Energy?” asked Dr. Thompson, trying to sound nonjudgmental, despite Harmony’s lateness and lack of explanation. “Can you elaborate on that?”

“You know—the stuff people give off when they feel or think. Sometimes it’s hot or cold. Sometimes it stabs or cuts or envelops you. Sometimes it stinks—like what I was talking about last session. It depends on the person and the situation. Kathy Smith probably smells lovely, even after a workout. Cancer, on the other hand, is stinky. I know that’s not a thought or a feeling, but maybe it comes from a feeling. I’m not sure. All I do know is Cora, the secretary in the cubicle next to mine, has a tumor in her stomach, and I swear, I could use a gas mask.”

Dr. Thompson took a long sip of iced tea. “This is very interesting,” she said readjusting her skirt to cover her thick calves. “Can you tell me some more?”

Harmony was paying \$120 a session and was beginning to get annoyed. She’d been seeing Dr. Thompson for eight months—since her dog died and her suicide inclination had been hijacked by a sudden and seemingly permanent state of arousal—a bizarre manifestation of grief? It was more physical than emotional—like there was a missile of energy between her legs, and if she didn’t blast off, she would blow up, kill somebody, or go mad—which was why she’d been jumping up and down with Kathy Smith for eight months. This energy destroyed her ability to be depressed, which at least would have been more rational than relentless arousal with no true desire for companionship. She’d tried masturbation, but seconds after the orgasm, the missile would return. And eight months of therapy hadn’t made it any better. She glared at Dr. Thompson and ground her teeth. “I’m



glad you find this interesting. I've never really tried to explain it before, but energy most definitely has a smell. For instance, if somebody has a really strong thought—the way you did when I was five minutes late for my appointment tonight—it smells.”

“Excuse me?” said Dr. Thompson recrossing her legs and willing her foot not to tap. She had thought this was just an anxiety disorder following the death of a pet, but perhaps she had been too hasty in her diagnosis.

Harmony half-closed her eyes and softened the front of her body to feel Dr. Thompson's discomfort level. Very high. But \$120! “When I was late and didn't apologize or explain but just started talking, you were annoyed,” said Harmony, staring steadily so she wouldn't miss the reaction.

Dr. Thompson sucked in breath. “You feel I was annoyed?” she queried on a measured exhale. “Why do you feel I was annoyed?”

“Because you thought, ‘She's five minutes late and hasn't apologized. Another narcissist. Lord, I'm sick of this. Well, I'm not saying anything if she doesn't, and I'm ending the session on time. I wonder if she'll protest.’”

Dr. Thompson turned crimson and took several controlled breaths.

“And now you're wondering if I'm delusional and a good guesser, or if I can really hear you think which scares the shit out of you because this isn't in the DSM, and how on earth can you deal with it?”

Dr. Thompson spilled her tea, slowly rose from her chair, and said, “Please excuse me for a moment. I need a paper towel.” Then she walked out of the room.

Harmony felt a little guilty for how much she was enjoying this, and she gazed around the room trying to pick up clues about Dr. Thompson's personal life.

Harmony was interested in people's backgrounds. She had so little information about her own. She had been adopted soon after birth and had no knowledge of her racial roots. She'd been asked so many times what she was that by the third grade she'd begun telling people her birth parents were a Native American medicine man and a Middle Eastern gypsy who'd met in jail after being arrested for fortune telling. She'd told the story so many times that she'd almost come to believe it. After all, she did feel different.

Her parents were Rosemary and Larry Rogers, two hard-working white Christians who married too late in life to conceive a biological child. Harmony had grown up loved and admired, if not understood. When she would answer her mother's unvoiced questions or tell her father he worried too much, her parents would simply hug her and tell her what a sensitive girl she was, but she shouldn't spend so much time indoors. She should make friends with the other children in their suburban development of box houses with rectilinear windows so identical that you could get lost. It was a lostness particular to small towns awash in people who smiled and said good-morning no matter how angry they were at their husbands or wives or annoying children. When Harmony asked why the minister at church always pretended to like people when he shook their hands good-bye, but his hand smelled like dirty socks and he really hated everybody, her parents told her she could stop going to church. And she did. No big deal.

Harmony made very good grades, which seemed to compensate for the fact that she had no friends. She was a devoted daughter and had nursed both parents to the end of their lives. After her mother died was the first time she contemplated ending things. She was sitting on a bench at the East 72<sup>nd</sup> Street entrance to Central Park trying to choose between a pill



overdose and “falling off” the subway platform when a stray puppy of indeterminate pedigree had jumped into her lap. The puppy had no collar, so what could Harmony do but take her home and name her Delilah?

They’d lived together for eighteen years—the longest relationship besides her parents that Harmony had ever had. And when Delilah died in her sleep last August, Harmony lost her focus. Her energy lost its focus and was trying to make her insane. Although she badly wanted to join Delilah and her parents, the missile forbade it, and since she was well aware that forty-two was too young to die, she’d decided to give therapy a try.

Dr. Thompson walked stiffly into the room with a roll of paper towels and dabbed at the puddle of spilled tea.

“I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable,” said Harmony after what seemed like an interminable silence. “I was late to work and I had to make up the time. It’s been a long day, and I guess I’m cranky.”

“You think I’m uncomfortable,” began Dr. Thompson, and Harmony stood up.

“Can we stop this? Please! I’m paying you to help me, and this doesn’t help. I don’t *think* you’re uncomfortable. I *know* it. I know that right now you’re wondering how much time is left in the session because as soon as I walk out of here you’re going to pour yourself a stiff drink. Then you’ll call a colleague to try to make sense out of all this and put it in a box with a label so you can be assured you’ve done the right thing. I know that right now you’re scared to death because you’ve never felt so exposed. You’re trying to think of all the stray thoughts I might have heard, and you’re even more scared because you’re actually believing I can hear you think. So maybe *you’re crazy.*”

All the blood drained out of Dr. Thompson's face, and Harmony sat down.

"You're right," said Dr. Thompson finally. Her eyes were soft.

"Thank you," answered Harmony, sighing heavily.

"Now how can I help you?"

Harmony closed her eyes and swallowed. She had never told anybody about her secret language before.//

Buy the Book: <https://amzn.to/3C84S1H>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Betsy Robinson writes funny fiction about flawed people. Her novel *The Last Will & Testament of Zelda McFigg* is winner of Black Lawrence Press's 2013 Big Moose Prize and was published in September 2014. This was followed by the February 2015 publication of her edit of *The Trouble with the Truth* by Edna Robinson, Betsy's late mother, by Simon & Schuster/ Infinite Words. She published revised e-book and paperback editions of her Mid-List Press award-winning first novel, a tragicomedy about falling down the rabbit hole of the U.S. of A. in the 1970s, *Plan Z* by Leslie Kove, when it went out of print. Her articles have been published in *Publishers Weekly*, *Lithub*, *Chicago Review of Books*, *Oh Reader*, *The Sunlight Press*, *Prairie Fire*, *Salvation South*, *Next Avenue*, and many other publications. Betsy is an editor, fiction writer, journalist, and playwright. Her novels *Cats on a Pole* and *The Spectators* have been published by Kano Press in 2024.

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