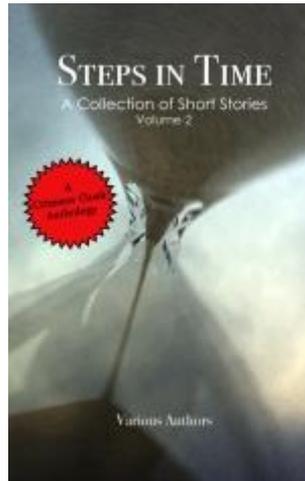


STEPS IN TIME



Volume 2 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies.

A collection of Stories by [Roger Bone](#), [Janice Clark](#), [Mark Conte](#), [Ray Daley](#),
[Madeline Dow](#),
[T W Embry](#), [Jane Finch](#), [Don Ford](#), [Elizabeth Grace](#), [Rod Martinez](#), [Rodney Page](#),
[Esma Race](#), [Doug Rains](#),
[P J Roscoe](#), [Wesley Tallant](#), [Chrystal Vaughan](#), [Barbara Weitzner](#) and [Gary Winstead](#).

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The Eternal City illustrated by [Veronica Castle](#)

Pictures for *Field of Poppies* and *Warrior Spirit* provided by the authors

STEPS IN TIME

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To grandma Bessie, and the many like her.

Though you may have forgotten us, we will never forget you. You are a light that shines in the darkness, the warmth on a cold winter day, a cool breeze on a warm summer night, and forever loved by those who knew you.

Where a charge is made for this book, all profit will go to

[Alzheimer's Research](#)



Foreword

Two weeks ago I stood before a packed church on a Friday afternoon giving the eulogy at my dad's funeral.

It still seems unreal. My dad. My healthy dad. Just last year we were Christmas shopping together. Two years ago we were volunteering at food shelters. Three years ago we ran a 10K race together and he won his age group. Four years ago he walked me down the aisle. But five years ago he was diagnosed with a combination of Alzheimer's and Lewy Body dementia. A quick and deadly combination.

As I stood before the crowded church, I found myself thinking about life. We wake up every day and go about our lives. We work. We play. We do dishes and oil changes and holidays. And the years roll by. We all want to do something important with our lives. We want to think that after we're gone and people gather in a church to talk about us, that we will have given them something to think about. Well, my dad did something with his life. There was much to talk about.

Fred Brightbill was world-renowned ophthalmologist. He gave sight to thousands of people. He wrote four editions of the textbook that is still used in medical schools across the country. He taught. He started a family. He planted trees. He was kind to every person who crossed his path. He was generous with his money and his time. He left every place better than the way he found it. He was an extraordinary person and yet completely humble. And he loved the Wisconsin Badgers like nobody's business.

Dementia is a terrible, unapologetic thief. It disassembles your loved one and takes them apart piece by piece before your eyes. I would sometimes find my dad weeping. He couldn't remember what his diagnosis was, but he knew something was very wrong. He became clumsy, paranoid, repetitive, unable to work, drive, read, write and eventually unable to speak. But he never stopped feeling. He felt pain, embarrassment and shame. He felt lonely. He felt like he was letting us all down. Nothing was farther from the truth.

Alzheimer's is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States and it's on the rise. Someday they'll figure out why. Let's make it happen sooner rather than later. Give money to research. Or invent an ice bucket challenge to raise money so we can get rid of this God forsaken disease once and for all. And if nothing else, go out and live a life worth talking about. My dad would want you to.

Susan Brightbill Dahlseid

March 2015

Look for her article in [*Guideposts*](#) magazine.

For more information go to <http://www.alzheimersresearchuk.org/about-dementia/helpful-information/symptoms/>

[Ten Early Signs and Symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease:](#)

1. Memory Loss that disrupts daily life, *as opposed to absent-mindedness*
2. Challenges in planning or solving problems, *as opposed to occasional errors*
3. Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure, *as opposed to occasionally needing help to work a new gadget*
4. CONFUSION WITH TIME OR PLACE, *as opposed to temporarily being unsure of the day of the week*
5. Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships, *as opposed to age-related vision changes*
6. New Problems with words in speaking or writing, *as opposed to occasional trouble finding the right word*
7. Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps, *as opposed to occasionally misplacing things and retracing steps to find them*
8. Decreased or poor judgment, *as opposed to making an occasional bad decision*
9. Withdrawal from work or social activities, *as opposed to sometimes feeling weary of work, family and social obligations*
10. Changes in mood and personality, *as opposed to becoming set in one's ways and fond of routine*

A note on spelling: you will find either UK or US spellings employed according to usage in the country of origin of the author concerned.

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## SECTION 1: TIME SLIPS

### Remnants of Love

By Roger Bone

*Robert, come play with me, come out into the water,* Alice said.

*Ok, Alice, here I come,* Robert said as he started running across the sandy beach, and splashing water with his kicking feet as he reached Alice in the water.

*Be careful and don't go out too far,* Robert's mother yells.

*We won't Mom,* Robert replies.

*Don't get sand in my eye!* Alice says as Robert continues to splash Alice. *OK! OK! Robert, that's enough,* Alice says.

*Alright, I'm sorry.*

*I'm gonna sit in the water for a while, do you wanna sit with me, Robert?*

*Sure, I guess I can for a little while.*

*Want to hold my hand, Robert?* Alice asked.

*Sure, if you don't care.* Robert and Alice sat just at the edge of the water in the sand holding hands as the waves come up to their feet with the sun glistening over the water, creating a silhouette of their young bodies from behind them.

*Can I kiss you, Robert?*

*Why?* Robert asked.

*Because I like you a lot, I like you a lot,* said Alice. There the two of them were sitting and showing the world the innocence of true love in its truest form. The one single most magical moment in everyone's life is their first true love kiss, and here it was in the raw.

*Aw, honey look, Robert and Alice are kissing.*

*Yes dear, I remember someone else doing that a few years ago,* as Robert's father said, turning to his beautiful wife and winking.

*That made me feel like butterflies in my stomach,* Robert said.

*Mine too,* said Alice.

*Did you touch my foot, Alice?*

*No! Why?*

*Something just did, let's get out of the water.* Robert and Alice looked behind them just as they were walking out of the waves and noticed a jellyfish washing in and out with the waves.

*Robert! Robert! Are you ok?* Alice was screaming as Robert fell to the sand. Alice starts yelling for help and both sets of parents start running to Alice and Robert. Robert and Alice both collapsed onto the sand and went unconscious. Robert was going in and out of consciousness for a period of time when the ambulances came onto the beach and the EMTs loaded up each of them in separate ambulances. Alice lay unconscious and Robert finally went out of consciousness and became incoherent.

“Robert, wake up, it’s time for school,” his mom says while knocking on the door. He awakens with the sun shining in his eyes. Robert gets dressed and goes down into the kitchen.

“How you feeling this morning?” his mom asks.

Robert says groggily, “Ok I guess.”

“Do you feel like you can make it through school today?”

“I think I can, Mom.”

“Alright, there’s a plate ready for you in the dining room. Go eat and get ready for school. Alice will be waiting for you soon so hurry it up. Do you want a ride to school or you going to walk with Alice?”

“I’ll walk with Alice if that’s ok with you, Mom.”

“It’s fine, but be sure you have your phone with you in case you need to call.”

“Sure mom,” Robert says hastily. Robert gets up from the dining table and goes brush his teeth; while he’s in the bathroom there’s a knock at the door. Robert’s mom opens the door and there is Alice standing there.

“Come on in Alice,” Robert’s mom says, “Robert is up brushing his teeth and he’ll be down in a few minutes. Are you hungry, Alice?”

“No,” she says, “I just ate before I left home.”

Robert finishes brushing his teeth and combs his hair and goes back downstairs to meet with Alice.

“Hi! How are you feeling, Robert?”

“Not too bad, Alice.”

“Are we walking to school today?” she asks.

“We can if you want to.”

“I want to,” she replies.

“You two have a good day at school,” Robert’s mom says as they walk through the door, and shuts it.

They held hands and started the short walk to school. Alice asked Robert teasingly like they just met, “Does this mean we’re boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“School is only a few blocks away so we don’t have to be in no hurry, Alice.”

“Sounds good to me,” Alice said with a huge smirk on her face.

“Why do you have that look on your face, Alice?” Robert asks.

“Nothing,” Alice replies, “nothing at all.”

“Aw come on, you can tell me.”

“I’m just really happy is all, Robert, that’s all.”

“Me too,” Robert says, with a huge sigh of relief. “I was scared for a minute that you didn’t feel the same about me since we sat by each other at the beach.”

“Why would you think I wouldn’t, Robert?”

“Well, because I ...”

“It’s ok, Robert, I was scared to go to your house this morning. It was a chance I had to take, and here we are.”

“I’m glad you came, Alice.” Alice and Robert made it to school and stood at the bottom of the steps leading to the doors to enter.

“Can I kiss you, Alice?” Robert asked while making a deep swallow.

“That would be fine, Robert.” Once again Robert and Alice give each other the same kiss as the time at the beach, then they give each other a hug and go on into school.

The last bell rings and all the students go to their locker to put away their school books and put up their belongings. Alice and Robert meet at the door to exit school, the same as every day for the past six years, but today is a special day. Two weeks left of school and this weekend is the Senior Prom dance. Alice and Robert grabbed each other's hand and started to walk home like they always have in the past.

"I have a lot of things to do this evening and tomorrow to be ready for our prom," Alice said.

"Are we still set for five o'clock to pick you up?"

"Five will be just fine, but I still don't know why you insist on us going so early, the prom isn't until seven o'clock," Alice said intuitively.

"I have something planned, and that's all I'm gonna tell you," Robert said excitedly. "Here we are," Robert said as they got to the sidewalk to his house. "So I'll see you tomorrow at five o'clock, Alice".

"Yes, I'll be ready," and they kissed each other and gave one another a huge heart-felt hug, and down the road Alice went to her house.

Saturday finally arrives and Robert has been up most of the night, nervous about the events coming later in the day and his surprise planned for Alice. He gets up, gets dressed, and goes brush his teeth, doing all of this as slowly as he can to waste time in the day. Robert goes down and fixes a simple bowl of cereal and thinks about how to pass some time before the big night. Alice on the other hand was up late last night with her mother making last minute alterations to her dress and mending some loose ends on her it. A beautiful silk white dress with all the fixin's. Alice woke up early to do some shopping.

Three-thirty it shows on Robert's watch, as he looks after shutting off the mower. Time to get ready for the night. He has the tux rented and ready, your standard "penguin" tux, limo rented and ready, and the most important dozen roses and corsage to pin on Alice's dress. Robert goes upstairs and jumps in the shower, making sure he's cleaned up after mowing the lawn just a little bit earlier. By the time he's done showering, shaving, and primping in the mirror it's around four-fifteen. *Better get a move on*, he was thinking to himself. He gets to his room and puts on his expensive cologne to wear tonight for the special occasion, puts on his tux, makes sure the bow tie is perfect, got the cuff links in place, got extra cash in the wallet, hair is nice and well groomed.

Four forty-five, time to head to Alice's house to pick her up. Perspiration, sweaty palms, hands shaking, a few nervous twitches, all the makings of a nervous wreck waiting to happen.

Robert arrives a few minutes early to Alice's house, he steps out of the limo and takes the walkway up to the front door, takes one huge deep breath, and rings the doorbell.

Alice's father answers the door: "Come on in Robert, Alice will be down shortly. Have a seat while we wait. Need anything while we wait Robert?" Alice's father asked.

"There is just one thing I would like to ask you."

"What is that Robert?"

"I was wondering if I could have your daughter's hand in marriage."

"That's an awful large step from the prom now isn't it. What about you going to college and getting jobs?" Alice's father mentioned with a little haste and sarcasm.

“I thought the commitment to our relationship would strengthen while we’re away in college, and after both of us graduate and get our careers in line, then we would wed. We could be engaged from now to then for our commitment to each other.”

“Yes, that would be better in my opinion, I know you and Alice have been together for quite some time now and seem very happy. Me and the wife have talked about this day coming soon, just not this soon, but nonetheless here we are. As long as school comes first I have no reason to stop you two from getting engaged.”

“Thank you sir, so much, you won’t be disappointed I promise,” Robert said.

“You haven’t let me down yet Robert,” Alice’s father said. Robert and Alice’s father just sit there close to one another in an awkward silence when Alice’s mother comes down the steps.

“Are you ready to see Alice?”

“Yes ma’am,” Robert said.

Then in one step, Alice’s white shoes came into view, then next step you could see all but her head, and finally one more step and there she was. As beautiful as the morning spring, as beautiful as a rainbow over a waterfall. Robert stood up and his eyes were wide open and he couldn’t blink, his mouth gaped open and he is all awestruck.

“Here is your date, Robert.”

“You look absolutely beautiful, Alice,” Robert said.

“Thank you,” Alice said, “and you look very handsome, Robert.”

“Ok, you two love birds, quit gawking at each other and stand close together so I can get a picture.” Robert and Alice stand together quickly so Alice’s mother can get a quick picture.

“Alice, we better get going because my parents want us to stop in for pictures at my house too.” Alice and Robert go outside and Robert opens the door for her to enter the limo, still gazing at her beauty and him thinking he’s the luckiest man on earth to have such love and beauty.

Shortly after they leave Alice’s parents’ house, they arrive at Robert’s house and hastily go inside. Robert’s parents are both sitting and waiting for the two. Both of them are in awe over the pure beauty of both as a nice young couple.

“Let’s hurry this along,” Robert said. “We’re running a little late. I have dinner reservations that cannot be changed.” So without further delay, Robert’s dad snaps a picture of the lovely couple. Robert and Alice return to the limo and off to the restaurant they head.

“So what’s this big surprise you have planned?” Alice asks.

“You’ll have to wait and see, it wouldn’t be a surprise if I told you,” Robert said, laughing.

After a short trip downtown, they arrive at the finest restaurant in the city and the limo driver pulls through the valet drive to let Robert and Alice out of the limo. Both enter the restaurant and get ushered to their waiting table. The waiter hands them both a menu and a glass of water and says she’ll be back to check on them in a few minutes. Sure enough, a few minutes later the waiter returns and asks each what will they be having.

“I’ll take the crab legs and shrimp with a coke,” Robert said.

“I’ll take the same,” Alice said, “we’ll leave it simple.”

Six-fifteen: “You ready for your surprise, Alice?” Robert said anxiously. Robert tapped on the glass to motion to the driver and the driver nods his head in recognition on what to do. Soon the limo arrives up on a high lookout overlooking the city. The driver pushes a button and opens the sun roof.

“Stand up and look around with me, Alice,” Robert said with excitement.

“Is this my surprise?” Alice said.

“No, this is: Alice, will you marry me?”

Alice stood there overlooking the city in total awe and shock.

“Alice, did you hear me?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Alice said with extreme excitement, while tears started to come down her face. She held out her hand while Robert placed a nice two-carat eleven-facet ring onto her finger. Suddenly Alice wrapped her arms around Robert and started to give him one of the most passionate heartfelt kisses one could ever imagine. The two stood there holding each other without a care in the world except each other’s company.

The limo driver opened his door and stepped out. “Sir, it is six forty-five, we must continue to the prom.”

So Robert and Alice sit back down into the limo and the driver closes the sun roof and starts to head back down the mountain. Just as they got up to speed and near half way down the road from the overlook, the front left tire blew out and the car swerved to the left and went crashing through the guard railing. Alice and Robert started screaming as the car began to fall over the ravine. The car started rolling over and over, luckily for Alice she was on top of Robert, but Robert’s window shattered and his back and head was hitting rocks on every roll. The car comes to a stop at the bottom of the ravine and is upside down. Robert is fatally injured from all the abuse he suffered on the way down.

*Robert . . . Robert . . . Robert, can you hear us? It’s Mom and Dad. Robert, are you awake?*

*Mom . . . Dad . . . where’s Alice, she was just with me.*

*Now honey, take it easy, you’ve been out for a few days since you got stung by that jellyfish, so just relax.*

*Jellyfish, what do you mean?*

*You and Alice were down at the beach and you two got stung by a jellyfish, don’t you remember?*

*I was twelve years old when that happened, Mother.*

*Yes Robert, you’re twelve, and it happened a few days ago.*

*So where’s Alice, Mom?*

*Sorry, Robert, Alice didn’t make it. She died on the way to the hospital; there wasn’t anything anyone could do.*

*I’m not feeling well, Mom, I’m just going to close my eyes for a few minutes and*

...

The End

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**[A Slip in Time](#)**

By **[Janice Clark](#)**

Eighty-year-old Gladys was all a-twitter. "I'm so glad you could join our sewing group today, Sybil. Really, it does a body good to get out of the house once in a while, don't you think? May I...?"

Sybil held up her embroidery hoop, with the motto in elaborate letters, encircled by an assortment of strange symbols.

"My, what unusual patterns. Wherever did you find them, dear?"

Sybil smiled. "I ran across them in an old book. I just like the looks of them."

"Well, they're certainly...interesting. Oh. Oh dear. I think you may have slipped up. I always thought it was a *stitch* in time, not slip..."

"How silly of me," said Sybil. "Of course it is. Well, no harm done. I'll just have to pick out a few letters—there's room to make the change. I'll do that after I finish the border."

Gladys giggled. "It's sort of a slip of the tongue, isn't it?" She smirked at her own joke.

Alice spoke up. "What did you say about slips, Gladys? My granddaughter Mary got in some trouble over a slip. She told me her employer tried to give her a pink slip. The nerve of that old goat, offering an intimate garment to a young lady. Of course she left her position at once."

Deborah hooted. "Oh Alice, don't you know a 'pink slip' is a way of saying she got fired? Laid off, canned, given the axe..."

Alice blushed furiously. "Oh my, no wonder she looked at me so strangely..."

"Now, girls." Emma put down the frilly 1950s slip she was making for her niece. "Deborah, you stop teasing Alice. Anyone could make a mistake, the way the language keeps changing."

There was silence for a moment as each lady focused on her stitchery. Young Betty Lou, the hostess, said, "Well, I really appreciate all of you coming here today on such short notice. With my babysitter canceling at the last moment, I wouldn't have been able to come. And just look. Eight of us. I think this is about our biggest group ever."

There was a shudder, a ripple in the air, as if something had shifted.

Two-year-old Johnny padded into the room, wearing footed pajamas and clutching a teddy bear. "Mama. Hung'y, Mama."

"Why Johnny," exclaimed Betty Lou. "How did you get out of your crib, and why are you up so soon?" She turned to the other ladies, her voice apologetic. "He nearly always sleeps until 4:30 at least, and here it is only...Oh!! How did it get so late? It seems like you just got here."

The ladies all turned toward the mantel clock, which now read 4:45. There was a collective shiver and shaking of heads. The ladies began gathering up their sewing projects, still looking bemused. All except Sybil, who had just finished the last symbol in the border of her embroidery.

"Oh, please don't go yet," said Betty Lou, a touch of desperation in her voice. "You must think me a terrible hostess. We haven't even had refreshments yet. I have a lovely fudge cake in the kitchen. I'll just...no, why don't you all come out to the kitchen. It won't take a moment to make the tea and you can have a little cake before you go."

"Cake?" said Johnny. "Party?" He smiled hopefully.

"Yes, a party, and all these nice ladies will share it with you. Please, won't you?" she added. "And Johnny has his very own dish of red jello waiting in the refrigerator."

The boy squealed in delight, and the ladies trooped after him. They were just getting settled with their tea and cake when there was a resounding crash from the next room. The house shook. Everyone ran towards the living room, where an out-of-control bus had apparently missed the curve in the road and smashed right through the living room wall. They stared in shock at the bus-filled living room, as the clock hands spun madly back to 2:30.

The End

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## [A Man With a Hat](#)

By [Jane Finch](#)

The shop front was quite tatty, in keeping with the rest of the neglected street. Several shops were boarded up and others had broken windows and peeling paintwork.

Sam sat on the well-worn bench, staring at the window displaying all types of clothes from years gone by. The “d” was missing from the name, Secondhandlan-. It wasn’t the missing letter he was looking at, but the straw boater hat. It had a faded blue stripe around the middle and was beginning to fray around the edges, but it still had its distinct style, and that set Sam’s heart racing.

It reminded him of his days at college in Cambridge, when he would punt along the river, the striped blazer and straw boater his pride and joy. Jenny would be sitting in the bow, her dark hair blowing in the breeze, the sound of her laughter echoing against the walls of the aged bridges as they passed slowly through. Sam always found it a struggle to keep in the centre of the river under the bridge, and had to duck to avoid hitting his head. Ducking and punting at the same time was quite a feat.

Friends and colleagues passed by, nodding and smiling at Sam’s antics and Jenny’s delight. Her happiness was infectious, and it was a time of carefree days and exciting times for them both. There had been so many plans to make, things they would do, places they would go, and people they planned to visit. It seemed they had so much time ahead to spend together. How glad he was they had not known what fate had in store for them.

Now, whenever he dreamt, it was always of those times. He and Jenny enjoying a picnic in the park, or walking hand in hand in the cool of a summer evening. He had not thought about the boating days for a long time, until he saw the hat in the window.

Now, all these years later, there was a straw boater. He looked down at his gnarled hands and gripped his walking stick tightly. As he rose from the bench his back screamed and his bones ached. He sighed and hobbled towards the shop window, his eyes locked on the hat and the price tag that he could not yet read. He pressed his face up against the glass and squinted. The printed tag was too faded to decipher.

A gust of wind blew a circle of dust at his feet, and he fancied he heard the tinkling of Jenny’s laughter in the air. Turning abruptly he took hold of the door handle and walked determinedly into the shop. A woman’s hand lifted the hat from its stand, and a few moments later Sam walked out holding the boater.

He looked up and down the street. There were few people about, the sun was going down, and a chill filled the air. Sam saw his reflection in the shop window. He

was surprised how thin he looked, and bent. His short grey hair was receding and his cheeks were hollow.

Leaning on his stick, he slowly raised the boater and put it on his head. It fitted perfectly. Almost immediately his back straightened, a smile broke out on his face, and on an impulse he hurled his stick away. The man he saw now in the window was young and handsome and fit and happy.

He turned and almost skipped down the street, the years of loneliness falling away from him. He headed towards the bridge. He was going to hire a boat, and punt down the river, and even try to go under the bridges without bending. And somewhere, Jenny would be watching, and laughing.

The End

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## Time Goes By

By P J Roscoe

“My life is over...”

“Do you really believe that?”

I paused for a long time as I stared off into the distance. I saw nothing, yet continued to search for the truth of it. I finally nod my head, “Yes, it’s over. It can never be as it was. How can I live now? I merely exist and that...” My voice broke and I stopped, unable to continue.

The silence that followed stretched on. The clock in the hallway barely heard but like a dripping tap, I became fixated on it and its sound pulled me back into the room. I swallowed hard.

Time. I hated it with a passion. The days, the weeks, the months, the last few years, even that damned ticking clock! How long would I have to bear it before I died and peace would descend upon me? And I would be with him again. Bliss.

A slight noise and movement caught my attention and I looked up. “Where were you just then?” The soft question brought tears to my blood shot eyes and I sniffed, trying to stem them before they flowed yet again.

“I guess I was nowhere. It doesn’t matter anyway, does it?” I quickly glanced across at the woman opposite me and felt the trembling of my lower lip. How could talking to this person always affect me in such a way? I’d been warned of course, but it was still a shock every time.

“You are allowed to cry Maggie...”

That soft, non-judgemental voice broke my measly defences once more and the cascade of salt water gushed forth, quickly followed by snot which I frantically wiped away with a sodden tissue. My eyes burned and my face tingled. I clasped my hands in-between my legs as they felt cold. “I’m sorry... it’s pathetic isn’t it...?”

“Apologising for being human again Maggie...”

I heard the smile in the comment and found myself catching her eye, smiling briefly before hiding it away again. To hide my shame for smiling I busied myself with a clean tissue, and blowing my nose I wasn’t quite sure who I’d been apologising to; but I quickly wiped away any residue of grief and breathed deeply in an attempt to compose myself. The small digital clock on the table told me I had another forty minutes before I could flee.

Well, that technically wasn't true. I could walk out right now if I wanted; after all, this was my session and I could bloody well do whatever I wanted with it, those were the rules; but I never left early, if anything, I ran over. The truth was, I needed these one hour sessions and waited impatiently for them every week.

I looked up knowing she would be waiting patiently; I wasn't disappointed. She was known as Rebecca and she never judged me, or told me off or expected me to 'pull myself together'. In a world of people who quickly formed opinions on every move I made, Rebecca was a God-send. Without these weekly sessions, I would have fallen apart completely, I was sure of that.

"Do you want to tell me why you feel your life is over?"

I swallowed and licked my lips nervously, "I can't form the words, not yet..."

"Okay, that's fine Maggie, but please remember our agreement about hurting yourself..."

I felt myself get flustered and knew my cheeks were beginning to glow, she knew what I'd been contemplating of course but I still lied. "Oh no, it's nothing like that... I promise... it's..."

A fresh wave of tears threatened to cascade again, but I blinked them back whilst staring at my scrawny knees. "I just...I don't know how to tell you... to explain... I feel so ashamed..."

"I am not here to judge you Maggie, you do that yourself, it seems...?"

"Well of course I do! I'm disgusting!" The anger that rose so fast within me dwindled to nothing almost immediately and shame swiftly followed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to shout. I know you are trying to help me, but I don't know if anyone can. I am lost..."

"Lost?"

"Yes, lost. I have lost my path and now I don't know where I am or what I am meant to do. I have strayed and now, I feel I should be punished..." I couldn't quell these tears and let them fall unhindered.

My companion sat silently, watching, waiting, but eventually asked, "Perhaps, if you told me why you feel lost...?"

Reaching for a clean tissue, I realised that there weren't many left in the box and hoped that they would last until the end of the session, making a mental note to put them on the shopping list. "I don't think I can. I am ashamed of myself. It's hard to even look at you."

"Yet, you have come here today, knowing that you feel like this. Knowing you would look at me. Do you think there is some part of you that needs to talk about it...?"

I blew my red nose and thought about that. Maybe there was? There had to be or I wouldn't be here; that was true. Would I have come here, knowing that I could trust this one person to be honest with me if I didn't need to voice my anxiety? This was the ONLY place I could talk about it and I knew it. But, still, it was hard to find the words.

I loved my husband. He was everything to me and had always been everything to me since the first moment we had met. The love and passion that I'd felt in that instant of meeting him had astonished me and I'd found out later that he'd felt the same way. We'd married as soon as possible so that the sin of our sexual exploits was minimal before legal.

The children were a joy because they were ours. Life together was a joy, because we were together. Our love never died. He did.

The horror of his dying still haunted my every waking moment. A year had passed in a blur, with friends and family keeping me busy, while another year had passed in a haze of medication, booze and loneliness. Now, nearly three years after his passing, I had found some solitude in my weekly sessions with the grief counsellor. My only true, constant friend, that never had other things to do or crossed the road when she saw me. She was there when I needed to talk and unload my grief and now my guilt.

Throughout the last few months I had shared myself during those hours together. Shared every emotion I had ever felt during and after my life with Greg. It was hard to choose which emotion or anniversary to work on when there was twenty-three years of history to rummage through.

After the first few initial sessions, my nerves had taken over and I'd flounced out of the room screaming it was a stupid idea, I'd finally managed to relax enough to communicate some of my feelings, thoughts and consequent actions since his death.

Anger towards my darling Greg had surprised me and I'd despised myself for a very long time. Was it really his fault for dying? The drunk hitting him at fifty-four miles an hour as Greg crossed the zebra crossing was at fault. The guilt for feeling such an emotion had quickly followed and I'd wallowed in that for so long that now, I found it difficult to let that emotion go. Disbelief had been brief, lasting as long as it had taken to pluck up the courage to see his body and then allow them to burn it. The beautiful body I had held every night; my head on his chest whilst twiddling the dozen or so hairs there with my fingers while my head rose and fell with his breathing.

Bargaining had also been brief. In those hazy moments fuelled by alcohol of any kind, I'd screamed at the sky, begging him to return to me and to haunt my every moment... if he loved me. Or I'd begged someone to kill me so I could be with him... but he never came and I never died, no matter how hard I'd tried. I would wake to find myself either tucked up in bed by one of the kindly neighbours, or if they hadn't heard my sorrow and my two children hadn't come to my rescue, then I would wake in a puddle of vomit, urine or both somewhere in the house we had shared for our whole married life.

Acceptance was never forthcoming. The drunk had also died so he had got away with murder; no one else to blame and nothing else to 'get over' and accept, except his not coming back and my living.

"He's not coming back..." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them and I felt sick. A fresh wave of emotion threatened to overtake me and I shook my head. "I...I have to live. I have to love... forgive me..."

"You have found another?"

"Yes. We have only been out a couple of times... but, he makes me feel again and I hate myself..."

"Hating yourself for loving another human being?"

"Yes, God damn it! I shouldn't be loving anyone else!"

"Why?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but found I couldn't find the words. Eric had rescued me one night after my friends had talked me into going out with them to a local pub. He had talked to me, tentatively and kindly, understanding my pain as his wife had died five years before. He knew the ache in my soul and had been comforting me for the last four months. "I'm so sorry... Greg..."

The silence dragged on and I finally heard the loud chime of the hallway clock announcing the end of the session. I stood unsteadily and wiped away the last

remnants of my tears and breathed deeply, ready to face the day. My usual routine was to walk out without looking back. To leave the session and forgive the emotions that had stirred up for me in that room and to get on with my day; Eric had taught me that.

But this time, I didn't just leave. Instead I turned and faced the long mirror and stared at my reflection. Rebecca. Why had I chosen that name? Perhaps it was in reference to a name Greg and I had already chosen if we'd ever had another girl; sadly, we never did and the name Rebecca had lain dormant all these years in my subconscious. I would probably never know the answer and I didn't dwell on it for too long, best not to, as Eric had suggested. Let the name come and accept her for whoever she may be.

Eric had talked to me about his own 'sessions' with himself after failing to find a counsellor. He'd realised that he had his own answers, though they were buried deeply within himself, but after talking with his own reflection one day, he'd realised how much better he'd felt and he'd shared this secret with me.

"See you next week...?"

My reflection smiled and nodded knowingly before I left the room and closed the door softly behind me.

The End

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## [The Road](#)

By [Wesley Tallant](#)

On a hot, sunny July afternoon, a semi truck rumbled down a dusty winding gravel road. It was supposed to be a shortcut that would save the driver, Mark Johns, several hours on the route to his destination. He was already a day late because of mechanical problems but the load was needed in Yuma, Arizona by eight-o'clock in the morning.

He had driven from Denver to Flagstaff to Phoenix when an axle broke. The mechanics couldn't get to it for two days, so he spent the day under the truck's trailer doing the repairs himself.

His job depended on him getting this load through on time. His boss had told him that if he was late again, he'd be fired and no excuse would be accepted. Only intervention by the hand of God would save his job if he were late one more time.

He had a bad habit of exploring the older small towns he came to. He would get lost in time as he marveled at how things must have been in the days of the wild west. On more than one occasion, his exploring the old ruins of a town had cost him a paycheck for missing a delivery time.

So he checks his GPS and it shows this dirt road that would cut at least two hours off his drive time. Not fully trusting the modern convenience, he reaches into the glove box and pulls out a well-used Arizona map. But the road is not shown on the map. He calls out on his CB radio and asks if other truckers knew the road, but nobody knows what road he was talking about. It's a gamble he must take, his job depends on it, so he makes the left turn and crosses his fingers.

It seems to be a well maintained road. The surface is smooth and level without any of the potholes that were found on other dirt roads. It's so smooth that he is able to

maintain a rather fast speed. He keeps the diesel motor turning at high RPMs as he sails down the road toward Yuma.

It is well past sundown when he checks his watch and GPS. By all calculations, he should be in Yuma well before the deadline. His eyes are beginning to show the strain of the long day and he can barely keep them open.

He decides to pull over and set his alarm for just a couple of hours of restful sleep. But where to pull over? Each side of the road is strewn with boulders and other debris that would surely do harm to the truck. And where there aren't any rocks, soft sand would surely stop the big rig in its tracks.

He drives a little farther and sees a building come into view. In front of the building is a dirt lot big enough to park for the few hours he needs to nap. He parks on the edge of the lot so as not to block anybody that might come along.

Mark sets the air brakes and lets the engine idle for just a few minutes before he shuts it down. He decides to stretch his legs before setting the alarm and taking his nap.

The moon is shining full and lights up the old building that looks to be a hundred years old. The paint on the sign hanging on the front of the building has flaked off and the porch on the front looks to be about to fall down. It has swinging doors that have fallen off their hinges and the once glass paned double doors behind them are slightly open. The windows that haven't been broken, are so covered with dirt and dust that he can't see through them.

He walks around and peers around the corner of the building. The desert has all but reclaimed the area around the building. Weeds and cactus have grown right up to the outside walls. He walks back to the front door. The small flashlight on his key chain lights his way as he enters the old building.

To his right is a bar that runs the length of the inside wall with a large mirror behind it. The mirror had long since been broken when something flew through it. By the back wall is an old broken down piano and stool. Four wagon wheels hang from the ceiling on rusty chains with six oil lamps perched on each of them. Tables and chairs are strewn about the inside. Only a few of the tables have legs that haven't dry rotted and broken off. A stairway leads up to the second floor balcony that opens up into a hallway with several doors in it.

It dawns on him that this was a saloon back in its heyday. He could imagine cowboys lining the bar, gamblers sitting and dealing beer soaked cards at the tables, and ladies of the night escorting cowboys up the stairs for a quick roll in the hay.

'If only this was in the day time so I could explore it more thoroughly,' he thinks to himself. But then his eyes remind him of why he stopped. He yawns and makes his way back out the door and to the sleeper on the back of his truck's cab.

Again he checks the GPS and his watch. Two and a half hours of sleep and the final short distance drive would put him in Yuma well before the deadline. He sets the alarm and settles in the bed.

He barely gets his eyes shut when a noise from outside the truck catches his attention. As he looks out the windows of the cab, he sees that the old saloon is lit up and a crowd has gathered on the inside. Horses are tied to the hitching posts out front and even a few buggies have been parked beside the building where desert foliage was growing just a few minutes earlier. The old broken down piano in the back is making music and laughter is coming from everywhere.

Next to the old saloon is another building that wasn't there earlier. A livery stable full of horses. And on past it are two more buildings, but he can't tell what they are.

He rubs his eyes thinking they are playing games with him but when he looks again, nothing has changed. He sees that he can now read the sign on the front of the building. 'Dusty Dog Saloon' in bright white letters reaches his eyes.

"What is going on here?" he says openly. He climbs down from the cab of the truck and turns around to see that he is face to face with what appears to be an old man.

The old man's Stetson is torn and ragged, his clothes are covered with dust, his face covered with at least three weeks of beard stubble, and his eyes appear to be clouded with age.

"Mighty fancy lookin' wagon you got there, mister," the old man says. "I reckon I ain't never seen one as big and fancy as that before."

"What are you talking about, old man. That's just a plain old. . . ." Mark turns around and sees not his truck, but a freight wagon. He rubs his eyes again, still no truck comes into view. Just a freight wagon and four strong mules hitched to it.

"Where's my truck?" he asks the old man. "It was just here. I was asleep in it. Where's my truck, old man?"

"Don't rightly know what you're talkin' about, mister. Only truck I ever seen was a little hand cart down at the Yuma train depot. And it wasn't hardly big enough to sleep in."

Mark looks past the wagon towards the road. What was once a smooth road is now a rutted wagon trail. "What's going on here?" he turns and screams at the old man.

"Just people gatherin' for a little spirits and beer and a little female companionship iffing you got enough in your poke."

"No, no, no. I mean, where's my truck? And that road, just a few minutes ago it was a smooth level road. Now, I wouldn't drive a truck down it if my life depended on it."

"That road's always been the same. It used to be an old Apache tradin' path. Then they opened the territorial prison in Yuma and started transferin' prisoners down it. It ain't much like the roads near them big cities, but it'll do."

"Look, old man. I've got to find my truck. I am supposed to be in Yuma by eight-o'clock in the morning or I'll get fired."

"Then I reckon you're out of a job. Yuma is two days' travel from here. Ain't no way that you can get that wagon there by then."

"But I've been on the road for. . . ." Mark looked at his wrist expecting to see his digital watch. But instead he sees that his wrist is bare and his clothes are dust covered and he is wearing boots. He had never worn boots in his life. When he was younger, he insisted that his mother buy him PF-Flyers and later jogging shoes, but never boots. Plus there is a gun belt with a pistol in it hanging on his hip. *Where did that come from?* he thinks to himself. *I don't even own a gun.*

Mark is now visibly shaken. "Am I dreaming? Is this some sort of nightmare?"

"You look like you could use a drink, mister," the old man says. "You just come on in here and I'll get Sandy to set you up with something that'll settle your nerves. By the way, young fella, what's your name?"

"Mark," he answers in a voice just barely above a whisper. "Mark Johns."

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mark Johns. Folks around here call me Sagebrush Evans. Sage for short."

Mark stopped walking and watched the old man. *Could it be?* he thought to himself.

Sage turned around and looked at Mark. "What you stop for? Sandy's got some of the best beer and whiskey in these parts."

Mark dug into the memories in his mind's vault. Something rang familiar about the name Sagebrush Evans but he couldn't quite get a grip on it. It was a name he had heard his grandfather use long ago before he died when Mark was only a toddler. But what was the story with it? Who was Sagebrush Evans?

Sage stops short of the porch of the saloon and removes his hat and starts slapping the dust from his clothes. "Sandy named the place *The Dusty Dog*. But the only dust she wants in the place is the dust on her dog. It's one of those rat sized Mexican dogs."

Mark took the hint and started slapping at his clothes with his hands.

Sage looked at Mark. "That head cover you got there will do a better job."

Mark looked at Sage. Then he felt that he was wearing a hat. He never wore a hat. He reached up and removed the hat and looked at it. It was a gray felt broad brimmed cowboy hat and had seen better days. It was almost as tattered as Sage's hat. But he found that Sage was right, it did do a better job of removing the dust from his clothes than his hands did.

The two men walked into the saloon. What was just a few minutes earlier a dust covered abandoned building, was now a thriving saloon. A clean place with cowboys bellied up to the bar. The bar was clean and shiny and covered with mugs of beer and shot glasses full of whiskey. The broken mirror was now shiny and in one piece. Shelves behind the bar, that had previously been empty, were now filled with bottles of liquor. A bartender served the drinks and wiped at the bar with a towel that he kept hanging over his shoulder.

The broken down piano looked like it had just arrived on a freight wagon from someplace back east. The man playing it wore a white long sleeve shirt with red garters at the elbows, suspenders over his shoulders, and a derby hat sat on his head.

The tables and chairs were all sitting upright and several card games were in progress. Only a few of the chairs were vacant. Even the oil lamps sitting on the wagon wheels hanging from the ceiling were as shiny as new and every one of them cast a bubble of yellow light.

A lady's laugh filled the room and Mark looked up the stairs as a woman dressed in a frilly dress led a drunken cowhand into one of the rooms on the balcony. Another door on the balcony opened up and a woman stepped out followed by a cowboy that was still buckling his gun belt around his waist.

In the light of the saloon's oil lamps, Mark takes a closer look at Sage. Mark could tell that Sage is younger than he first appeared. The desert sun had prematurely aged and dried out his skin giving him the appearance of a man twenty years older.

Mark followed Sage to the end of the bar and leaned against it. His mind was still trying to figure out what was going on. *This has to be a dream*, he thought to himself.

"What's a dream?" he heard someone behind him say.

Mark and Sage turned around and saw a woman standing there. She is dressed in a blue frilly dress with lots of lace around the sleeves and neck line. She has long auburn hair and her complexion is ivory white. She is by far the most beautiful woman that Mark has ever seen. And in her arms is a small tan rat sized dog.

"Hello, Sandy," Sage says and tips his hat.

"Hello, Sagebrush. Who's your friend?"

"Sandy, this here is Mark Johns. He just pulled up in that freight wagon out front."

“Mister Johns, glad to make your acquaintance.” She reaches out a dainty little hand and waits for Mark to shake it.

Mark just stared at the beauty before him until he felt something poke at his ribs and heard Sage make a sound like he was clearing his throat.

“Oh. . . uh. . . yes, Ma'am. Nice to meet you too.” Mark reached out and gently shook her hand. He had never had any trouble with women before, but this one took his breath away. He found himself mesmerized by her beauty.

“What'll you have, Mark?” Sandy had stepped around the end of the bar and placed the little dog in a small bed on top of it.

Mark felt another poke in his ribs and Sage again cleared his throat. “Oh. . . uh. . . I'll have a beer.”

“Make mine some of that wildcat whiskey you got back there.” Sage reached to pet the little dog but quickly drew his hand back when it growled and snapped at him. “Damned little mutt never has liked me.”

Mark reached over to pet the dog but wasn't as fast as Sage and received a few fang marks from the little dog's sharp teeth on his little finger.

“Chico doesn't like very many people,” Sandy said. She sat the drinks in front of the two men and started petting the little dog. “He only likes me and the girls.”

“Don't forget Luke and Sam,” Sage said as he pointed first at the bartender and then the piano player.

“Oh, he only tolerates them because they work for me,” Sandy said as she petted the little dog.

Mark sipped at the cool beer as he marveled at what was going on around him. “This has to be a dream,” he said again. But the beer was cool and tasted good. The sights and sounds were clear and not fuzzy like a dream. The smells of sweaty cowboys and roll your own cigarettes filled his nostrils.

Mark looked up at the old regulator clock that hung above the piano. If it was right, his own alarm would be going off in the next ten minutes and wake him up. He sipped at the beer, gazed at Sandy, and watched the minutes tick by on the clock. The time for his alarm lapsed by. Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. Still no alarm woke him up.

The three of them had been engaging in idle small talk while he watched the clock. Mark finally gave into the dream and thought, *Well, I'll wake up when the alarm goes off.* He emptied the beer and asked Sandy for another.

The night wore on. Beer after beer was served and drunk. Mark looked up as the clock struck midnight. He heard Sandy ring a bell behind the bar and call out, “Alright folks, it's closing time. Drink up what you got.”

Most of the patrons gulped down what was left of their drinks and staggered out the door. Soon everyone was gone but Mark, Sage, Sandy, Luke the bartender, and three men sitting at a table in the back of the saloon below the staircase.

“Come on, fellas. It's closing time,” Sandy called out to the three men.

“We'll just have three more beers if it's all the same to you,” one of the three men said.

Mark took a closer look at the three men. They looked like outlaws from movies that he used to watch as a boy. Each had a gun strapped to his side and each had a week's worth of beard stubble. They looked like men a normal person didn't want to get mixed up with. An aura of evil seemed to fill the air around them.

“Well it's not the same to me,” Sandy said. “You've each got a half a mug of beer sitting in front of you. That's all you're getting. Now, drink that and go.”

Mark saw Luke the bartender reach under the bar for the shotgun that lay there. But before he could reach it, one of the three men drew his gun and shot Luke in the chest. Luke fell back and was dead before he hit the floor.

“Now, about them beers, missy,” the man said as the smoke from his gun drifted away. “If Joe wants another beer, he gets another beer.”

Mark couldn't believe what was going on. He wanted to race out of the saloon doors, jump in his truck, and get the hell out of Dodge, but something was holding him in place, an urgent need to see this through was holding him there.

Sandy had rushed behind the bar and was crying over the dead body of Luke. It was then that Mark's memory vault doors flew wide open and the story that his grandfather had told him came out.

Mark watched as one of the three men stood up, emptied his beer and started for the bar. He then saw Sandy reach for the shotgun. She didn't know the gunman was headed towards the bar. She stood up with the shotgun but was driven off her feet when Mark dove at her.

Mark felt the heat of a bullet as it passed over his and Sandy's heads and shattered some whiskey bottles behind the bar. The bullet surely would have killed Sandy if not for his fast action. The barrel of the shotgun then hits the mirror and breaks it into shards of falling glass. Fortunately, none of the glass lands on them.

Another shot rang out. Sage had gotten in on the action and had shot the gunman that had shot at Sandy. The gunman spun around, blood leaking from his shoulder, and shot at Sage. But Sage had ducked behind the bar and when he emerged again, the shotgun was in his hands. He let go with both of the sawed off barrels and the gunman flew backwards towards his companions.

Mark didn't know how or why, but somehow the gun on his own hip suddenly appeared in his hand as he stood and shot the man that had ordered the extra beers. Both his and the man's guns sang out at the same time. Mark felt a burning in his shoulder but saw that his bullet had hit the man square in the chest.

Sage emerged from behind the bar again. This time with his own pistol in hand, but the third man had ducked behind the staircase and was shooting back. Sage went to the end of the bar and began sending bullet after bullet into the wooden planks of the stairs.

Mark crawled to the other end of the bar and peered around the end. He saw the man's foot sticking out from behind the stairs and shot it.

That brought the man from behind the stairs and he shot wildly at the bar as he limped across the saloon floor trying to get to the back door of the saloon. Mark stayed down behind the bar as bullet after bullet hit the walls and bar around him. At the other end of the bar, Sage was busy reloading his own gun. And then Mark heard a click. Then another click. The gunman was out of bullets. Then he heard the boom of the shotgun again.

Sandy had managed to reload the shotgun and the blast from it sent the third man out the back door as he tried to open it.

The gun battle had lasted less than a minute, but to Mark, it seemed like an eternity. He stood and followed Sage to check each of the gunmen. All three were dead. Mark's wound was only a scratch where the bullet had just grazed him.

Sage began going through the pockets of the dead men looking for some form of identity. In the pocket of the man that Mark had shot was a folded up piece of paper. Mark's bullet had gone through the piece of paper and left a clean round hole in it.

Sage unfolded the paper. He was stunned at what he saw. He handed the paper to Mark. It was a wanted poster. The picture of the man that Mark had killed was on it.

It said;

*Wanted dead or alive  
for murder and robbery  
Joe Gladstone  
\$5,000.00 reward  
Collect at Yuma Prison*

Mark knew now what was going on. The story that his grandfather used to tell him was how a stranger had driven a freight wagon to his great grandmother's saloon and saved her life from a gang of cold blooded killers with the help of her future husband, Sagebrush Evans. Nobody knew who the stranger was or where he came from, only that he had to get to Yuma before eight-o'clock. But when the sun came up, both he and his freight wagon were gone. There was no sign that a freight wagon had even been there. No tracks in the road or anything.

Mark then noticed the resemblance that Sandy bore of his own mother. The same colored hair, the same skin tones, and in his mother's younger days, the same bodily build.

"Well, young man," Sage said. "I guess you won't be worried about a job once you collect that reward."

"No, you keep it." Mark handed the poster back to Sage. "I think I'll be okay, now."

Mark began to walk towards the saloon doors. He stopped and looked back at Sage and Sandy. "Your real name is Ethan, but I like Sagebrush just fine. And Ma'am, he's a good man. Don't let him slip away with that reward."

Mark turned and walked out the door. The night was chilly and a slight breeze moved the clouds across a moonlit sky. He stopped and turned around and looked at the saloon. Once again the swinging doors sagged to the sides. The windows were covered with dust and the paint on the sign had all flaked off.

His truck was where he had parked it. "Was that a dream?" he asked himself. Then he felt the pain in his shoulder and saw the dog's teeth marks in his finger. Then the alarm of his digital wrist watch began beeping.

Mark made it to Yuma with time to spare. After his truck was unloaded, he went back to try and find the road but it had vanished.

Mark went back to Denver and quit his job. He bought an off road vehicle and using the GPS, he found the old saloon. The old road was barely visible. The only tracks on it were made by the vehicle he drove now.

Inside the saloon he found the bullet holes in the stairway, the bar, and the walls behind the bar. He continued searching for something that his grandfather had told him would still be there. In a desk drawer in a room in the back of the saloon, he found a folded up piece of paper with a hole in it. He could just barely make out the picture of Joe Gladstone on it. Beside the paper was a small strong box with a note that said, "Property of Mark Johns." He busted open the rusty lock and found that inside the box was \$5,000.00 in twenty dollar gold pieces.

Digging further through the desk, he found a diary. It belonged to Sandy. The last entry was from June 2, 1913. It said; "Ethan Junior and I are moving on. Business has dried up here since the livery stable burned down and the railroad came through twenty miles south of us. Sagebrush hasn't been seen since he went prospecting in the desert three years ago. I imagine his bones are fairly well bleached by the sun by now. My sister says we can stay with them in Denver until I can find work. It's tempting to take the gold reward money with us, but Sage insisted that Mark Johns would

someday return to claim it. So I'll leave it here in case he does. It was a nice little community here while it lasted.”

Mark closed the diary and placed it in the box with the coins, and left the old saloon. He sold the gold coins to a coin trader in Flagstaff for over \$300,000.00.

Mark found a receipt for \$5,000.00 in gold coins in the Yuma Prison records paid to Ethan Evans.

He also found a marriage license issued to Ethan Evans and Sandra Collier dated August, 19, 1893. Just five years before his grandfather was born.

When he returned to Denver, the simple marker on his grandfather's grave was removed and a more elegant one was put in its place. He located Sandy's grave in a small overgrown cemetery and placed a marker there. With the rest of the money, he bought a small bar and named it “*The Dusty Dog II*” and moved his mother into an apartment above it.

He also bought her one of those small rat sized Mexican dogs.

The End

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SECTION 2: TIMELESS

Fall Semester

By Mark Conte

He was a graduate student in creative writing at Florida State University and he had just published his first short story in the Kenyon Review. She was a typical junior college transfer from out of state.

She had heard of him before they met, quite by accident, at a poetry workshop. It was an evening class and she had signed up to see if there was a poet somewhere inside her. He had been invited to the workshop as the English Department's we-can-do-this-for-you-too. He wore black slacks; a black cotton knit turtleneck, and a camel sport jacket. His hair was light brown and almost touched his shoulders. She remembered thinking he did not look a bit like F. Scott Fitzgerald.

She did not see him the rest of the week, but she thought of him when she passed the Union Book Store on Wednesday after her geology class. Her mother called from Philadelphia on Thursday and asked her if she needed any money. She said no. Her mother asked if she was having any problems. She replied that she was going to a college where the girls outnumbered the boys five to one. She was living in an all-girl dorm and she didn't see how that could be threatening. Her mother said, “Mary Jo, you know how your father feels about you having an apartment.”

Mary Jo said, “Doesn't Daddy realize I'm nineteen years old? It's 2005, not 1935.”

Her mother said, “Maybe next year, Dear. Anyway I'll talk to him and see what he says.”

Mary Jo said goodbye and made herself a hot chocolate. She picked up her text for her Narrative Technique class and thought of him again. She picked up her pencil and wrote his name in her notebook. David, then David F. Walters, and finally,

David Francis Walters, one below the other. She leaned back and stared at it a while, then bent forward again and wrote Dave. She erased it quickly and picked up her textbook.

On Friday afternoon, there was a poetry reading by a visiting poet at the Down Under and she talked one of her classmates into going with her to the reading. David was surprised to see her. He pretended to be busy talking to two girls from his class, but when Professor Jacobi walked to the microphone to introduce the poet, David went down the side of the chairs and sat directly behind her. She didn't dare look back.

After the reading, everyone stood around making insightful comments about the poems they had heard, he with the grad students, and she with the undergrads. They drifted to the punch bowl from opposite ends of the room and recognized each other with half smiles.

"How is your poetry coming?" he said.

She said, "If there is a poet inside me it's wearing a pretty good disguise."

Harry Rosen came over and said he was throwing a party for the visiting poet and did they want to come. All three said yes.

"Do you have a ride out there?" David said.

"Yes," Mary Jo said. "My roommate will take me."

"Do you want me to call or anything?" he said.

"If you want to," she said.

David took her phone number and said he would call seven PM. She walked out the door and up the steps to the bright sunlight and felt drunk.

When she went home, her roommate said, "No, I do not want to go to some dumb poetry party."

"But can't you just take me there?"

Gretchen, who had been doing her voice exercises, sang, "No. They are having a disco dance class at the Silver Dollar and Ronnie said he would meet me there."

"You know Gretch, you're tall, blond, music major, and have your own Mustang. How can anyone like you with all that?"

"It's my shapely butt," Gretchen said, slapping her right cheek.

Mary Jo made herself two scrambled eggs, poured a glass of milk and opened a box of Ritz crackers. She ate the eggs hungrily and remembered she hadn't eaten lunch. The little green speaker's box over the doorway made a static sound, and then she heard the desk girl's voice.

"Telephone for Mary Jo Sweeney."

She jumped up and walked to the phone at the end of the hall, still holding the cheese and crackers in her left hand.

"Hi," she said.

"Did you change your mind?" he said.

"No," she said. "I couldn't get a ride."

"Do you want me to come and pick you up?"

"That's okay," she said. "You don't have to do that. I can do some studying."

"Do I have to ask for you at the desk?" he said.

"No," she said. "I'll be downstairs waiting for you."

"Damn," He said. "I forgot."

"What?"

"Steve took my car to pick up the poet. I'll see if I can borrow Harry's car." He put the phone down, then picked it up again. "Hold on the line, okay?"

"Okay," she said.

Mary Jo propped the phone against her ear with her shoulder and nibbled on a piece of cheese. An obese redhead in a sweat suit came trotting down the hall and waved hi.

"They're out there in droves," she said.

"Who?" Mary Jo said.

"Bikers. On the streets, the sidewalks, the stadium, everywhere."

"Oh," Mary Jo said.

"There ought to be a law," the redhead said and disappeared down the hall.

Mary Jo squatted on the floor Indian fashion below the phone and munched on the cheese and crackers. She heard the murmur of voices and tried to picture the people there. When she ate her fourth piece of cheese, she heard a click and the phone went dead.

Two girls came out of the elevator. Mary Jo nodded into the dead phone and said,

"Yes, of course, Albert."

When the girls went into their rooms, Mary Jo quietly hung up the phone and went back to her room. She walked to the window and looked down at the campus. The tennis courts were lit and full of students hammering the lime green ball back and forth. She promised herself she would send for her tennis racquet on Friday. She picked up her pencil and made a list of things-she-would-do-this-fall.

Horseback riding

Canoeing

Biking

Tennis

Hiking

She put the tip of the pencil in her mouth, and then continued.

Ballet

Ceramics

Basket weaving

Macramé

She made a circle, filled in eyes, a nose and a frowning mouth, then went back to the list and added, New Hairdo, underlining it.

The little green box crackled again. "Telephone for Mary Jo Sweeney."

She hurried out the door and picked up the phone.

"Hi," David said. "It's me."

"Hi," she said.

"I forgot, I mean about you being on the phone. Did they tell you I was coming to pick you up?"

"No," she said. "Someone just hung up after a couple of minutes."

"Wow. What did you think?"

She was silent a moment. "I don't remember," she said.

"I'm not too smart sometimes." He said. He blew air out of his mouth. "I'm in the lobby downstairs," he said. "Are you coming down?"

"Uh, huh," she said. "Give me a few minutes."

She hurried to her room and opened her closet, picking at her clothes. On her third try, she picked out a blue denim pants suit. She took off her pajamas, flung them on the sofa and slipped into her pants suit, picking out a blue silk print blouse from the chest of drawers.

She looked in the mirror, brushed and combed her hair, then spent the next three minutes opening and closing her mouth applying lipstick.

When she came down in the elevator, he was waiting for her by the desk, talking to the desk girl. Mary Jo walked up to him and took his arm.

On the drive back to Harry's house, a light rain began to fall and David put on his windshield wipers. He talked about American Writers. The brilliance of Fitzgerald, the Achievement of Steinbeck and the greatness of Hemingway. She spoke of the sorrow of Sylvia Plath

They drove up Old Bainbridge Road listening to the click, clack of the windshield wipers and the rain filtering through the branches of the oak trees and before she realized it, they were parking in front of a white wood frame house.

Harry met them in the kitchen and gave them each a glass of wine.

"You two are way behind," he said.

Harry led them through the hallway to a large candle-lit room. There was a huge oriental rug on the floor and people were sitting on the edges of the rug on square satin pillows of reds, greens and yellow. They passed around plates of butterfly shrimp, sweet and sour pork, pork fried rice and egg rolls.

Harry gave out more wine for refills, and after the third refill, Diane Crompton, who taught Freshman English, produced a joint from her handbag, lit it and passed it around. When the weed came to David, he took a deep drag and passed it to Mary Jo. Mary Jo took a drag and coughed as she always did on her first toke. Harry lit another joint and passed it around in the other direction. Jill DeLuca from the Classics Department began to pick up dishes and Ben Inges perched his guitar on his knee and began singing.

*"When you're down and troubled
and you need some loving care.
and nothing, nothing is going right.
Close your eyes and think of me
And soon I will be there
To brighten up even your darkest night."*

Little cliques began to form on the floor. Weatherling spoke to a group of five at the far end of the room. "Language," he said. "Language is the whole key."

Susan Connors and Dennis Wyatt slowly danced to the back bedroom. Ziggy left with Pamela, and Dr. Simmons was kissing Paula in the hallway...

Mary Jo shook her chestnut hair from her shoulders. She felt giddy. The music from the guitar only added to the glow and she could not keep her eyes off David. He was holding her hand, asking if she wanted to see the rest of the house.

He took her into the kitchen, talking like a tour guide. Next, he showed her the bathroom and finally the guest bedroom where he kissed her, awkwardly, against the chest of drawers. He closed the light and they kissed twice more, groping for the bed, sitting on the edge of it, exploring each other's needs and wants, until they could stand it no longer, and they undressed, flinging clothes on both sides of the bed, no longer aware of the party or the world around them. No longer caring about Hemingway or Plath. No longer pretending sophistication, for this was their basic need. This was what they had been made for. This was what people had lived and died for, and all the rest meant nothing to them.

She did not remember falling asleep, but later in the night, when she was awakened by the voices of Harry Rosen and Weatherling outside in the hall, she began to panic. She was sleeping in a strange house with a student she barely knew. The two men could walk in on her at any moment and her roommate could be calling the police this very minute, reporting her missing.

David stirred in his sleep. His hair fell across his face and her breath caught. She took her hand and gently pushed his hair back off his face. David opened his eyes, startled.

"It's okay," she said. "Go back to sleep."

He smiled and closed his eyes again. She heard Weatherling and Harry Rosen carrying the suitcases out of the house. She kissed David on the nose and he wrinkled it as if there was a fly on his nose, and she laughed to herself.

She remembered Gretchen had "played cards" at Ronnie's apartment all night Saturday and Sunday and that Gretchen was not likely to call the police or anyone else for that matter. She closed her eyes and put her head on David's shoulder. She was asleep in minutes.

The next morning when David awoke, Mary Jo was dressed and in the kitchen making hot tea and honey. He slipped on his pants and socks and walked into the kitchen.

"Hi," he said.

"Good morning," she said. "I'm having tea. Do you think Harry would mind if we make toast?"

David said, "Harry wouldn't mind if we jacked up the house on rollers and hauled it away." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Tell you what," he said. "Let's just have tea here and we'll go to The Subway for breakfast."

"Okay."

They drank hot Russian tea and talked about their hometowns. He told her about Atlanta and how the Underground is just a tourist thing now. He told her about the mansion the Studio built for *Gone With the Wind* and how there are still huge plantations there and even an old castle that was brought over from England where they have poetry readings once a month.

She told him about the Robin Hood Dell in Fairmont Park and how on hot summer nights you can sit on the hillside on blankets, drink red wine, and listen to Pavarotti sing. She told him about the Schubert Theater and Playhouse in the Park.

She explained the whiteness of new snow, trolley cars and the New Year's Day Mummers' Parade.

He went to the bathroom, put on his shirt and shoes and combed his hair. She found her jacket in the living room and they went to The Subway, sitting on authentic New York Subway seats, eating under the Mott Street sign.

After breakfast, they went to the nature factory and she helped him pick out an African Violet plant for his living room. They stopped at the campus flea market and rummaged through stacks of used books. He bought a copy of John Ciardi's *How Does a Poem Mean* and gave it to her. She found a copy of James Joyce's *Dubliners* and bought it for him. He bought hanging rope for his plant and carved wood bookends. She bought a pale blue poster with a flowered yellow border that read, *Dum Vivimus Vivamus*.

When they left the campus, David drove out on highway 27 to the new Publix and shopped for the week's groceries. He let Mary Jo pick out the meat and vegetables for him. He picked the wine.

"Wait until you see Walden Pond," David said.

Mary Jo said, "Sure, Walden Pond."

"Well, it's actually an old Mansion that has been turned into apartments. Twenty-two apartments in the mansion and six in the huge red barn. Wait till you see it. It's fantastic. They only rent to students and everyone refers to it as the Florida State off campus dorm."

They stopped at a large swing gate off the highway. David stepped out and opened the gate. Mary Jo leaned out the car window and gave a long, low whistle. "This, Mam," David said bowing slightly "is the estate of David Francis Walters. Walden Pond, Junior."

He drove up a curving path past a row of trees around a small pond with several wild mallard ducks at the edge, past the red barn and parked in front of a large, white pillared mansion. There was a girl on the porch with long blond hair that hung carelessly down her back. She was touching a row of plants, watering them, talking to them in a soft voice as she moved from box to box. She waved hi to David and Mary Jo as they came up the porch.

"There is love in the air," she said. "I can feel it."

"Yes," David said. "There is love in the air."

He led Mary Jo through the front door, down the long hall to his apartment.

"That's Tyaga," he said. "She had to be the youngest flower child in the history of the movement. She was twelve years old when she left home to join the peace people. She's known them all: Ginsberg, O'Leary, Kerouac. Hunter Thompson refers to her in his book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. She was with Baba Ram Dass for two years in New Mexico. She teaches a Hatha Yoga class at the United Ministries Center. You know how old she is? Twenty-four. Can you imagine living through all that and only being twenty-four years old?"

They walked into his apartment and clicked on the light. A huge poster hung on the living room wall showing a Frenchman with his arms raised. The caption read, *We Are All Undesirables*. He caught her looking at it and said, "That was my rebel period."

They walked into the kitchen and put the groceries away.

"How about this for a view?" he said, leading her to the window.

There was a large pasture with over thirty cows moving toward the South fence with their tails swinging in the wind. Several mallard ducks were landing in the pond, gracefully swimming to the tall reeds. In the background, the white pillowed skyline hung over the new Capitol building on the horizon.

"Nice," she said.

David took two cokes from the refrigerator and they went out on the porch. Mary Jo said she was an education Major and her greatest ambition was to teach grade school. She said she had been teaching in a special program in a school for the deaf since she was 16 years old. "I've learned how to sign and even learned how to lip read."

David said that children were the saviors of the world. He said that their innocence sometimes brings a clarity to the world that brings people to their senses.

"Yes," Mary Jo said. "I love them, but it's not going to be easy. Boy, you should have heard Dr. Stanton, the Education Department head, the day we all met in the Lecture Hall. He had this long black beard, and he kept stroking it while he talked. He explained that only one in four who had applied for the Special Section were accepted. He said by graduation time one-half of us would wash out of the program. One-half! He said, 'Look at the person sitting next to you. It's either you or him'."

David said he did not want to be just a writer. "I don't want to just fill up space on the bookshelf. I have this ambition inside me that's so big, it scares me sometimes."

Mary Jo said she understood. "The immortals were the ones who were not afraid to have the grand dreams."

“I don’t know about immortality,” David said. “I just want to be the best damn’ writer in the country.” He told her about his acceptance in the university’s London/Florence Program and that he would spend the next year in Rome and Venice finishing his novel. “Just think of the writing I could do there!”

He took a bag of charcoal and spread some on the hibachi. Mary Jo squirted the charcoal lighter fluid on the coals and David lit it. He took her down to the pasture and they picked mushrooms that sprouted from the cow dung.

When they went back to the house, two cows were standing near the front porch and David had to hit them with the broom to shoo them away. Mary Jo broiled the steaks while he fried the potatoes Georgia style. After they ate, he made mushroom tea and they sat on the porch and drank it. Within fifteen minutes, the colors began to vibrate with electricity.

“Now I know how Alice felt when she went down the hole,” Mary Jo said.

She didn’t get back to her dorm until Sunday Morning. It was nine o’clock and she had to shower and change for her Sunday School Class at St. Thomas Moore Church. She left a note for Gretchen.

*Gretch,
Had the most marvelous weekend.
Been in Wonderland. See you at dinner
Mary Jo*

When she came home from Sunday school, her note was turned over and Gretchen had written on the back,

*Mary Jo.
Congrats. My weekend was yummy too.
I’m off to the lake for water sports. Don’t
Know if my bod can take this, but I’ll try
Real hard.
Luv, Gretchen*

Mary Jo tried to study the rest of the day, but she only managed to scribble two lines of a poem.

*The yellow dreams that fall
Like leaves too ripe to cling*

She tried eight different versions of a third line and after each one she said, “Yuk!” and lined it out.

On Monday, Mary Jo went to her 8 A.M. torture class, History of Western Civilizations and dozed off twice. At eleven o’clock, she went to her Narrative Technique class and day dreamed through Dr. Johnson’s lecture on the Importance of the Semicolon and how it should be used. In Lit 300, she kept seeing David’s face on the screen instead of the Renaissance art film.

Tuesday she only had lab from 10 A.M. to Noon, so she went horseback riding with Barbara Gains and Janet Eiler until 5 P.M. and they all chipped in for a pepperoni pizza from Pizza Hut for dinner.

Wednesday night David called and said he had two tickets to see Lenny at the Conradi Theatre and would be over in five minutes. Mary Jo dressed quickly and hurried down the stairs because the elevator seemed to take forever.

The play turned out to be the hit of the season and received a standing ovation. Afterward, they went to the Train Wreck, where the band played, “That’s the way, uh huh, uh huh I like it,” seven times, and they danced to it every time.

When Mary Jo went back to her dorm, she told Gretchen, “I had a *grand* time.”

It was their last formal date. They were together every night for the next two weeks, and after that, every free hour of every day. They became a well-known couple. The saying went, "If you see one, the other one is not far behind."

On Halloween, they went to a masquerade party at Greg's and Carol's. They wore old baggy pants and jackets and large floppy shoes they bought at the Goodwill Store and painted their faces with frowns, pinning large halves of a huge red heart on their chests and after too many beers, sang *How Can You Mend a Broken Heart*, harmonizing out of tune and tempo.

They never took pictures and the only one they had together was the picture they posed for at the carnival, dressed as Scarlet O'Hara and Rhet Butler.

She bought a blank hardback writing book for writing her inspirations and although she had written 30 pages into it, she never showed David because she felt that she was just a little twit as far as writing was concerned and she would not dare show David her corny inspirations.

One night they saw the French film *Tranche de vie* and were touched by it.

Mary Jo said, "See, you don't have to have a sad ending for a love story to be great."

David said, "Yes, but it doesn't happen that way a majority of the time. Most of the time, we lose our great love, the big moment in our lives for one reason or another, Maybe because we can't handle it at that time or all the circumstances are wrong then and it's the second love we marry and go through life with, although many times, the first love is the great love. "

"And we forget that love?" Mary Jo said.

"I don't think so. I think it's always there like an old song that keeps popping up when you least expect it."

"I think that is a very sad comment on life," Mary Jo said.

That Saturday, The Florida State football team, which had the longest losing streak in college football, 19 games, beat its state rival Miami, 21 to 14. It was a night game in the Orange Bowl at Miami and it was almost midnight when the final gun sounded on radios throughout Tallahassee. David and Mary Jo were listening to Patti Smith records when the cars came driving up the road to Walden Pond, Jr. and began circling the pond, blowing their horns and leaning out of their cars windows shouting, "*FSU, FSU, FSU!*"

The students came running out of their apartments, shouting chants and slogans of the Florida State. They hugged each other and danced in little circles. They yelled and whooped like Indians. A female student climbed on the hood of a car and shouted, "Let's go down to the campus" and all the students piled in cars and started a motorcade that was 12 cars long by the time it reached the campus.

At Landis Green, the female students were leaning out of the dorm windows, daring the male students to streak across the green. After three false starts, thirty-five male students streaked naked from Strozier Library to Seminole Hall as the female students cheered and applauded. Within minutes, the girls hung out a hastily painted bed sheet that read *Thank you for the peter party*. A half hour later, 25 female students streaked across Tennessee Street and several carloads of male students drove past sororities, mooning the girls and blowing their horns.

By two A.M., a thousand students had gathered in front of the Westcott Building, singing Fight Seminoles, Fight, until finally ending the night with Auld Lang Syne.

When David and Mary Jo went back to Walden Pond, Jr., Mary Jo made brownies and they sat on the floor, eating brownies and drinking Cold Duck wine, listening to Joni Mitchell songs, until the dawn came through the windows and made

the room bright. They went outside then and watched the sky change colors, holding hands on the edge of the porch until they were overcome by its beauty and quietly went to bed.

They lay on the bed and undressed each other at arms' length, and when they touched, it was like the first time, the only time they had touched or been touched, and she wished she could cry after; wished she could say that he had been the only one she could do this with, could feel these feelings for, but he was kissing her then, repeating her name over and over again, and she was happy. God, she was happy. And it was crazy to even think it, but she knew she loved him. Loved him beyond anything she could ever feel before. Loved him beyond life.

On Monday, Mary Jo's mother called and asked her when they could expect her for Thanksgiving. Mary Jo said that there were still two weeks left, and besides, she did not think she would fly all the way up to Philadelphia just for a four day holiday.

Her mother said, "Mary Jo, you know we are all expecting you. We've made plans and all."

Mary Jo said, "Well, don't I have anything to say about my life?"

"But Mary Jo," her mother said. "You are the only child. It wouldn't be a holiday without you."

"David and I are planning on going to see Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Review in Jacksonville. Joan Baez and Allen Ginsberg will be there too. All the guys are going. We're going to wait outside the Coliseum all night to get tickets. Don't you understand? This is the biggest thing that has happened to me."

"Who is David?" her mother said.

"A boy I'm dating," Mary Jo said. "He's going away for a year in January."

She heard her mother say to her father, "It's a boy Mary Jo has met," there was a pause and then, "I don't know Dear. Some Yokel at the college,"

Her father took the phone and said, "Mary Jo, what's all this about a boyfriend?"

"He's just a guy, Daddy. We've been going out."

Her father said, "Yes, well, how many weeks have you known him?"

"What difference does that make?" Mary Jo said.

"What difference?" her father said. "Why, at this point, the most you can know him is ten weeks. What can you know about someone in ten weeks?"

Mary Jo did not answer, as she always did when she was angry.

Her father said, "Is this going to be one of your stubborn periods?"

Her mother took the phone from her father. Her mother denied that she was crying. Mary Jo was also on the verge of tears. They apologized to each other and Mary Jo promised she would call again next Sunday.

That night, David and Mary Jo went to see An Evening of Dance at the Ruby Diamond Auditorium. Mary Jo told David about her conversation with her parents. David said, "What are you going to do?" She said, "I'm going with you."

Saturday morning David went to the Writers' Conference in Savannah, Georgia. He dropped Mary Jo at Smith Hall first. It was six A.M. and the first cold snap had hit Tallahassee that morning. The wind whipped around the building and frost-smoke escaped from their mouths as they spoke. He said he would be back by 3 A.M. She told him to blink his lights by the main entrance of the dorm and she would keep watching from the window. He kissed her and walked to his car. She stood on the edge of the curb and watched him drive up Tennessee Street, then she ran up the walk to the door.

When Mary Jo went into her rooms, she found the frost had taken the sleep away from her eyes, so she made herself breakfast and read three chapters of her Western

Civilizations textbook. At ten o'clock, she made herself a bowl of New England clam chowder, then she washed her hair and wrote the outline for her narrative technique assignment while her hair was drying.

By one o'clock, she was beginning to feel like The Prisoner of Smith Hall, so she put on her coat and walked to Burger King across Tennessee Street. A cold rain was falling and it felt good on her flushed cheeks. She had a hamburger and fries, and took back a container of coffee. When she reached the elevator, she sneezed. She felt her nose begin to run and went for the Kleenex when she went into her rooms.

She took off her shoes and wet socks, and sipped her coffee. She wore size eight shoes. She looked down and squiggled her toes. "The roots of my life," she said, laughing. The words sounded in her mind. She stood still and listened to them. For a brief moment, she saw it, like the instant opening and closing of a camera lens shutter. "Roots," she said. "Gather in little piles about our roots." She ran to her desk and took out with the two lines she had written six weeks ago. She wrote.

*"The yellow dreams that fall
Like leaves too ripe to cling
Gather in little piles
About our roots
And burn with the wind."*

She picked up the paper and read it. "Incredible," she said. She read it again and threw the paper up in the air, laughing. She caught it and held it to her chest. She wanted to tell someone, wanted someone to read it, to share it with her.

She sneezed. Her nose began to run and she blew it on a Kleenex. She started to feel feverish, so she took a blanket from the closet and lay down on the sofa.

When David drove up at 4 A.M., Mary Jo was sitting on the window seat with the blanket wrapped around her. David blinked his lights twice. She threw the blanket off, put on her jacket and ran down the stairs. David stepped out of his car and they hugged halfway between Smith Hall and the parking lot.

On the way to Walden Pond, Jr., David talked non-stop about the Writers he met, the editors and publishers he spoke to and his meeting with the assistant director of the National Endowment of the Arts.

When they went to bed, David was so tired, he talked himself to sleep in a matter of minutes. Mary Jo did not fall asleep quickly. She just lay there watching him, wondering how much of him she had lost.

On Monday, they went to the Nostalgia Ball at the Union in the Leon Lafayette Ballroom. The female students wore gowns and the male students wore tuxedos. The sound was Big Band and everyone danced the jitterbug and the foxtrot, dancing close together. Gretchen was one of the featured singers and sang her first solo, *I can't Get Started*.

The highlight of the evening was the picking of the Nostalgia Couple of the Year, who danced to Moonlight Serenade. After that, Gretchen and the Quartet sang the last song, *Dream*.

The Rolling Thunder Review in Jacksonville the next weekend was the most incredible thing that Mary Jo had ever seen. She had actually seen them, had been in the same building with them, Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg and Joan Baez, in person, arm in arm with David, listening to their songs, their words. It would be, she knew, the most important single event in her life.

When they returned to Tallahassee, David and Mary Jo began hitting the books, trying to get ready for their finals. They spent whole days at the library doing research for their papers. David was nervous and jumpy all through finals week. To

add to the confusion, David had a final on the day he was to leave Tallahassee for Atlanta on his way to Italy. Mary Jo was calm and helped him whenever she could. She received a C in history, a B in Narrative Technique, a B in Geology, a C in Lab and a B plus in Literature. David aced all his finals.

They went to the Subway for their celebration lunch and had Sicilian pizza and wine fizzes. After that, they drove to Walden Pond, Jr. and packed David's things, stacking them in his car. When they finished, they walked back to the kitchen window and looked out at the pasture a while.

"I'm never going to forget this place," he said. He turned to Mary Jo and put his arm around her. "I'll never forget you." He kissed her and then said, "We better go now." And they walked to the car.

They drove to the campus. Mary Jo had to drop off some books, so David let her out at the Strozier Library. They hugged and promised to write each other. Mary Jo stepped out of the car and went around to the driver's side. She stooped and kissed him for the last time, then she slowly stepped back and waved goodbye. David put his car in gear and pulled away. Mary Jo stood and watched him until he was behind Landis Hall, then she went into the library and put her books in the return slot.

When she came out, she stood on the steps of the library and looked at Landis Green. The Fountain was closed and the campus trees were thick with Spanish moss, looking like wise old men.

Students were carrying boxes to their cars as the campus emptied out and snack bars and shops were going through the ritual of closing for the year. As she passed The Union, she could see the lights were still on in the swimming pool even though the pool was closed and no one had been swimming for a month. A couple was huddled on the bench near the post office and the bell for the blind students at the cross walk was clanging as if there were still huge crowds of students waiting to cross Woodward Street.

When she reached her rooms, Mary Jo put a Carol King album on the phonograph and went into the kitchen to make an omelet. She took three eggs from the refrigerator as the first song came on.

*"So far away.
Doesn't anybody stay in one place
Anymore.
It would be so fine to see
Your face at my door..."*

She broke the eggs and let them fall in a bowl, beating them with a fork. She took some cheddar cheese from the refrigerator and chopped it into little squares, dropping them in the bowl with the egg mixture. She took an onion and peeled it, and then she sliced it. Her eyes began to water. She rubbed her sleeve over her eyes and chopped the onion. She then put the onion pieces into the bowl with the eggs and cheese and stirred it. She rubbed her eyes again, but they were still blurred. She stood there a moment. She felt herself begin to cry, slowly at first, holding both hands to her face, and she backed to the far side of the kitchen, crouching down in the corner, putting her arm across her eyes, but by then she was sobbing.

He was gone. He was gone and she would never see him again. She was sure of that. He was gone to Atlanta, Italy, and parts of the world that would only be names to her. It was that simple, that final. He was gone.

After a while, the crying stopped and she went into the bathroom. Gretchen, who had been out looking for boxes to finish her packing, came in with two empty cartons. She saw Mary Jo's jacket and heard the water running in the bathroom.

“Boy,” she said. “It’s like a ghost town out there. Everybody is leaving.” She put the cartons down and walked to the bathroom door. Mary Jo was bending over the sink. Blood was rushing out of the cuts on her wrists, as she tried, unsuccessfully, to keep it off the floor and walls, as if there was a clean way to die.

Gretchen rushed in and caught Mary Jo as she was falling to the floor. She wrapped towels around Mary Jo’s arms and yelled out the door for help. Two female students carried Mary Jo downstairs where an ambulance was waiting.

Gretchen called Mary Jo’s mother from the hospital and sat by her bed until Mary Jo awoke from the medication at two A.M. They hugged each other.

Gretchen said, “Why didn’t you tell him?”

Mary Jo said, “I didn’t know how.”

Gretchen said, “My God, what are you trying to do to yourself,” but by then, they were both crying and hugging each other.

The nurse came in and gave Mary Jo another sedative and Gretchen slept outside in the waiting room.

Friday morning Mary Jo’s father flew down from Philadelphia and she was discharged from the Tallahassee Memorial Hospital. They took a cab to Smith Hall to pack her clothes. Mary Jo stopped at the front desk on the way out to check for mail, but there was none.

When she left, it was in a cab alone, with her father. She looked out the window and saw the track and tennis courts. It was Friday and the traffic was heavy, moving quickly down Tennessee Street as they approached the crest of the hill on Monroe Street.

Mary Jo whispered *David* and the vibrations of the word felt strange in her mouth. She said it again, “David.” She turned and looked out the rear window. Already the grounds of the university were disappearing, leaving only the skyline, hanging just above the horizon.

The End

[Field of Poppies](#)

By [Madeline Dow](#)



“Let’s go for a ride and show your mom the desert. April is the best time to see the poppies.” My husband Ralph was excited.

I was tired. My head ached. But when would I have another chance like this?

In six days we would move to Massachusetts. When would I see poppies in the desert again with my mom, my newborn son and my husband? Many decades later I would make the connection that my son Christopher's first trip to nature would be his lasting love. He became a science teacher.

In the garden of my mind I see the burnt orange poppies in the Mohave Desert. Christopher is four days old. I'm so sore I am barely able to sit down. My mom has traveled from New York to help me through these first few days.

I reluctantly agree to the poppies excursion. Ralph packs us into the old white panel truck: my mother, my newborn, my pillow and me. Bright poppies bob in the light wind. Sweetly scented wildflowers dot the bone dry brown hills. Even the desert knows it's spring. My mother kneels in the orange field of poppies as she poses for a photo, my young son in her strong arms.

It was a good time, filled with so much hope-dreams of a future with my new family in a rambling old house with a big front porch in a small town near Boston.



Two and a half years later, I am a continent away in a wet blustery New England fall in that small town outside of Boston. Natick, Massachusetts is situated on the shores of picturesque Lake Cochituate. I stare out the living room window of our tiny cottage as I watch rain soaked leaves drop by the barrel from ancient oak trees.

I am nearly ten months pregnant. Christopher is a terrible two. My long haired black Labrador retriever is in heat. She's supposed to be only six months old. How can she be in heat? The rubber band of a migraine headache stretches tightly across my temples.

My geologist husband is away on business. The drenched leaves cover the yard. I reach over my swollen belly and thick ankles as I stretch to lift handfuls of the heavy leaves into black plastic bags. There are so many leaves I can stand in place as I lift. I hardly need the rake. Chris rolls in the leaves and chases the dog.

In the mist of a gray morning the scent of fresh pine and a wood fire reminds me of a recent camping trip to the Berkshire Mountains. Suddenly I am shaken out of my reverie by barking dogs as they race into the unfenced yard. Big and small, black, brown, white, short hair and long. Every male dog in the neighborhood. They sniff around me. They rush for Bussy, my black Lab. Chris starts to cry as they knock him over. I grab the toddler and the stunned Lab and drag them both into the house as I fend off dogs with my kitchen broom. I feel defeated and exhausted. I throw the dog a bone and give Chris a box of animal crackers.

I have heartburn, I vomit. My body doesn't feel like it's mine anymore. I want my body back.

"How can the baby be healthy if I'm this sick? I'm overdue. Can't we induce labor?" I beg my doctor.

"It's too soon. You know this isn't an exact science. Let's wait another week or so. The baby will come when it's ready. Could be tomorrow."

I had begged my husband Ralph not to leave this time.

"I have to go. It's my job." His jaw set tight.

"You could explain to them. Surely they would understand?"

But off he went, leaving me with a crumpled sheet of paper: a phone number for his hotel somewhere deep in the Vermont woods where he would stomp around and give advice on how to build hydro- electric power plants.

I was furious. But I knew it wouldn't do any good to argue when Ralph dug his heels in. He was a responsible man but one who wouldn't talk about much, especially when it involved changing his mind. Although I had spent most of this pregnancy alone with my infant son and working the evening shift as a nurse, I was more vulnerable now with the baby due any minute. I felt abandoned.

I wondered what I would do when I went into labor. I had no idea when the baby would come. I plowed through my chores and planned things to do with friends. On that day, Wednesday, November 3, 1971, I mopped the kitchen floor and picked up some groceries. Then I drove to my friend Lynne's home in rural Sherwood.

My friends wanted me to teach them how to bake apple pies. My wonderful mother in law, Gramma Dow had taught me the art of baking pies. My girlfriends and I chatted and drank steaming mugs of instant coffee. Lynne's kitchen smelled of apples and cinnamon. Four pies filled the big electric oven.

Our two year olds wore each other out as they ripped through the house. Lynne and Linas worried about me but I forged ahead, rolling dough and shoving pies in the oven. And I ate. I was hungry all the time.

"Are you sure you should eat that? What about the heartburn?" Lynne said as I wolfed down half of a bologna sandwich with lots of mayo.

The next thing I knew my water broke and the long awaited blessed pains of labor began. First the familiar low back ache, then cramps in my abdomen turned to sharp spasms, closer together. I was ecstatic. Maybe it was the mayo. I downed another half sandwich and washed it down with a fresh cup of freeze dried coffee and milk. Life was good.

My friend, Linas, wrinkled her Spanish brow,

"You should get to the hospital. Second babies come faster."

"No chance of that. My first labor was thirty six hours. I'm not hanging out in the hospital all that time. Besides, I have to wait for the pies. You guys don't know when to take them out. This is a fine art."

Linas frowned and fretted, Lynne clicked her tongue and boiled more water for coffee. They humored me despite their concern. We timed contractions and waited for the pies. The little boys ran around the house like hellions.



“Good, “I thought. “Maybe Chris will sleep through my labor. His dad will come back and have to deal with a rambunctious two year old. Justice would be served.”

The labor pains got closer. I phoned my doctor’s office.

“Dr. Kinder is on vacation. We’ll send the partner.”

“What?”

I was half in love with my OB- GYN and his wavy ebony hair. Even his dandruff didn’t turn me on. I didn’t like the partner, Dr. Feldman, who had the bedside manner of Attila the Hun. How could I have my baby without Dr. Kinder? My stomach churned more acid. My face felt flushed.

“Calm down,” I told myself. “You can handle this.”

Lynne stirred powdered creamer and saccharin in her coffee. “It’s raining. We’ll hit traffic. You know, I’m not good with a stick shift. Linas can watch the pies. Let’s go.”

The sky darkened as sheets of icy rain pelted the gravel driveway.

I trotted around the kitchen. I was invincible.

“Not yet. The pies have to be cooled in a certain way on racks. I need to show you the full cycle.” After all, I was the coach here.

As familiar pains got closer, I agreed to head for the Framingham Union Hospital. With rain and traffic, about twenty five minutes away. My baby was coming! The plan was to take my car. Lynne would leave me at the hospital and meet Ralph later at my place. We couldn’t leave Linas alone with three toddlers and the pies. We’d bring Chris with us. He’d drop off to sleep in the back seat. A perfect plan.

The floor in the back seat of my 1965 stick shift Dodge Dart was rusted out. Ralph had covered it with a piece of plywood. Christopher wasn’t allowed to stand on it. He had a car seat but it wasn’t child proof and he had figured out how to break free. He liked the way the floor bounced like a trampoline when he jumped up and down. But he was asleep now.

Lynne inched the Dodge along in heavy traffic. The gears creaked.

“I can’t get it into second,” cried Lynne.

My labor pains grew intense and closer.

“I’ve got it.” I leaned my bulk over and jerked the shift into place while Lynne drew the clutch out. The gears ground. Chris stirred in the back seat.

I was distracted by the pains and we made a wrong turn. The only way out of the crowded dead end street was to put the car in reverse and back up.

“I can’t get it into reverse, Mad.”

I envisioned the possibility of Lynne delivering my baby in the front seat while Chris did jumping jacks on the rusted floor. I took a few deep breaths and heaved my swollen body out of the passenger seat, lumbering through the downpour. I squeezed into the driver seat as Lynne slide over. Chris was fully awake now in the back seat. He rubbed his eyes and wailed.

I bit my lower lip to keep from screaming out in pain. The manual shift had a will of its own. I used all of my strength and finally yanked it into reverse.

“I’ll just keep driving. We’re almost there,” I assured Lynne.

We skidded into the ER parking lot a few minutes later. I positioned the car so Lynne could drive it straight out. On my way out the door, I glanced at the back seat. Chris was busy working the clasp free on his seat belt.

“You’ll be fine, Lynne. Just drive in first gear all the way to Natick if you have to.”

I pictured Chris hitting the rusted floor boards as Lynne inched along in the rain.

But I had to hurry now. These were the excruciating last minute pains we forget until the next time. I lumbered into the ER, hands clutching my powder blue overnight bag.

“I’m having my baby—now!”

The receptionist glanced up from her paperwork. Then she did a double take.

“How did you get here?”

“I drove.”

She disappeared through the double doors. “Oh my god!”

The next thing I remember I was sitting in a wheelchair, the cold hard leather of my overnight bag perched precariously on my belly. The nurse wheeled me straight to delivery.

“What about the prep? Aren’t we going to the Labor Room?”

“Too late for that. You cut this a bit close. You’re fully dilated. This baby’s coming now.”

I look up at the white ceiling. It’s quiet. Change of shift quiet.

“Great, no prep. No loss there. Is my doctor here?”

“Not yet. He got held up with the rain. He’s on his way.”

The white halls are quiet. Change of shift quiet. It’s 3:55 pm. The nurses are all in report.

“Hmmm,” I thought, “Who is going to deliver my baby?”

During the birth I refused a mirror in order to watch. I was terrified there was something wrong with my baby. When I heard that first beautiful cry, only thirty five minutes had passed since I had been wheeled through the doors of the ER.

The nurse asked, “Would you like to hold him?”

“Please tell me how many fingers and toes he has and if his head is normal?”

The nurse managed a tight smile.

“He’s okay. Ten and ten; the head looks normal. You have a perfect baby boy.”

I looked down at a full head of fine dark hair.

“So that’s what all the heartburn was about.”

But I am grateful for a healthy son.

The nurses were still in change of shift report. The partner OB, Dr. Attila, volunteered to wheel me out of delivery.

I said, “You know, I hate to bother you but I think I am going to be sick.”

He blithely pushed the gurney right on through the double doors, “You’re not pregnant anymore, you can’t be sick.”

“I know I shouldn’t be. But I think I’m going to be.”

“You just think you are.”

But Dr. Attila was wrong. My gurney blocked the hallway as he ran for a basin and towels.

“Sorry. I tried to warn you.”

He scowled as he wiped his scrubs off with a towel.

The next morning, I was greeted by the scent of fresh orange juice. My first orange juice in nine months! No heartburn! I could see my ankles—no balloons! I basked in the afterglow of tired childbirth.

But not for long. The birth certificate lady made her rounds for the third time.

“You have to name your child. You are being discharged in a few hours. You can’t go home without a name.

“I’m not sure what I want to name him.”

“We have to have something for the records. Your doctor has written discharge orders. And your husband is on his way.”

Of course we should have chosen a name. But by then we couldn’t agree on much of anything, especially a name for the baby. I had been too numb to realize it but my marriage was in shambles. Now all I wanted was to go home and there was this pressure about a name.

Ralph had made it back from Vermont. He strolled into my room looking like a man who had spent the night with a two year old and a dog in heat. I gloated.

“You’re drinking orange juice? Great! Your disposition certainly has improved. The kid looks okay except that his face is dented and looks like the rear end of a 1956 Studebaker.”

“What? What’s wrong with his face?”

I felt heat rise, my neck stiffened, and my head throbbed. Then I remembered that forceps deliveries sometimes leave a mark for a few days.

“That will go away. We have to give him a name. They won’t let me leave until we do.”

“Maybe you should stay ‘til your mom gets here. There’s a lot of work to do at home.”

That meant dirty dishes and diapers. We both knew I needed more rest.

“No way! I’m leaving. I want to go home with my baby and see Christopher.”

“Okay, if you insist. Anyway, I’ve got a good name for him. Travis.”

“That sounds like a name from a cowboy movie. I am not naming my child after a cowboy hero.” I pouted.

“It’s actually from a novel,” Ralph said.

“How would you know that?” Ralph, to my knowledge, had never read a novel, western or not.

“I’m reading one now. I like that name. We’ll use my dad’s middle name, Travis McKinley Dow. It’s catchy.”

“He doesn’t need a catchy name,” I snapped.

“We named Christopher to appease your family for the Las Vegas wedding. They wanted him named for a saint. I went along with that. Now I want to call my son Travis McKinley Dow.”

I didn’t know anyone who had named their son Travis or McKinley. Christopher had turned out to be the most common name of the decade. Almost all of my friends had a Chris, Christine, or some derivative. There’d be no chance of that with “Travis.”

I nodded in agreement, too tired to argue.

“Well at least he’ll be a one of a kind.”



We left the hospital in a freezing drizzle. When we got home, Ralph pushed through the knee deep leaves to open the side door. With the other hand, he hung onto Christopher to keep him from dive bombing off the porch. I hovered on the narrow landing as I hugged Travis close. I pulled Gramma Dow's crocheted cap tight over his tiny head against the wet wind.

Back in my mind's garden I see the tiny cottage kitchen. Christopher circles and snatches the baby's bottle. He is Superman, a beige towel for a cape. I look down at my sweet baby boy and wonder what life has in store for him.

I nuzzle Travis through tears of joy as I breathe in his baby powder scent. His tiny fingers wrap around mine. I cradle his raven head. He opens his eyes and wails.

"Geez, What a pair of lungs. I wonder what he'll do with those," says Ralph.

I never dreamed that Travis would write the most beautiful music in the world.

He would become a singer songwriter. (He certainly had the right name for it.) He played five instruments, recorded many solo CDs, and fronted five bands. He wrote almost one thousand songs. Travis lost his life to cancer on his 41st birthday in 2012.



*There must be a plan
Something to believe in
And pride, that what we build survives.
Don't keep it to yourself
All this beauty
Doesn't mean a thing
Until you share it with the world.*

WD and The Idea
by Travis Dow.

The song speaks to the creative quest in all of us. "WD" is Walt Disney.

*Travis Dow, *The Light That Lives*

Travis Dow's music may be heard on www.reverbnation.com/travisdow,
ourstage.com/profile/travisdow, Amazon.com, MySpace, Spotify and CD Baby.

Christmas Calling

By **Jane Finch**

Grey Gables is an imposing three-storey building, but not unpleasant on the eye. Sparse window boxes are brightened by sparkling fairy lights, and the film of frost gives it an almost magical quality. Winter jasmine surrounds the pristine parking area, so that visitors exclaim at the colours and smell on a winter's morning.

Inside the Nursing Home a smiling receptionist waits, directing callers in an efficient manner. Silent corridors spur off in several directions as the tinkle of Christmas carols hover in the odourless air.

At the Nurses' Station, room numbers display a name and a coloured star. The nurses know that a red star means *call the paramedics* in the case of an emergency. A black star denotes 'No Resuscitation'.

Room 72 showed Maggie Watts. Black Star.

Maggie didn't want to wake up. In fact she didn't care if she never woke up again. She forced her eyes to stay closed, listening to the sounds outside. Church bells ringing, carols on a radio, laughter of children. Somewhere a dog barked. She turned painfully and buried her head in the pillow, her elderly bones aching even before she had started the day. Her glistening tears made a damp patch on the warm fabric. She huddled under the covers for a few minutes, putting off the moment when she had to face the world, such as it was in regimented Grey Gables.

It was always harder at this time of the year when everyone was going around with smiles on their faces, carrying bursting packages and always in a hurry. Twinkling stars on TV commercials, Disney feel-good films, and families holding hands bombarded her world. Only two days to go and then it would be over, and perhaps life could get back to normal. Whatever normal might be.

Maggie gripped the bedclothes for a moment, drew a deep breath, and struggled out of bed. She pressed her lips together as the effort of getting up overwhelmed her. As she rested briefly she looked around her sparse room. Cream walls, green carpet, matching curtains, and a worn chair facing a tired television.

Not a lot to show for 85 years, she thought.

A sharp tap on the door, and in walked the carer, cheerful and busy. She chatted all the time as she worked, helping Maggie to wash, brushing her hair, helping her to dress. Maggie blocked it all out. She'd heard it all before. The son was doing such and such, the daughter had a new boyfriend, and the husband was a pain. Then another carer entered and they helped Maggie to her chair and began making the bed, straightening the sheets, smoothing the quilt and pummelling the pillows. They chatted to each other now, ideas for presents, recipes for festive goodies, excitement building. Busy houses and busy lives. They smiled and waved at Maggie as they left, laughing in the corridor as they went about their work.

Breakfast came and went, barely touched. A weak sun shone through the window and Maggie turned her head away. Even the dim brightness made her eyes blur and then she couldn't focus for ages. So she sat, alone. Memories often tried to interrupt her day, but she forced them away. Faces and voices from the past persisted as she dozed and brought the determined tears to her eyes as she woke.

A knock on the door was unexpected. A lad with a smiling face was delivering a parcel for her. She checked the name on the packaging. *Maggie Watts*. Definitely her name, but it was obviously a mistake. She shook her head and handed it back. It couldn't be for her. It was, he insisted. It was a parcel for her. It had her room number on it. Number 72.

Maggie held the parcel in her hands for several minutes, turning it over and over, trying to think what it could be. A square box of some sort, not very heavy but something inside was rattling. No return address.

She slid a crooked finger beneath the wrapping and looked in amazement at the box in her lap, a glossy photograph of a mobile phone declaring it was the answer to all her communication needs. What on earth was she supposed to do with it? She had no-one to call, and no-one was likely to call her either. Curiosity drove her to open the box. The carers were always fiddling with their phones, 'mobiles' they called them. Sending messages, they said. How they could do that was beyond her. Maggie could never understand what they got so excited about.

Well, now she had one. She was still looking at it in confusion when her lunch arrived. A laughing carer fitted the battery and turned the thing on. There was a bleep and some strange tune erupted from it. The carer left with a wave. The lunch grew cold as Maggie continued to look at the mobile, still turning it over and over in her hands. She pressed a button, and the screen lit up, and she saw there was some writing. She had a message.

'Hello Maggie.'

She stared at it. Then there was another beep. Maggie paused, and then pressed the button again.

'Do you like your Christmas present?'

Maggie shook her head. She shoved the mobile back into the box and threw the whole thing into the bin by her chair.

She looked at her lunch and pushed it away. A cup of tea stood cooling on the tray. She lifted it carefully to her lips and began to sip. Although she tried not to, she looked at the box in the bin several times, but left it there. The tea actually tasted good, and she picked up a piece of bread and butter and chewed it thoughtfully. A beep came from the bin. Maggie finished her bread and sat looking at the box. No more beeps. She waited.

Lunch was cleared away and the lights dimmed. This was doze time. Televisions were turned off, radios became quiet, and carers took a break. Routine was important. Maggie lifted the box out of the bin and looked at the screen.

'Remember Christmas in Scotland?'

She stifled a cry. Who was this? What was going on? She closed her eyes and tried to calm herself. Christmas in Scotland. How long now, twenty or thirty years ago. She closed her eyes and the memories flooded back.

The room was warm with a sparkling fire throwing shadows across the ceiling. The Christmas tree was aglow with twinkling lights, and the soft sound of a children's choir singing 'God Rest You Merry Gentlemen' filled the air. Maggie sat on the sofa beside Dan as they watched Julia helping David open his presents. They laughed as David ripped at the colourful paper, exclaiming in delight at a new car, or a bus, or a storybook. Maggie laid her head on Dan's strong shoulder and he gripped her hand and squeezed it affectionately. Maggie could feel him smiling by the way his skin crinkled in his neck. This was what Christmas was all about. Family together, parents, children and grandchildren, enjoying the company of one another.

Maggie awoke with a start, her face and neck damp from her tears. A sob escaped from her lips and she fumbled for a handkerchief. Damned memories. It all came rushing back before she could stop it. Dan, her beloved Dan, gone now these many years, leaving her all alone. Then Julia emigrating with dear little David, travelling to some distant shore and then dying out there. Her lovely daughter buried in some

remote graveyard that she could never visit. Again the tears fell, and Maggie dabbed half-heartedly at them, gave up, and let them come.

Then the mobile beeped, bringing her back to the present, and to Room 72. Maggie picked it up and fumbled with the button until the screen lit up.

'God Rest You Merry Gentlemen!'

Maggie stared at it, then put it in the box and tucked it under her bed. The carers came and she was amazed to see it was evening and time for bed. The day had sped by. Almost immediately she fell into a deep sleep. The dreams were queuing up. One minute she and Dan were walking hand in hand alongside a meandering river and the next she was in the hospital and Julia was born. Then it was their first Christmas as a family, Julia a tiny baby and Dan as proud as a man could be, and then the scene changed and it was Julia cradling David in her arms. There was so much laughter. Then the sadness all came at once. Dan's graveside, Julia and Maggie standing side by side, and then Maggie at the airport, watching as Julia and her husband and David departed for their new life in some God-forsaken country. Even the gut-wrenching pain in her chest felt the same.

An insistent noise woke her. It was the mobile again, but not just a beep this time. It was making a continuous noise. Maggie struggled out of bed and hooked the box out with her walking stick. Just as she picked it up, the noise stopped. She took out the mobile, pressed the button, and looked at the screen.

'Dan calling.'

Instinctively, she threw the mobile onto the bed. It began to buzz and vibrate, moving across the bed as it did so. Maggie reached for her walking stick and tried to hit the thing, missing every time. She knew she was getting senile, forgetting the silliest things, but a heightened imagination was not something that was supposed to come with senility. She stopped whacking the bed and tried to think logically. It seemed someone was trying to communicate with her. Was it really Dan? Or maybe it was God?

Of course, she couldn't mention it to the carers. They would just make a note in her records that she was "losing it" or some such comment. What had the box said, 'the answer to all her communication needs'? Well, if it was God, what happened to good old-fashioned praying? If it was Dan.....well she couldn't even think about that possibility.

With a sudden burst of inspiration, she grabbed at the mobile, placed it to her lips, and shouted: "Dan, is that you?"

The screen remained blank.

"Hello?" she whispered to it.

Still no reply. Then she felt really silly and was glad there was no-one near to see her. That wasn't what the carers did with their mobiles. They punched keys and somehow sent messages. Maybe that was what she needed to do. She began to press different buttons, but nothing happened. Totally frustrated, she threw the mobile on to the bed again. She tried to stop herself from looking at it. She searched the ceiling, examined the floor at her feet, and even looked out the window. Always her eyes were drawn back to the bed and to the now silent mobile.

Then she felt a tiredness come over her, and she surrendered to the feeling. It was all too much to take in. Maybe she had imagined it all anyway. Maybe she would open her eyes and everything would be the same as always, and there would be no mysterious package and no mobile sitting on the bed.

She jumped as someone tapped on the door. Not the carer, not yet. She needed time to think, to compose herself. Too late. The door opened and a tall man stood

there, smiling nervously at her. She stared at him for a long time, trying to recall why he looked so familiar. There was something about his eyes that triggered a distant memory.

“Gran?” he whispered.

He opened the door wider then, and a troupe of three children shyly followed him into the room.

“Gran, it’s David. Your grandson. These are your great grandchildren – Tanya and Dan – and Maggie.”

The mobile beeped. Maggie looked from her visitors, to the bed, looked at David, and then leaned forward and took hold of the mobile. She pressed the switch, watched the screen light up, and took a deep breath.

‘Happy Christmas, Maggie.’

She stared at the message for a long time, and then handed the mobile to David. He took it gently, turning it over in his hands, pressing buttons, putting it to his ear.

“The battery is dead,” he said “there’s nothing there. Is it new? You have to charge it up first and put a sim card in before it will work.”

Maggie took the mobile back and looked at the black screen. She pressed the button a few times but there was nothing. Then she looked up at her family and opened her arms and welcomed them.

‘Happy Christmas, Dan,’ she whispered.

From the corridor outside the strains of *God Rest You Merry Gentlemen* floated through the air.

The End

Warrior Spirit

By **Don Ford**



“Small Feather, which hand is the marble in?”

“Why are you doing this game? You know I can read faces. There is no object in either hand, while they are yet in your pocket.”

“You have said well, young warrior. I have never tried your gift, my young friend. Do you see into the future?”

“For others I can.” The brave spoke freely.

“How far can you see?” The elder felt an excitement welling up inside of him.

“To the grave and then beyond.”

“What of the Great Beyond? Have you been there?”

“Only as my spirit would fly. My body would remain here, and my spirit would drift to those other realms.”

“So, there are many places we can go?”

“Exactly two, wise one. One is not a place I wish to talk of. It is the one I see most often, and where most lives retire to.”

“Try to describe that place?”

“It is full of dreadful creatures who once were human. These are screaming without stopping, and there are flames that cannot be quenched.”

“But is that a real place? Are there any you know from here?”

“Yes, many, but they do not recognize me. This is the most curious of all, at this I wonder greatly.”

“And the other place; what of the other place?”

“That place would take me a lifetime to explain and explore. Each time I go there I am amazed at the new views and wide panoramic vistas of colors and splendors. I can’t see into my own future, but it is the place I hope to go beyond the dark veil of this world.”

“So, I take it we are seeing two very opposite places?”

“That is an understatement. It is certainly that and much more; like apples and oranges are different and worlds apart. The one place is unchanging, a firestorm always burning; people gnashing teeth and yelling. The other place is in a constant state of flux, and changes with every visit.”

“You are describing a world beyond our own, that I would love to retire to.”

“Did I say this was a retirement or resting place? No, I didn’t! It is full of activity, singing, happy folks dancing, and when he comes by...”

“Who is he?”

“He is none other than the great one, and Creator of our present world and probably worlds beyond. The woods and creatures there leaped for joy too at his appearing. I would be lying if I told you this was a place of rest. It is eternity unfurled. No one tires; everyone is on the move. There is more to do in this place than a hundred lifetimes could occupy.”

“Now the big question: where am I in all of this?”

“Yes, and now the reason for my visit, wise one. Though your life has been a good one, and your heart is kind, you have never yielded your life to the Creator of Heaven and Earth. You are a strong warrior and your life has been full of grand exploits. You have done it all on your own. Will you now, at long last, yield to the Great Master? He is kind and fair; he has a plan for every member of mankind. Most do not feel they need his hand upon their lives. Will you yield?”

“For one so young and untried, I marvel at how you have been given an old man’s wisdom. I knew that a day like this would come. Somehow I sensed there must be more to life than what leads us to the grave. There has to be more beyond our own finite minds. I do yield, young one. You are wise beyond your years. I will gladly yield my life to this Great Spirit and join you in that day – and in that place.”

Suddenly the birds broke out into a great chorus of singing. The trees also began to gently sway as a soul found its way back to its Creator.

The End

Granny Mae’s Journey

By **Rodney Page**

My Granny Mae was born on July 4, 1900; she died on Christmas Eve, 1998.

Granny left her substantial investment portfolio to charity. My cousins, more interested in cash than keepsakes, had little interest in her personal possessions. It was left to me to sort out over a hundred years’ worth of Spence family relics and memories in the rambling old country house in which Granny was born.

I saved the attic for last. I was apprehensive, wondering what demons and ghosts lurked above, but turned on the flashlight and climbed the rickety stairs.

Much of what I found wasn’t salvageable and of little sentimental value. After two days in the dark musty attic I discovered a large chest. I didn’t expect to find gold bullion or a million dollars in Confederate money, but maybe something offering new insight into the Spence family and Granny Mae.

The chest wasn't coated in thick dust like everything else; it had been opened recently. Though legally blind in her later years, Granny Mae remained spry until she died. Could she have climbed the stairs and put something in the chest?

I opened it and removed a neatly folded homemade quilt covering the contents. Below was a shoebox containing my uncle's military paraphernalia...sergeant stripes, campaign ribbons, and his letters to Granny Mae. And there was the yellowed Western Union telegram from the War Department that advised Granny Mae her son died in action on May 23, 1944 at Anzio in Italy.

I sat quietly for a few minutes and hoped my uncle knew the last physical remnants of his time on earth wouldn't be discarded with the empty cat food cans.

A clean white pillow case covered the remaining contents. Below were three two-foot high stacks of notebooks, steno pads and bundles of single sheets of paper held together with rubber bands or paper clips.

On top was a relatively new spiral notebook. It was a diary of sorts, written in pencil and in Granny Mae's unmistakable script. The dated entries extended about halfway through the notebook. The last was dated Christmas Eve, 1998, the day she died.

I packed Granny's writings and took them home. Cataloging and sorting the diaries wasn't difficult. The stacks were in precise chronological order, the first entry made on May 29, 1911. I journeyed with Granny through her thoughts and feelings, her triumphs and tribulations, and learned to appreciate and respect her wisdom and strength of character. Granny's accounts of almost ninety years of her life and times were like her novels, impossible to put down.

She wrote about everything from the most frivolous family events to pointed critiques of the nation's presidents. She was witty and aware of the world around her. She stoically dealt with the deaths of her mother, father, husband and two of her children. She saw and experienced the impact of two world wars and countless smaller ones. She described riding in a car, hearing a radio and watching a television for the first time.

Granny Mae's life spanned ragtime, jazz, big band, rock & roll, disco, pop, rap and hip-hop music. She saw the travel time from her home in rural middle Georgia to Atlanta shrink from nine hours by mule-drawn wagon and train to two hours by car. Granny saw a man go to the moon.

And, there was Granny's remarkable rebirth in middle age, her metamorphosis from poor widow woman to renowned author.

Enough for introductions. Following, in her own words, are Granny Mae's accounts of the trivial and momentous stops on her long journey.

June 13, 1912

Today my mama birthed my sixth sister. Her name is Pearl and she is a beautiful baby. Now there are 10 of us children. My sisters are Ethel, Eloise, Ruth, Mary, Rose, Susie and now Pearl. My two brothers are Buford and Clyde. Mama had two other babies but they died early on. Jacqueline died when she was just 2 and Jack died just after mama birthed him. Mama was very sad when they died. I am the oldest and mama talks to me more than the little ones and she cried when they died. I cried also.

I sometimes lay in my bed and wonder what Jacqueline and Jack would do on God's earth if they had not died. By my mama says they have gone to heaven to be with the Lord and I will see them after I die and go to heaven too. I believe my mama but I do not understand why the Lord lets little babies die. Little Jacqueline and Jack did no wrong to anybody. But the Lord took them. Sometimes I do not understand what the Lord does.

July 4, 1914

Today my uncles and aunts and cousins came to our house to celebrate Independence Day and my birthday. But grandpa Jed and uncle Nathaniel did not come. They never celebrate Independence Day and do not allow their children. Grandpa Jed and uncle Nathaniel fought for us in the southern war of independence. Grandpa Jed had his arm shot off in the war. Grandpa Jed fought at Gettysburg and Uncle Nathaniel fought at Vicksburg. They were whupped by the yankees on July 4 and do not want to celebrate a yankee day. They are old men but are still very mad at the yankees. There was much talk of war by the men today. A war has started in Germany and France. The men do not want to fight there because they believe the war is none of our business. They think the war will kill a lot of people. And they think they will have to go fight even though they do not want to. I do not want them to be sent to fight. They will die and get shot and nobody will understand why.

February 9, 1915

It is very cold today and mama and daddy did not have us work in the garden except for piling up leaves and hay on the turnips and potatoes and carrots so they would not freeze. We helped bring in wood for daddy because the three fireplaces in the house must be burning all the time since it is so cold. By noon today we children were all done with our chores and allowed to stay inside because it was warm. There was much excitement before it got dark when Mister Lutz came to our house. He had a new wagon without a horse. Daddy says it is an automobile and it is the first I and my brothers and sisters have seen. Daddy told us he saw one in Milledgeville the last time he went there. The automobile made a terrible loud noise and it scared the dogs. Daddy said the automobile scares horses fearfully and people have been hurt when horses get scared of the automobile and throw them off. The automobile does not scare me and I hope I can ride in one soon. It would be very exciting.

May 27, 1915

My sister Johnnie was born today and she and my mother are doing very well. She is a very excitable little baby girl. She does not cry very much but sleeps just a little. She is always awake and she looks at everybody and she seems to hear things very well for a little baby. I asked mama if she was going to have any more babies. There are now 11 of us. She did not want to talk about more babies and our house is very crowded now and I sleep in the same room with four of my sisters. The lord has been gracious giving mama and daddy 11 strong children. But mama is very tired. I hope she will have no more babies.

October 30, 1915

Last night was a very scary night and our house almost burnt down. My little sister Ethel had to go to the outhouse. She did not use the pot under the bed like mama told her to. Little Ethel took a lamp with her. She came back to the house and dropped the lamp on the floor in her room. The lamp broke when it hit the floor and the kerosene spilt everywhere. The curtains and some of the bed covers caught afire. Daddy heard the commotion and him and mama ran to the room as did I who heard it also. Daddy pulled the burning curtains down and stomped the fire with his bare feet. Me and mama got the little ones out of the room and then filled pails with water from the pump and took them to daddy and he put out the fire. Nothing except the curtains and bed clothes were burnt much. The bed frame was scorched but not bad. Mama put flour on daddys feet and legs but he was not hurt bad. Mama spanked Ethel with a switch and I do believe she will use the pot after this.

November 4, 1916

I am very sad today for my mother died bearing little Martha. Daddy fetched the doctor to the house when mama started bleeding and the midwife Anna did not know what to do but the doctor did not save my mama. She died just before the sun's rise this morning. I am taking care of Martha and she is doing fine. I was first angry with the tiny child and blaming her for the death of my dear mama but I know it was God's will she died. Daddy told me Martha would be the earthly reminder of mama and we all should be kind and gentle to Martha. My mother lies dead in the parlor and daddy says I will be the mistress of the house. God forgive me being selfish but I do not wish to take the place of my mother which I can not do anyway. Daddy will need my help with my brothers and sisters and I will help. But I love my schooling and want to learn more. Dear Jesus how can I learn new things remaining here raising my brothers and sisters for the next many years? I fear I will never learn more than what I know presently. There is so much to learn but I will help my daddy.

June 7, 1917

I completed my public schooling and was given a very nice certificate at graduation. Daddy, my sisters and brothers and many relatives from around the county were all in attendance at the joyous ceremony. My active and lively sister Johnnie even behaved well for the speeches and presentation of the certificates. Daddy was very proud of me since he had not progressed beyond the fifth grade. I have not complained but he knows of my desire for more education and I have good marks most notably in English and writing. And my teacher Miss Yandle says I am a good writer though I can stand much improvement but my arithmetic and science is better. She encouraged me to apply to nursing school in Macon and I did so but have little hope of acceptance. And if so I can not leave daddy and my sisters and brothers and have no means for payment for the school. Maybe I have learned all that I will learn but I have enjoyed it greatly. I may never become an educated woman but I will try to continue to learn.

July 4, 1917

The Lord does provide and I am thankful. Today I turned 17 and this is the most wonderful birthday I shall ever have. With no forewarning my daddy and Miss Yandle approached me this afternoon with the best of news. Not only did Miss Yandle advise me of my acceptance to nursing school, my daddy told me his sister Betsy would come to the house to take care of the children when I went to school. Daddy has little money for the tuition with many mouths to feed but he has talked to the bank in Milledgeville and will help me with the cost. He says I must find a job and work while I am in school to help out but that is not a burden. I suspect my daddy borrowed the money and will be at a hardship to pay it back and that is what I told him. He would hear none of my protests and concerns and he said he was proud of me and that Aunt Betsy was pleased to help with the children. My dreams have come true but I now will feel like a selfish girl should I go off to school. I told my daddy that but he said all was arranged and I should not fret. My daddy is a Godly and good man. I will not disappoint him. I love my daddy more than I am able to express in words. I will go to Macon and begin with the winter session in January and I will make my daddy and the memory of my mama proud.

June 19, 1918

The mail today brings sad news from Daddy. Uncle Hubert received a telegram from the Army telling him my first cousin Tommy was gassed in France. No additional information was offered but I have learned of the effects of mustard gas in my studies. It is awful! If Tommy lives he most certainly will be sick the rest of his life. Oh, why are we in this awful war? President Wilson told us time and again he would not take us to war. He is nothing more than a deceitful and lying politician. Most of them seem to be that way. But, I write philosophically when the matters of the world in which I live need tending. I am fatigued. Thankfully I will graduate in December. I attend class from early morning until shortly after noon and then off to the dreadful cotton mill until midnight and then my studies and assignments. But Daddy knows I'm working hard. He's worked so hard to help educate me and he deserves no less. I so love my Daddy.

December 5, 1918

I have not written in weeks. So much is happening. Thank Almighty God the war is over. Maybe there will be no more wars. Millions of people were killed and injured. Cousin Tommy finally came home and is in the hospital in Dublin, but I don't believe he will live very long. More positive, I graduated last week with the second highest marks in my class. Hooray! Daddy and everyone caught the train and were here. My sisters and brothers are growing up so quickly. But, I am oh so much bedeviled by a decision I must make. I have been offered positions in Milledgeville and Atlanta. What should a poor girl do? The hospital in Milledgeville is so close to my family but small and backward. I do sound pompous but I may know more medical arts than the doctors there. I should be ashamed. But, Georgia Baptist Hospital in Atlanta is so

much larger and advanced. And, for goodness sakes, the pay is almost twice that of Milledgeville and I could help Daddy pay back the loan. But, oh my, I would be so far from home and Atlanta is such a sinful place.

April 19, 1919

My duties at Georgia Baptist are going well I suppose. It is a very large hospital and there are many more experienced than I so I spend a lot of time doing the most trivial tasks, really more the work of orderlies I would say. But I am not complaining. I am learning a lot but at a much slower pace than anticipated. I work from midnight to 10:00 A.M. and have not yet become accustomed to sleeping in the day time, and it is a shame. The dogwoods and azaleas are in bloom, and Atlanta town is most colorful. I did have Sunday off last week and caught the trolley to Inman Park. The houses there are quite large and beautiful, so much larger and grander than our little house. Many of the boys I have met are veterans from the war and quite full of themselves. They seem to prefer girls from the city who are not chaperoned. It is a lively town with lots of jazz clubs and whiskey saloons. The great talk of the town is the prohibition of alcohol. It matters not to me for I find myself foolish enough without imbibing. I have no religious objection to those who choose to drink liquor, but it is not for me.

September 3, 1919

I have finally admitted it to myself. I am homesick for my family and the plain life away from the maddening city. There, I've said it. Here, automobiles have almost completely taken the place of carriages and wagons. They honk and belch foul odors. They frequently collide with one another. It seems the police are more engaged determining the fault for such collisions than arresting the ruffians and hooligans that run rampant. Though my wages are not modest the prices for the basic foodstuffs are outrageous. The bandits from Kentucky who own a grocery store near my rental demand such that I barely have any money remaining after I feed myself. (And a cat that has taken a fancy to me. I have named her Matilda.) It is difficult for my Daddy or the rest of my family to visit. The train fare is beyond their means, and I never have enough time off to visit them. Oh, I do miss them and our little house, the fresh snap beans, corn and turnips. But, I have made my bed and shall lie in it.

March 5, 1921

Hooray! Hooray! My application for employment at the small clinic in Gordon has been accepted. The postman just delivered a most gracious letter from the chief physician. He would be most pleased to have me in his employ as the Head Nurse. Of course, there are only two nurses, but I am overjoyed. The clinic is a tolerable buggy ride from our little house. Perhaps one day I will drive an infernal automobile there. The wages are less than I now receive but are more than adequate. I will rob my bank (a mason jar with my accumulated pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters) and send Daddy a telegram! I'm going home!!!!

April 7, 1921

Oh, how my sisters and brothers have grown. Four of them have left the litter and are managing on their own. Eloise has married. Can this be possible? Aunt Betsy has been a Godsend, so wonderful and loving to my Daddy and the children. I am gratified she is not returning to Sandersville upon my return. She is a part of the household and I would be terror struck if she left. The work at the clinic is most satisfactory. Doctor Wiggins has taken a liking to me and allows me to attend his visits with the patients. I am learning again and I have a job that makes me feel important and useful. But I am so afraid for my Daddy. He seems to have aged so very much since I left for school. He tells me the market for the crops has been good since the war, but he works so hard. He is not an old man, but a haggard and tired look surrounds him. He says nothing is wrong but I have insisted he visit the doctor. He doesn't want to go but I will pester him. I cannot bear the thought of losing Daddy.

October 4, 1922

Dare I write this? I have just returned home from the Harvest Cotillion at the Armory in Milledgeville having been escorted by none other than Mister Leo Stark. Why, yes. That is the Leo Stark of the Stark family that owns Hickory Plantation. Now, it isn't a plantation really. It was before the War of Southern Independence but was burned down by the Yankees and now is just a big farm. Listen to me. What a hussy I am. Little of that matters in the least. Leo is a very fine young man unlike the boys in Atlanta. I was most surprised when he invited me. Leo came to see Doctor Wiggins at the clinic a few weeks back and we had a friendly conversation. But I was startled when he later invited me to the Cotillion. We had a wonderful time and I danced and danced and danced. The moon was high and full. I must not be smitten by Leo but so I am. He asked Daddy if he might escort me on future occasions. My Daddy was pleased with Leo's courtesy and manners. I think Daddy believes I will soon be an old maid. HA HA! At the ripe old age of 22 I think he wants to marry me off. HA HA! None would be better than MY LEO.

June 17, 1923

Oh my, the wedding is tomorrow and I am a Nervous Nelly. Aunt Betsy talked to me this afternoon and explained what I might expect on my wedding night. She was most serious and mysterious. But I must say (is it a sin?) I look forward to it most expectantly. HeHeHe!!! My friend Sally Burnett in Atlanta has sent me (at my request) a scandalous black silk negligee. I am sure Aunt Betsy would not approve. Leo and I are to be married in the parlor of his family's old house and EVERYONE will be there. My Daddy will escort me and all my brothers and sisters are coming. Oh, I wish my Mama was alive for such a happy day. But she'll be there, hovering like an angel. I just know she will be. We will drive to Savannah in Leo's automobile for our honeymoon. This will be the first time I've seen the ocean. This will be the first time for a lot of things. HeHeHe!!!!!!

May 5, 1929

Yesterday I delivered my third baby, another wonderful baby boy, Richard. I am very tired. Little Richard weighed 9 pounds & 13 ounces. I think I shall have no more children. Unlike earlier times more children are not necessary to work the farm. My Mama had 14 and 2 died. She died having little Martha. Bearing children is a painful and frightful experience. Children are God's gifts. But 3 are enough. I shall talk to Leo about this.

March 8, 1931

I do not know of Leo's business affairs, but today his financiers seized 200 acres of his land. The terrible financial condition of our country has befallen the Stark family. Leo tells me he borrowed money over the last few years to pay for new farm equipment and pay the wages of the field hands but has been unable to repay due to the calamitous situation. This morning Leo had to let go over 20 field laborers and craftsmen. Many have been in the Starks employ their entire lives. I feel so sorry for them for I don't what they will do. Leo is a compassionate man and will allow them to grow food on the remaining property so they will not starve. We are not completely destitute. We are allowed to keep the house and a few acres surrounding. Leo's grandfather is a shattered man. The thieving and looting Yankees passed through when he was a young man and he rebuilt the family's fortunes only to see them disappear because of Mr. Hoover's ruinous actions. I feel so for Leo. He is not bearing the situation well and aged 20 years in the last 6 months. I fear for his health. I try to be supportive and helpful as I do not want to become another burden. But he is a very proud man and sees the situation as a personal failure. The boys are not old enough to understand and their daily routine will not change so they are blissful in their lack of understanding, as it should be. I will carry on. I am not so old as to be unable to tend to the garden and feed the hogs, but Leo sees my new labors as his own fault. Pshaw! I have milked many cows, beheaded many a chicken and shucked a thousand ears of corn. I am not troubled by my tasks as is Leo.

July 17, 1934

We laid Leo to rest today in the Stark family plot. I had him for only 11 years, but they were wonderful and loving years. Doctor Wiggins said Leo died of a stroke. That may well be but my beloved husband died of anguish and worry of a situation not of his making. I do believe I am in shock. The emotions of my loss dwell deep inside me fiercely seeking a way to express themselves. But I am resolved not to be crippled by needless self pity. The boys need their mother strong and resilient. Their Daddy is dead and I must verse myself on things of fathering. I must know things men know and do the best I am able to impart them to my sons. A whimpering, weak and stupid mother will be of no use to them.

September 19, 1934

Will this wretched year never end? I have not written for over 2 weeks for I was not able. I have tried to be a strong person but the death of my beloved Daddy overwhelms me in ways I can not describe. I do not know if I will survive. The resolve and strength I have mustered since Leo's death are no longer with me. My sadness is total. Try as I may I can not remove the memories of my loving and pleasant Daddy. I bear guilt for not having similar feelings of my husband's death. The Good Lord knows I loved my husband. Perhaps He is punishing me for not mourning my husband more respectfully and has taken my Daddy. The Bible says the Lord does not burden us with troubles with which we can not cope. What might I have done to anger the Lord? He gave me the strength to go on after Leo died but He has now taken it away. I pray to Him it will be restored. Without His help I can not do what must be done for my boys. Please God, help me.

August 9, 1936

At last, at last! The men from the electrical company put up the poles and strung the wires along the road a few weeks ago. Today the man from the wiring company in Milledgeville finished his work and we have electrical light bulbs in our house. I wish to discard the kerosene lamps forever but was told storms may disrupt the wires at times and I would be wise keep the lamps. The electrical light is magical and very bright. I feared I might go blind at an early age reading the Macon Telegraph and my books in the dim yellow lamp light. But perhaps now I will not require a cane to make my way around in my old age. The wiring man also placed electrical boxes in several rooms of the house. Though the temptations of an electrical iron or washing machine are strong, my first appliance purchase will be a radio. My sister Rose owns one and it is truly wondrous. Voices from all over the world can be heard from radio stations in Macon and even Atlanta. I greatly anticipate learning more of the world's current events on the radio. But, Rose seems not interested in such and listens mostly to the fanciful melodramas broadcast in the middle of the day, most particularly the various romantic adventures of a woman named Helen Trent. And there are the endless advertising messages for Oxydol Soap. I find these programs a waste of time. I am too busy to spend endless hours listening to such dribble. Mr. Roosevelt is doing a wonderful job restoring our country. I do believe that without him we would have never gotten electricity out here in the country.

September 2, 1939

I fear the tragedy of 1918 is repeating itself. The radio is filled with news reports of the German invasion of Poland. Will the Europeans never cease their endless squabbles and wars? Mr. Hitler seems a particularly treacherous sort. Was it not just a few months ago he signed a treaty that promised peace? Mr. Roosevelt flatly says our country will not get involved in the war. But Mr. Wilson promised the same. I am fearful for my gentle middle son Julian. Richard is only 10 and Robert is sickly. But Julian graduates high school next year. Should Mr. Roosevelt get us in this war Julian will most certainly be recruited should the wicked draft return. My heart aches at the thought. Perhaps the war will end. The victor would be of little interest to me if the slaughter ends. Perhaps Mr. Roosevelt will keep his word if the war does not end. I pray we will not get involved but fearfully certain we will.

December 11, 1941

The world is completely aflame again with war. Last Sunday the Japanese attacked our Navy in the Hawaiian Islands and Mr. Roosevelt declared war. Today the Germans and Italians declared war on our country. The news reporters on radio say this will be the second worldwide war. Julian has moved to Macon and has a good job with an automobile parts company. He is happy and very independent but remains a very loyal and helpful son. He visits at least once a month to check on his mama and brothers and sends money to help us out. He's a righteous young man and is escorting a very fine young lady. Oh, his future is so bright but now this terrible war looms ahead. I have not seen him since the war started nor talked to him of his attitude towards it. I fear he will want to join the Army or the Navy before the draft confiscates him. He will talk to me before he decides and what will I say to him? I read millions of young men are flocking to the recruiting stations. He will want to fight for his country. Do I plead that he not be patriotic? Do I appeal to his emotions and beg he take care of his aging mama? Does it matter anyway? Will not the draft grab him from my arms in any case? I care not to think about it further.

April 9, 1942

I have made a very difficult decision but it necessary. Julian is off in Army Training and only Richard remains at home. With the loss of Julian's financial assistance I am forced to seek employment. I will be working in Macon at a factory that makes shells for the Army. The wages are very good. I will stay at my sister Eloise's house and will be able to save a lot of money. But, oh how I hate leaving my home and Richard. My shift is from 6:00 A.M. until 2:00 P.M. and I will ride the bus back to my home each Friday and return every Sunday. My sister Pearl will care well for Richard during the week but I feel guilty leaving my youngest. He will grow up so quickly and I will miss seeing him. I hate this war. It has taken Julian away to the Army and me away to a factory just so I can provide. It seems everyone's lives are terribly askew. Husbands, fathers and sons are off in the war. Simple women are forced into change just to make do. The world is upside down with no prospects of righting itself.

January 15, 1943

A batch of letters from Julian awaited me today when I came home. Hooray! He is well! I last received a letter from him when he departed his training camp at Fort Jackson in South Carolina. He did not know (or could not tell) where he was going but my fears and suspicions were correct. The American Army invaded North Africa in November. His letters are dated in November and the Army censored any mentions of where he was, but I know my Julian is there. The letters were full of funny stories. He wrote nothing of fighting and death. He does not want his mama to fret I am sure. He has been promoted to something called Buck Sergeant. I am not surprised!!! He is smart and a good leader. My Julian may well be a general some day. Just imagine that. I will read his letters many times over in fear I may have missed something. And

I will keep reading them until the next letters arrive. He has not received any of my letters yet but should soon and he will laugh at the stories of his mischievous little brother. He would never tell me but he will be bored at my endless words of all his aunts and uncles. I pray for my Julian's safety every day and every night. May God spare him harm and end this war.

September 4, 1943

My son Julian is clever young man! Last July I read that the Army invaded Sicily and I just knew he was there. His letter speaks of a smoking mountain on a large island. It made it past the censors and I am flattered he thought his aged mama was smart enough to understand the clue. I went to the library and looked at an Atlas. Eureka! Even this old woman from the country figured out he was referring to Mount Aetna. I think he will include more clues of his location in future letters. Perhaps Mount Vesuvius or the Coliseum when he gets to Rome. It is difficult to find anything positive about the war, but Julian gets to see famous things in faraway places. That is little consolation but it is what I choose to think about. I have never left the state of Georgia but my son has been in Morocco and Tunisia and Sicily and probably going to Italy. He must survive to tell me of the sights and experiences. I pray for the day he returns home.

June 5, 1944

I have not slept for two days and sit and gaze at the few things I have of Julian. I have exhausted my emotions. I can cry no more. The Good Lord did not intend parents to outlive their children. It is not a natural thing. War is not a natural thing. The telegram is stained from my tears. I can not bear to see the photograph of Julian in his Army uniform. The Army and the war have taken him from me. He was only twenty years old. His little brother Richard is grief stricken and I can do nothing to comfort him. His older brother Robert is overwhelmed with guilt but it is not his fault he is sickly and the Army would not accept him. Thank God Richard and Robert will not be going to war. My heart is broken beyond repair. I am numb. Perhaps it is God's way to help me survive. I can not accept Julian's death. The Lord works in mysterious ways but His ways seem too cruel for understanding. I have faith and I believe but the senseless death of my son makes me question His will. I am sorry but I do not understand and I never will. May the Lord take care of Julian and give him an eternal home free of war and death. Amen.

September 3, 1945

Yesterday the Japanese signed the surrender and the war is finally over. Since Julian was killed I have kept up with the war's progress, praying everyday it would end soon and spare other mothers the grief I can not remove from my heart. Richard graduates high school next spring and will be off to seek his fortune. He has no interest in remaining on the farm or living out in the country. I suppose he will move to Macon or Atlanta. I quit my job at the shell factory after Julian died. What will I do when Richard leaves? Robert and his wife share the house with me but he has

business interests in Milledgeville and will move there soon I think. Will canning pear preserves, tending the garden and waiting and hoping Robert and Richard (and my grandchildren should I ever have any) visit occasionally be how I spend the rest of my life?? I again ask, what shall I do with myself? Perhaps I could return to nursing but so much has changed. I have raised my children with love and affection and provided as best I could, but they will all be gone. I am a poor confused creature searching for the reason for my continued existence.

October 15, 1946

Today I received a kindly reply to my inquiry to Mister Bentley who is the editor of the Macon Telegraph. I had sent along stories and observations I had written in hopes of possibly writing in the paper. He wrote that I have a keen eye and unique insights into various topics but my writing skills were insufficient at present. With that I can not disagree. He offered hope and suggested I make efforts to improve my grammar and punctuation and style. I will indeed do that. I have promised myself to read books and articles of all types in great number. And there is a women's business school in Macon where I can take classes to help me improve my writing. I will correspond with the school forthwith and inquire about the classes and their cost. If the school will accept me I can live with Eloise again should her husband not object. I am very excited at the prospects. Perhaps I will fall on my face and find I am incapable of writing in an entertaining manner. But the challenge adds vigor to my life and a reason to live it.

June 5, 1947

Well, miracles of miracles! The old woman from the country (me) graduated at the top of the class. I do believe the teachers and other students, all much younger than I, were quite surprised. And, in my heart of hearts, I am also surprised. I now know where to effortlessly place commas (most of the time) and not to dangle my participles.

I am busily reading fiction and non-fiction books by the score, hopefully picking up a point or two from those more talented than myself. And, I write; oh, how I write. It is amazing the number of things I can write about for practice. Can an article about the hog butchering in the winter attract and entertain readers? I don't know, but we'll see. I will submit it, along with a few others, to Mr. Bentley at the Telegraph in a few months.

If he doesn't like my writing, oh well. Someone eventually will. I'm off to the library.

August 9, 1947

I'm a grandmother... finally. Robert's wife, Suzanne, delivered a bouncing seven pound eight ounce baby boy at 3:47 A.M. this morning. I was both thrilled and saddened when they named the baby Julian in honor of his uncle. It was a very

thoughtful and kind thing to do, but rekindled the hurt in my soul of my Julian's death.

I suppose having a grandchild marks a significant point in one's life. I'll admit it is a blinding flash of mortality; a woman can't be both a grandmother and a spring chicken. But, I don't feel any older than I did yesterday, in fact, maybe just the opposite. Nothing brings more cheer than little children underfoot, playing, crying and turning again cheerful almost instantly.

Little Julian is a blessing; I will see to it he is dreadfully spoiled.

February 17, 1948

Mr. Bentley from the Telegraph called today. My goodness, when was it I first wrote him; over a year and a half ago? At any rate, he wants me to write a monthly column on a trial basis, the topical area is growing up in middle Georgia during the first half of the century. If I say so myself, I believe I'm most capable of doing that quite well.

Now, of course, Mr. Bentley may have made the offer for another reason...just to hire me so I won't continue to bombard him with my writings. The poor man likely dreads the approach of the mailman delivering yet another batch of my musings. Isn't that funny? I can hear him now. "Maybe if I let this crazy woman write an article or two she'll get it out of her system and leave me alone?!"

Whatever works! Perhaps a description of the disembowelment of hogs should not be my premiere article?!?!?

August 28, 1949

God, with man's help, works in wondrous ways. Richard and his wife Jill called to announce her pregnancy. A blessed event in many ways, not the least being the pregnancy will make Richard ineligible for the draft. What a stupid war in Korea... a war they refuse to call a war. I suppose the dead soldiers will be less dead if not killed in an official war. Yet a third president, this time Truman, gins up votes for himself vowing not to go to war. But the folly repeats itself. Tens of thousands more widows, fatherless children; sisters without brothers, wives without husbands.

But that's enough on world events... 'God give me strength to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.'

If Richard's child is a boy, his name will be Leo. If it's a girl, I'm lobbying for Jacqueline, my sister who died in childbirth. But, I'm just the granny; I suppose I do have votes, but not the majority.

April 10, 1954

Who would have thought it? My weekly column in the Telegraph has been picked by papers in Savannah, Albany, Montgomery and Greenville. Watch out Walter Winchell! I'm closing in fast. Mr. Bentley has given me a little more leeway in deciding the column's topics. A lot of old folks fondly reminisce about the old days in the country, but new and interesting things are happening all over the world. I love writing about my youth, but present events require more than a little discussion.

Mr. Bentley wisely counsels I should write on topics with which I am familiar. But, after much conversation I convinced him my breadth of wisdom is much broader than knowing how to grow butter beans and milk a cow. Hooray for me! I intend to wade slowly into the deep end of the intellectual pool, but this old woman surprised Mr. Bentley before; she can do it again!

January 19, 1959

Shall I utilize the ciphering skills learned so many years ago? Before last week's column, forty-seven papers carried my column. After the column, seven dropped me...but seventeen picked me up. Let's see, $47-7+17=57$. Guess it worked out okay after all!

Mr. Bentley cautioned me about writing of the changing race relations in the South. He correctly projected a whirlwind of agreement and disagreement; some readers would fuss and fume at my audacity, others would agree with me in acknowledging the need for change of old ways and attitudes.

I do not consider myself a social crusader; there are many far more informed and experienced to carry the flag of integration. But, right is right and wrong is wrong. People of all persuasions have their share of the mean and ignorant. They also have the kind, reasonable and wise. My column was to appeal to the basic goodness and fairness in people of all colors. And it did. Those who condemn me wish that I appeal to hate and ignorance. That, I will not do.

Oh, ten of the seventeen new papers picking up my column are in Yankee states. Ain't that something??

November 27, 1963

My dear son Robert, so frail and sickly his whole life, passed away last Friday...the same day President Kennedy was killed. I mourn for the president's family and the country, but though not president, Robert contributed in ways common men do. He was honest and cared for his family. He worked harder than his tired body could tolerate. He never complained of his frailties, overcoming many with effort others will never know.

As a mother losing her second child, I retreat into both pleasant and tragic memories. Though often ill, dear Robert worked like a horse when Leo died; he knew

he was the new man of the house. He comforted me as no one else could; he was there for me when Julian was killed.

Dear sweet Robert was a sturdy lamppost, solid, never wavering, always there when I desperately needed someone to lean on. Now he is dead, another pillar of support knocked out from under me. The feeling is all too familiar...Leo, my Daddy, Julian and now Robert.

I've not prayed recently. My modest writing success has perhaps dimmed how dependent I am on my loved ones and God. Only Richard, Jill and little Leo remain. A full third of my siblings are dead or dying.

Dear God, please watch over Leo, Daddy, Julian and Robert. Provide them comfort and peace. Protect Richard, his family and my brothers and sisters. And, God, forgive me if I have doubted. Amen.

June 4, 1967

I did it! It's done, over, complete. I approved the novel's final proof and sent it to the publisher this morning. Now we'll see how many poor unsuspecting souls can be lured into reading a hundred-fifty-thousand words about a large family on a Georgia farm in 1910. My, my, I hope there are millions of them.

The day was likewise successful in another regard. (NOTE: this is a diary, a place to express private thoughts, feelings and guilt when appropriate...right? Here's a little, very little, guilt.)

Today, I selfishly and without hesitation exercised the power of my notoriety in the community. I feel both happiness and guilt in my success, but am quite effortlessly rationalizing away the guilt. I dropped by the Draft Board today and spoke with the Chairwoman, Miss Wiggly; I met her a few times over the years, and she was thrilled to learn she was a best friend of one of the town's few published authors.

My grandson Bobby drew a high number in the draft lottery; without intervention he would soon be headed to the jungles in Vietnam to fight in the fourth dreadful war of my lifetime. I'll not get into the details in order to protect both the guilty (me) and innocent (Miss Wiggly, to a point,) but, Bobby's not going to Vietnam. I only wish I might work the same illicit magic on behalf of every mother and grandmother.

July 27, 1969

In this week's column I wrote about change and how to cope. As the author, readers assume I know what I'm talking about; boy, did I fool them!

Like most people on the globe, I sat mesmerized last week watching the first landing on the moon. Though I've witnessed the onset of automobiles, electricity, telephones, radio, television, jet airplanes and an assortment of other miraculous gadgets and gizmos, the change during my lifetime became starkly obvious. Has any

generation of mankind ever seen, benefitted from or been intimidated by such change? I don't think so.

I must admit I'm overwhelmed. I've tried to take life's inevitable evolution in my stride; there's really no other option if sound mental health is of interest. But, new gadgets and gizmos are the least of it; cultural, social and lifestyle revolution engulf us, and I'm not handling it very well.

This old woman rambles...perhaps a column supporting a ban on tie-dyed tee shirts and bell-bottom blue jeans would be in order?!

December 9, 1979

I had a little health scare last night. Maybe it was the excitement of learning my fourth novel is atop the New York Times Best Seller fiction list (Brag! Brag!) Perhaps it was the overly abundant serving of lasagna, but no such good fortune. The doctor diagnosed a minor heart palpitation, whatever that means.

So here I am in the hospital scribbling away. It occurred to me I have not been in a hospital (except for visitations) since I was the head nurse at the Gordon clinic. My God, that was sixty years ago. Not bad! Even in those ancient days more people got sick in a hospital than were healed. Nothing much good comes from taking up residence in a building full of sick people. I suppose my 'hospital-less' streak has ended, but I'm anxious to start another.

I'll listen to whatever the doctor tells me, but don't foresee funereal chrysanthemum arrangements anytime in the near future. He'll probably harangue me about fried food and little or no exercise. But, My God, I'm almost eighty years old. I can't be doing too many shockingly unhealthy things to myself.

November 10, 1989

Not a good day for this old woman, but worse for the Communists.

My four years of forced semi-retirement just became imposed complete retirement...sans the semi. Though no one has yet to adequately explain just what stress is brought on the heart by sitting in a comfortable chair in front of a computer keyboard, I have been mandatorily banished to inactivity. The doctor and Richard agree; it was a vote of two to nothing. I was not allowed a ballot.

Much to my overzealous custodians' dismay, I have decided to move back to the Starks' country home. The current owner, a second cousin, graciously agreed to rent several rooms in an appendage of the old house. Richard reluctantly agreed knowing if he denied my wishes I would forever haunt him after my death...which, based on his hovering and apparent angst, surely must be only minutes away.

But, I won't be kept away from my word processor. I am actively hatching schemes to continue my writing; fanciful pen names (I like Betsy Ross, or maybe

Susan B. Anthony) or the ubiquitous Ms. Anonymous should serve me well. Authoring scathing critiques in letters to editors should sustain my will to live a few more weeks.

And, by the way, the Berlin Wall fell today. A final vestige of oppression with roots in World War II is no more. My Julian would be sixty-six years old had he lived.

Christmas Eve, 1998

My writing is now limited to these words in this diary. I see barely well enough to scribble. The arthritis gnarls my fingers, and typing is all but impossible. I cannot read; my vision impairments overwhelm the ophthalmologist's skill and science. My lifelong quest for knowledge is nearing its end. I listen to the television but cannot see it; the jabbering I hear leaves me knowing less than before turning it on. How far journalistic competence and ethics have deteriorated! I do suppose they write and broadcast what their readers and viewers expect and desire.

The president dallies with an intern and is impeached. He sets a deplorable example for the country that all too many chose to emulate. Today's politicians are no less scandalous than those who came before, but seem far more capable of getting away with it.

Oh, why do I fret so about changing times, changing mores, changing everything? I have outlived my husband by sixty-four years. Two of my sons are dead, and Richard lies dying. And, how odd...I am the oldest of the lot, but all my siblings are dead too.

These thoughts exhaust me and I must rest. All I do is rest. How boring. I can't read and can barely write. Almost all I love are long gone. Perhaps it's time for me to go too. If that's God's will, I am ready. I do so miss my Daddy, Mama, Julian, Robert and Leo.

The personal life deeply lived always expands into truths beyond itself.

Anais Nin

[The Eternal City](#)

By [Esma Race](#)

Illustration by [Veronica Castle](#)



I walked slowly down the narrow street, past the pavement cafes and inviting souvenir shops, all displaying similar items. The street sloped very gently to the right, and was bustling with both locals and tourists, all going about their own business.

I had not been here for fifty years. Then, I was the happiest girl in the world. It was the last day of my honeymoon, and I was married to the man of my dreams. That day, here in Rome, at the spectacular Trevi Fountain, all my dreams and hopes for the future came crashing down. I was to return to the UK a widow, sitting next to an empty seat on the plane.

Now I had returned to keep a promise made to my husband just moments before he had died.

Stephen was my childhood sweetheart, my soul mate. We loved each other so much. Each detail of our wedding and honeymoon had been carefully planned, and everything had been perfect. A day to remember forever, that was what all our family and friends had told us after the ceremony, which was held in the village church of St. Mary's in Bracken Lea. We had put a deposit on a lovely cottage, and could not wait to move in to our very first home.

Everything was going so well, and I had no premonition of disaster whatsoever. Stephen and I had been mesmerised by glorious Rome. For two whole weeks we had explored the wonderful city, every square, cathedral and fountain, each reminder of times gone by. The huge proportions of the Coliseum, St. Peter's Basilica within the Vatican City, which also housed the Sistine Chapel. The Roman Forum, the Spanish Steps, the Pantheon: my favourite, if it was at all possible to have a favourite, was the Castel Sant'Angelo or Castle of Angels. Rome, to me, was neither Christian nor Pagan, but an intriguing mixture of both.

Stephen's favourite was the Trevi Fountain, which was why, on the last tragic day of our honeymoon, he had wanted to return there for a second visit.

"We must throw in a coin each, Gina," he insisted. "If we do, we are sure to return one day". He smiled at me: he looked so handsome. He was wearing blue jeans, a white t-shirt and trainers. My heart swelled with pride as I smiled back at him.

"I'll go first," I said, as we stood together at the edge of the fountain.

"No, we'll do it together," laughed Stephen. "Are you ready? Then, after three: one, two, three!"

I watched the two coins spin through the air towards the water. As they passed through the spray, the Italian sunshine caught them, causing them to sparkle with colours.

Stephen turned towards me, his face alight with pleasure. "Promise me," he said, "Promise me that we will return to this very spot again." He was holding both my hands tightly. I laughed back at him.

"I, Gina Ellis, do solemnly promise that I will stand here again with you."

As I finished my little speech, I saw a change come over Stephen's face, and even though I tried to hold on to him, he fell down to the cold marble beneath our feet.

"Dead before he hit the ground," the Doctor told me. "There was nothing anybody could have done."

So I took Stephen's body back to the village church, and we laid him to rest just a month after our wedding day. I had a replica of my wedding bouquet made, and placed it on his coffin.

"Time will heal," they all said; but of course it doesn't. I went back to living with my parents, gave backword on the cottage, and returned to work.

After almost two years of living in a kind of dazed limbo, I moved to York. I changed career, chopped off my long hair, and told my new colleagues that I liked to be called Georgie. I firmly left Gina Ellis behind me and went back to my maiden name of Moore. I knew that although I would never forget, I had to move on; so I stowed the precious memories of my marriage, and Stephen, deep in my heart, where for the two of us time had stopped and would never move on.

Did I marry again? Well, of course I did. I was a young woman, I wanted children and a home of my own.

Derek was lovely, kind and dependable. We were very happy for almost fifty years, but now he has passed away, and my two children are independent and living their own lives.

So here I am, in Rome again, an old lady now, determined to keep a promise made long ago at the edge of a magnificent fountain. I know it won't have changed. Rome is not called the Eternal City for nothing. The Italians don't demolish masterpieces to build blocks of flats.

Stephen had once said that everyone should visit Rome at some time in their lives. He had, and never returned home, at least not alive. Now that I was here, I was thinking about Stephen, and our brief time together, more and more. Last night I had a vivid dream: in it he sat on the edge of my bed and said to me that he was so glad that I had arrived back in Rome, but could not understand why I was not staying in the same hotel where we had stayed together. I reached out in my dream to touch him, but he vanished and I woke up with a start.

What a bizarre dream, I thought. Why would he talk about hotels? My imagination was running away with me: maybe I had not been very wise to come

back, but I was here now, so I had no choice but to carry on. Today I would visit the Trevi Fountain again and keep my promise.

Even though it was not the first time I had seen the Trevi Fountain, as I stepped out of the narrow shaded street and into the square, I was as awestruck as before by the sheer grandiose splendour of it.

The Fontana di Trevi, to give it its Italian name, is 26.3 metres high and every day spills 80,000 cubic metres of water. The statue in the centre is of "Ocean", which is 5.8 metres high. It has to be seen to be believed, shining white marble and the sound and sight of shimmering water.

I moved slowly forwards, making my way towards the edge of the basin of water, where fifty years ago my husband of just two weeks had looked into my eyes, smiled his last smile, and taken his last breath. He had been 22 years old.

I stood quietly, peering into the gently moving, gleaming water, and remembered. When I looked up, I had a sense of unreality and felt very disorientated.

Then I saw him, making his way towards me through the crowd of tourists.

Time stood still then, and I was afraid to take my eyes off him in case I lost sight of him forever.

"Stephen," I called, and lifted my arm to wave, but lowered it again in despair. *Of course, he would not know me now*, was the thought going through my bemused head. I have grown old, whilst he has remained the same.

The next moment, he was beside me, holding me close, kissing my hair, and cheeks, where tears were flowing.

"Don't cry, dearest Gina," he whispered. "We are together again now. I have been here waiting for you."

I looked up at him. "All this time ..." I said.

"There is no time but our time," was his reply.

The End

[Apartment 5B](#) [Barbara Weitzner](#)

Quinn was my best friend. We had a special bond, a relationship that grew as each of us grew. We lived in an apartment house in Brooklyn. My family occupied an apartment on the first floor and Quinn's mother and father lived on the fifth floor, apartment 5B, and although I had to climb five flights of steps, it never stopped me from spending as much time with Quinn as possible.

Our birthdays were a few weeks apart, both Virgos born in September, both only children. Quinn was my ideal and ever since I could remember, I'd wanted to be as much like her as possible. Quinn was tall and slim, with a mop of curly red hair and elfin features. By the unlucky happenstance of genes, I was doomed to be short and fat with dark, stringy hair, thin lips and a large nose, like my dad's.

My parents were in their mid-forties when I was born. They'd never expected to have a child.

I was a tot when my mom was in some sort of accident never explained to me and she'd been left brain damaged. She could not, without assistance, eat, dress, or use the toilet. I couldn't understand Mom's confused and meaningless sentences, her

silences; her inability to communicate with me. She'd sit in her chair, muu-muu'ed and unapproachable. I constantly watched for something to soften in her face. "Here I am, Mommy, love me!" But my mom couldn't love me the way other moms loved their kids. I prayed for her to get well but God did not seem to hear me. Although Dad took no interest in my activities, never wanted to hear about how I got the scab on my knee or how well I did on my spelling test, the resentment I felt was for my mother.

Our doctor suggested she be put in a nursing home, but my dad refused. He hired Miss Dorothy, a retired nurse, who smelled lightly from talcum powder, to look after Mom. On Miss Dorothy's first day on the job she made it clear that "children were to be seen but not heard," her tone efficient and without warmth. Miss Dorothy would glower at me if I were thirsty and running the water in the kitchen sink too long, or making too much noise practicing my times tables. It was impossible to please her.

I sat on the floor in front of our television and watched families laugh. Wondered what it was like to hear Mom laugh. Wished we could have a conversation like kids and their moms did on the TV shows I was allowed to watch. I kneeled by the side of my bed and asked God why was I born to this household. Once, after dinner, I yanked her arm, screamed, "talk to me Mommy!" wanting her to admire my paper doll I had dressed. Dad lost his temper and spanked me. "You don't yell at your mom like that ever!"

My dad was a postal clerk. After work, he'd do the shopping and take care of whatever errands had to be made, and return home slump-shouldered, back hurting, open a can of beer, and prepare dinner. He always served Mom first. Then we'd eat without talking, wash and dry the dishes, and he'd help my mom to bed and collapse in his easy chair, with no time for a needy child.

I tried not to hate my mom, but her pallid, silent face tugged at me—a part of me wanted to feel sorry for her but another part - a bigger part - couldn't begin to forgive her for not being normal and loving like other moms.

I grew up knowing nothing about my parents' earlier years. Sometimes I'd take the photo album from the shelf and leaf through pictures of them taken before I was born. If I asked Dad a question about their families he'd answer with a tired, impatient, "Why do you want to know?"

"It's just ... I want to know," I'd answered feebly.

My father, the unapproachable fortress he'd always been, never asked me any questions. Whenever he spoke to me he had a specific purpose in mind; "clear the table, take your toys into your room, turn off your lamp and go to sleep."

I overheard him tell Miss Dorothy that I had been in the car the time of the accident. I'd thought a lot about it but this is what I remembered: brakes screeching, a loud bang and sirens, the whole world spinning upside down, a spooky quiet and then darkness. I wondered if I were to blame for the accident. Had I taken my mom's attention away from the road? The more I tried to remember, the more jumbled my memories got. Was this the reason Dad never showed me any affection or was it because he suffered severe back pain, and took pills that never helped? There were many questions I wanted to ask, but fear stopped me from asking them.

Each afternoon, after school, I escaped to apartment 5B, where unlike my home, I felt welcome, imagined myself living there permanently as I played with Quinn's stuffed animals, Barbies, board games.

Quinn's father worked the night shift—something to do with fresh produce — I never asked Quinn what that meant—and was home during the day. I thought him the nicest man I'd ever known. Quinn's mother worked days as a cashier in the neighborhood bank. I was usually sent home when she returned. Although I never

brought Quinn or anyone else into our apartment - asking her to my house was out of the question - I spent Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas in apartment 5B. I'd watch Quinn open her presents and there was always something for me. On Valentine's Day we each received a tiny red velvet box of Whitman's chocolates. My heart filled with delight. Quinn's family liked me.

As little tots, Quinn's dad cuddled us. He read to us all the Dr Seuss books. We thought them funny. He read *The Little Engine That Could*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Heidi*, and *The Secret Garden* to us, one huge arm around each of our shoulders, and as we grew, pointed out spelling mistakes or praised us for error-free homework. With time, his cuddling became touching me in places I knew were private, yet I was happy, relishing his attention. My dad never touched me.

I'd told Quinn a little bit about my mom, dad, and Miss Dorothy. She listened, tried to cheer me up. She was always on my side.

In apartment 5B we were not allowed to lock doors, and Quinn's father had a habit of walking into the bathroom without knocking and asking me questions; "Did I know where the royal blue crayon was? Would I like another Fig Newton?"

I especially liked the days the weather was nice and he'd take us to the playground. We'd step over the lines in the sidewalk, each of us lengthening our strides trying to match his pace and chant: *Left. Left. Left my wife and forty-eight kids. Right. Right. Right in the middle of the kitchen floor. Left...*

As we grew, Quinn's father's caresses increased in frequency and intensity, his hands wandering over my tiny breasts, I wondered if this kind of stuff happened to all kids. The scarier part was thinking it was only happening to me. That it was my fault—that I was too dumb to object. *This is not right...No, I'm sure it's OK. Quinn's father just likes me. It doesn't matter. It does... Stop it. Stop it. Stop those thoughts.* So I tried not to think too much about it.

One day Quinn's father came into the bathroom as I was peeing, legs dangling over the toilet bowl, my panties down around my ankles. He unrolled a length of toilet tissue and to my discomfort and embarrassment gently patted my vagina dry.

Some years later, while helping me off with my sweater (wet from jumping in the rain puddles after getting off the school bus), he pinched my nipple. As time passed, he stood too close to me, noting the ways in which my body had begun to change and found opportunities to press me against his chest, and I began to notice something hard and insistent in his pants poke at me when Quinn was out of the room. I wondered if Quinn had noticed. Of course she hadn't. "What did you learn at school today, sweetie?" he'd ask, rubbing my chubby buttocks trying to convince my seven-year-old self he wasn't doing any real harm. Other times we played hide and seek, and no matter where I hid, Quinn's father always found me first, hands outstretched feeling for my body. Maybe I didn't like Quinn's father as much as I thought I did.

Once, when Quinn was in bed recovering from an upset tummy, Quinn and I both older, her father invited me to play Hearts with him, both of us sitting on the couch, my hands folded in my lap. He plumped a pillow behind my back and said, "Sit. Get comfortable," inched his body closer until his thighs were touching mine and dealt out the cards. I picked up my hand and noticed there were dirty pictures on the front—Men and women doing stuff. I felt a naughty tickling in the pit of my stomach I knew I should not be feeling. It felt good. And from what little I knew about sex, I knew this much: It felt wrong. I saw the funny way Quinn's father watched my face, my heart beginning to hammer. I tried to think of polite excuses to get up and leave. None of them worked.

Quinn's father reached over, slid his hand over my chest and down my belly and began to rub his finger on top of my jeans, along my vagina. I wriggled away.

"Doesn't that feel nice?" he asked.

"Touching me there is bad," I whispered, avoiding the question, afraid of incurring his displeasure and struggling to hold back my tears.

Quinn's father set his cards down, "Let's stop worrying about what's bad and what's not."

I inched my body away. I didn't know what to say but Quinn's father didn't seem to need me to comment. He offered me a Tootsie Pop. "Did I like red or chocolate?"

I chose red.

As I grew older, with nobody to confide in, I wished I knew how to put a stop to the touching. I no longer believed it was OK, but I didn't want to lose Quinn as my one and only true friend.

I wondered how Quinn would react if I told her. "*Quinn? If I tell you something terrible about your father, something you won't like, will you be mad at me?*" "*Silly goose, what could you possibly say that will make me mad at you?*" "*Oh, you never know, but....*"

One day, while Quinn was not in the room, I gathered up all of my twelve-year-old courage and said to him, "I need to tell you something."

"Sure. What?"

"Promise me you won't get mad."

"I promise I won't get mad."

"I don't understand why you like to touch me. I'm not pretty and I'm fat. But I don't like it when you touch me. I'm not your daughter. I don't belong to you. I don't want to jeopardize my precious afternoons with Quinn, so that's the reason why I've never brought this up." I thought that if my heart beat any louder he would hear it.

Quinn's father looks at me untroubled, expressionless. No excuses or words of apology.

"OK."

After that, Quinn's father changed in his behavior to me, my visits to Quinn passing without incident, Quinn's father avoiding me, disappearing into his room while she and I were together.

Our first year of high school, Quinn became a cheerleader and we both drifted into different crowds. We used to do everything together. And then we didn't. I longed for the fun and popularity Quinn seemed to have. To me it seemed unbearably unfair. And although our friendship had largely fallen away I still loved her. Weeks passed when we rarely saw each other, although we both strived to go to Hunter College.

The day arrived when I felt I no longer had a choice but to tell my dad, when I'd gone up to apartment 5B to tell Quinn I'd been accepted into the honors club, not remembering that Tuesdays Quinn stayed late for cheerleading practice. I pressed the doorbell, Quinn's father far from my mind. But Quinn's father answered the door, and before I could react, he grabbed me and pressed me against the wall, his hand jamming up under my T-shirt. I panicked, gasped, "Please don't! Please..." *Get away. Get away...* Freeing myself from the lock of his arms I spun out of his reach and groped for the door knob, panicking until I finally got it open. Hot tears streaming down my cheeks, my breath coming in rasping gasps, I fled down the five flights of stairs into our apartment. Ignoring Miss Dorothy and my mom, I flung myself shivering and shaking onto my bed, willing my heartbeat to slow.

When Dad came home, I waited until Miss Dorothy left, came out of my room, took a deep, shuddery breath and gathered up my courage to tell him what had happened.

The look on his face was a mixture of disbelief and anger.

“How could you make up such a vile, terrible lie? How could you impugn this good man’s character? He’s been there for you through the years while I was working, fed you milk and cookies and helped you with your homework. You should be thankful to him. He’s a saint.”

“He’s not, he’s a criminal,” I blurted out.

He waved a hand, his eyes all slitty. “Oh you stupid, miserable, child, you’re always looking for attention. Trust you to be dramatic. Who do you think you are, Miss America?”

We heard my mother begin to snuffle and hum. “You’re giving your mother undue stress!”

I stared at him in astonishment. Maybe I hadn’t explained it properly. Maybe he needed to be fifteen-years-old with a cold, impossible-to-please father. I raised my voice loud enough for the tenants to hear me. “I thought you’d understand. I thought you’d care. I shouldn’t have told you. You don’t care.”

“I do care. I care that my daughter is a dangerous liar. Wash your hands and set the table.”

A bitterness and desolation swept over me that was far more powerful than pain.

I never went back up to apartment 5B, nor did Quinn ask me for any explanation. We have never spoken since. Whenever I passed her in the hall, I gave her a little wave, but she gave me the silent treatment—I can only guess what her father had told her.

Quinn was not accepted into Hunter College. I majored in English Literature and in my dorm decided I would put my story down on paper because I knew this crime exists out there, and for all the children in need of rescue. I opened my computer to Microsoft word, stared at the empty screen. How do I go about explaining all of this? Then I began to type. I wrote all of it.

I haven’t given Quinn’s father a name because he could be any man.

IN MEMORY OF Leah Ritzer

[Diablo Blanco](#) [Gary Winstead](#)

Larry and Cutter, the farriers and longtime friends, had just finished the second of a dozen head they had planned to work their magic on that fateful Saturday morning. The mist of the coastal marine layer was slowly burning off, exposing a typical, glorious, California summer day. The two friends had arrived at dawn to beat the crowds and heat of summer in the land of perpetual sunshine and now the ever-present hippies. It was 1972 and Orange County, California was still open and pristine, not yet ruined by the commercial sprawl that was destined to happen. Horses were still plentiful and the need for good shoers kept the pair very busy.

The early morning California mist had found them at the gates of the Juan Dejesus Ranch Stables, tucked strategically between the Pacific Ocean and the Five Freeway. After the attendant waved the duo through, they set up in their usual spot in

the designated shoers-only working area. The waves of the gentle Pacific Ocean added peaceful background to an uneventful, yet destined to be exciting morning. The occasional seagull, having caught an onshore breeze, would hover over Cutter or Larry as a spectral would watch over a grave. Ranch dogs would hungrily munch the trimmings from the horses' feet as the duo worked their magic, both farriers and dogs anticipating a big payday.

The Dejesus ranch was just that, a large functioning cattle ranch that had once been the center of Orange County living for over a century. The managers saw the value in establishing a working relationship with the local town's folk as civilization gobbled up the land around the ranch, so a partnership had been formed. The city ran the stables on land unusable for livestock or commercial flora, donated by Juan Dejesus.

The stable had flourished in the white-bread community of Irvine and with the horses came jobs, one of which was keeping owners' horses shod. The quiet of the morning would soon be breached by the arrival of a pleasant looking lady in a brand new two horse rig equipped with the best money could buy.

Larry and Cutter were traditionalists in the farrier community. They had a hand cranked forge, capable of turning cold steel into white hot lava when it was necessary to weld a bar shoe. Both took pride in the fact they were the last of a breed that still made their own shoes. Each, in turn would place copious amounts of bituminous coal on the center rack of their homemade forge, light newspaper under the stack, and start cranking until the flame showed a deep yellow red.

Prudence and economics allowed them to buy bar stock from the local racing plate company; manufacturer of racing plates for the track. The stock was precut to length, saving them the arduous task of cutting the ten foot long stock into usable bars. When a shoe was needed they would heat up the bar stock, turn it and punch the holes, finally cutting it to fit the horse's foot, not the other way as some shoers were known to do. Today's Farriers use pre-made shoes mostly from Japan and have replaced the bituminous coal in favor of a propane stove, eliminating at least thirty minutes from the shoeing time.

Larry was hand cranking the forge with black smoke billowing skyward as the shiny new truck and trailer pulled to a stop a few feet away. The lady that stepped out reeked of money and privilege and Cutter just knew the day was not going to end well.

She extended a jewel encrusted right hand, grabbed Cutter's, calloused and damp with sweat, with a demeanor that said *I am not accustomed to being told no.*

"You boys have a moment to help me," this was a statement not a question.

"How can we help you, Ma'am?" Larry asked

"My daughter's horse threw a front shoe and we are have a jumping competition at Lake Forrest this morning. I was hoping you had time to put it on for me."

Not suspecting anything untoward, Larry nodded and told the lady to bring the horse over to the shoeing area. Thinking back they both should have known better.

The Mrs. unloaded a white skinned, pink eyed, muscular gelding standing about sixteen and a half hands. The shoers were young, the morning quiet, and the lady handsome in an enticing sort of way, so they both missed the signs. The first tip should have been why the lady would stop here to have a shoe replaced when there would be an on-call farrier at the horse show she was going to attend. Another was the pink eyes of the horse. Normally, pink eyes mean trouble from a cowboy's perspective and today would be no different.

Mrs. Elegant stood by holding the lead rope as Larry walked up, shoeing box in hand, and reached for the gelding's left front leg. It would prove to be fortuitous this was a front foot and not a back one this day. As Larry squeezed the sensory ligament running the length of the cannon bone the white gelding reared up on both hind feet and pawed the air.

A good shoer is always cautious around a new horse, and it was this caution that saved Larry from harm. As the horse reared, Larry stepped to the side and out of the reach of the striking feet. The owner holding the lead let it slide to its full ten foot length and stepped aside as well, as if knowing what was coming.

"Anything you want to tell us about your horse, Lady?" Larry said, jaw tight with repressed anger.

"Well, he does tend to be just a little difficult to shoe sometimes."

Larry shook his head and reached in to grab the leg a second time. The albino horse reared and struck the air with an even more violent stoke as if to say, *touch me and die, mister.*

"If you want the shoe on this horse the price just went up. I know we quoted you four dollars but now it will cost you ten. Wanna go with it?"

Without a moment's hesitation; "Yes please," she said with a wry smile.

Both Cutter and Larry should have known better. In the past, a price that steep would have caused the owner to say *no thanks* and head off to find another sucker.

"Ok," Larry said with a shrug, and once again reached for the leg, with the same results.

"Would you mind if my partner holds your horse, mam?" Larry asked in his usual polite manner.

Cutter grabbed the lead rope and proceeded to thread it over the horse's nose, thus giving a better constraint on his head and hopefully a distraction from what was about to happen. With some horses, this simple trick would make them focus on the rope, not the person. No luck. When Larry grabbed, the white reared; a reprise of earlier.

"This calls for stronger methods," Cutter offered.

"Ma'am, do we have permission to use stronger methods to restrain your horse?"

The response was not at all predictable knowing what they did about horse owners in general, Cutter expected the lady to move on down the road and half hoped she would as well.

"Do whatever it takes, he is a very skilled jumper and an extremely expensive horse so I need him shod."

Larry grabbed a stud chain, a long leather lead rope with a twelve inch length of chain on the business end, from the bed of his truck. Once again the horse surprised them as he stood calmly while Larry thread the chain under the horse's upper lip. The stud chain approach can make the most troublesome of horses relax when used in a non-abusive manner, but again, did not work at all on the wild eyed albino. The seasoned cowboy gave a little tug to see the white's reaction and stepped aside.

It would be Cutters turn to go in harm's way. He squeezed the ligament and the gelding raised his left front as Cutter put it between his legs. Larry was applying just enough pressure to distract the horse as Cutter removed the shoe that had been pulled loose and bent in the trailer. As if on cue, once the shoe was pulled free, the big white horse pulled his leg and reared straight up, not stopping in midair, he threw himself over backwards and flailed the air with all four feet. Cutter had managed to step out of the way just as the powerful hoof shattered the air near Cutter's ear. Years of

experience had taught both Farriers to be wary around a horse like this, so when the white reared Cutter pulled himself off to the side.

The lady stood nonchalantly waiting near her truck as if she had expected this all along and was not disturbed by her animal's behavior. She was so relaxed she reached into the front seat of her truck, pulled out a thermos and poured herself a cup of coffee, tightened the top on the thermos and set it back in the truck. Larry, meanwhile, smiled a wicked smile at Cutter and both of them nodded as if to say, *yep let's go for it*. "How bad you want this beast's shoe on?" a frustrated Larry asked.

"Well, we just have to have it and the jumping competition starts in just over an hour: can you do it?"

"Oh, we can do it, but we will have to get tough if you want it done. You ok with that?"

"Please do whatever it takes." Again, that knowing, not so uncomfortable smile appeared on her face.

Larry and Cutter were able to slip a soft rope through the halter, into the D ring on the saddle and down to the unshod foot on what they now started to call "Ole Diablo." He stood calmly as Larry tied the soft cotton rope around the lower pastern and tugged the rope tight. Cutter lifted the leg and Larry managed to tie it off at a ninety degree angle using the saddle horn as the anchor.

This was not the easiest way to put on a shoe but it would work as long as Diablo would stand for it. Sure enough, as soon as Cutter tried to pare the foot with his crooked hoof knife, up and over went the white devil. Only this time one leg was tied and the other cutting the air.

Both shoers by now acknowledged the horse was crazy and a danger to both of them, but the macho image of the great American Cowboy had to be maintained so they pressured on. Every time the horse was stable, one or the other of the two would make a pass at the hoof, preparing it for setting the steel plate. And every time, as if pre-programmed, the horse went over backward.

It was now a contest between men and beast, and no beast was going to beat these two. The horse was sweating profusely, as were the two men, as the sun rose higher and a crowd gathered to watch the spectacle. After paring the sole, one stroke, and one quick pass at a time with the rasp, Diablo rearing over with each touch, the foot was finally ready and the old shoe straightened and ready to put back in place.

Shoers will tell you the most dangerous time is when driving the nail trying to anchor it to the foot. There is an instant where a razor sharp point is sticking out of the horse's hoof before it can be twisted off. Cutter has a two inch scar running down his inside thigh from a nail as a reminder to get that nail cut as quickly as possible. Three quick strikes with the hammer will seat the nail, then it is just a quick twist of the wrist to cut the nail and you are free. Six nails will hold the shoe successfully in place.

Nothing changed as the two fought the great white. Over and over the horse would go, as first Cutter then Larry nailed away. Once, Cutter failed to move quickly enough, and the scar is still there, making an extra life line for a palm reader to help determine his fate. The fearless cowboy grabbed a dirty rag from the coal pile and stepped up to finish twisting the nail. Finally the last nail was in place, finished, and the foot on the ground. It only took two men two hours to replace one shoe. That must have been an all-time record, thought Larry as he turned to the lady.

"That will be ten dollars ma'am and thank you for the fun."

"Would you guys be interested in doing my whole stable of horses? I pay top dollar to anyone with this kind of patience."

"Where do ya live Ma'am?" Cutter drawled.

“Palos Verdes Estates.”

Well, that explained it all. A woman of leisure with too much time had herself a play thing. The Estates have million dollar homes, perched atop bluffs over the Pacific Ocean, where horses are used as a play toy for bored housewives. The fact the lady lived there explained her behavior and attitude.

“No thank you,” Cutter said politely, “that is just too far to drive, not worth the effort.” The truth was, if they never saw this horse again it would be just fine with them.

“I might suggest someone who can help you with your horse though,” offered Larry. “We know a pet psychic might be able to communicate with “Ole Diablo” there and tell you what is wrong.” Larry had said this more as a joke than anything, poking fun at the rich lady, but was surprised when she jumped at the offer. They exchanged numbers and off she went.

Two weeks later Cutter got a phone call from the pet psychic and was filled in on all the details. The fancy lady, hair perfectly coiffed, put together a party full of neighbors and invited Shea the psychic out to do a reading. Shea spent several hours with the animals and ended the evening explaining to the lady how “Ole Diablo” was going to kill someone one of these days and should at the very least be put out to pasture.

Truth was this horse could really jump, and except for the shoeing problems was fairly easy to handle. So maybe they should just wait for some time to see how it works out. That was until several months later the big gelding trapped the rich lady’s daughter in the stall and tried to kill her. The girl was able to get away with just minor injuries but the horse destroyed the pen he was in. The next day they called the vet and had Diablo Blanco put down. Rich people do some odd things with money and this would be no exception. They had a necropsy performed and it turns out the horse had a brain tumor and was not responsible for his actions.

Fortunately for everyone concerned no one had ever been seriously hurt. Larry and Cutter never heard from the rich lady again, never made it to Palos Verdes and never ever forgot the crazy white horse that ruined an otherwise beautiful sunny day in Southern California.

The End

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## SECTION 3: END OF TIMES

### [The Waiting Room](#)

[Ray Daley](#)

I'd done all the calculations. I had the clock set up on the table. I'd also factored in the rotation of the Earth too. Most movie time travellers never do that.

H. G. Wells might have thought his shit didn't stink but he totally forgot that as time moves, so does space. Planets rotate and move in their orbits. Those machines would have been floating off into space with completely dead drivers before they ever travelled far in time.

The first trip wasn't going to be far, just a minute into the future. I'd even copied Emmett Brown's idea from *Back To the Future*. I had an identical digital clock around my neck, making me look like a cheap Flavor Flav knock-off.

I knew this was going to be a unique experience. Little did I know then exactly how unique it would turn out to be.

I set the timer and stood on my marker.

There was no machine to stand in, sit on, carry or even wear. The whole room was the time machine, moving me, a targeted event into a new time stream. The future.

By exactly one minute.

As the digital clock counted up to the sixty second point, the room ... well, the room did something.

Sorry it's such a vague description, I only ever did it once and it's not an experience I'd care to repeat.

I expected a slightly rough landing and had been standing with my knees slightly bent, thinking I'd have a bit of a drop to the floor. Not so. I landed with my feet firmly on the concrete.

*Concrete? That wasn't right.*

The floor of my room was wooden boards, I should have been standing on the big red X I'd painted onto them three days ago.

"Weerufum? Weersamashin?" The voice was male, speaking to me from somewhere I couldn't see. "Weerufum? Weersamashin?" he repeated.

I shrugged my shoulders in the general direction the voice was coming from: I had no clue what he was saying.

"Weerufum? Weersamashin?" he tried again.

"I don't understand what you're saying," I said.

"Where you from? Where's the machine?" he was quite clear that time.

"Okay, I got that. Where am I from? Difficult to answer that without knowing where *here* is. Where's the machine? I'm not sure which machine you mean?" I said.

"You understand? Good. What time are you from, what year?" he asked.

"Oh. I see. 2014. Why?" I asked.

"Not important right now. Where's the time machine?" he asked.

"There is no time machine, I'm afraid. The room was the machine. It stayed behind. Only I travelled in time. By about a minute. It looks like I miscalculated the landing though. Whereabouts on Earth is this? And may I ask, to whom am I speaking?" I asked.

"Can't tell you. Classified No names, can't have you forming any attachments." He wasn't particularly chatty, this mystery man.

"Oh, okay then. Somewhere Government or Military controlled then, judging by your response," I said.

"Step forward onto the plate," he said.

I could see the texture of the floor was slightly different a few feet in front of me. I walked onto it.

"Oh dear," the man said. "You really did screw up that landing. Not the location though. The time."

I started to feel a little nervous. "So it's not still 2014 then? I'm not a minute into my own future, am I?"

A light went on a few more feet in front of me, it was the outline of a door. "If you can see the portal, go through it," the male voice said.

I was cautious. "Not without knowing what it is or where it goes first."

"That's the Waiting Room. Go inside," he said.

"Is it safe inside?" I asked, still nervous at these strange surroundings I knew so little about.

"Safe enough. Go inside," he said.

I walked into the light. It was extremely bright and took a few moments to become accustomed to it. A few moments that included a heavy metal CLANG behind me. "What was that?"

"The portal being sealed. Had to shunt you. Can't keep the Capture Room occupied," the male voice said.

"Capture Room?" I asked.

"Captures all attempts at time travel. They're getting more and more frequent. It's too bad about your machine," he said.

"Too bad?" That didn't sound encouraging. "Why?"

"Normally we hold you for a period of questioning then release you back to your point of embarkation. We send you back in your own time machine. Unfortunately for you, there's no machine in this case," he said.

"So what happens now? What happens to me?" I asked.

"You wait. That's the Waiting Room. A room in which you wait," he said.

"And what am I waiting for?" I asked, almost afraid to know.

"One of two things. Thing one, for your time machine to arrive here. You said it was set to transmit exactly one minute into the future from your point of departure. Due to the classified nature of operations here I can't tell you the exact year but you've definitely missed your ride," he said.

"Oh. That's not good. You said there were two things though?" I asked.

"Yes, there are. Thing two, you might get lucky. We might capture a time traveller willing to give you a lift home. Be aware, most of these machines lack exact calibration so you may not get back to exactly where you started."

"And what are the chances of that? Someone giving me a lift, I mean?" I asked.

"Couldn't say. No-one ever arrived here before without their own time machine. This is a bit new for me too," he said.

"Do you capture many time machines?" I asked.

"Many? No. We capture them all. Every single one. No-one's made a time jump yet without being caught by us," he said.

"So what you're actually telling me is, no time traveller has ever arrived at their intended destination because of you bureaucratic idiots?" I asked.

There was an awkward pause. He was thinking. You could almost tell by the embarrassed silence.

"No. We send them back after we find out how they managed to time travel. We've got records of every type of time machine," he said.

"Except one," I replied.

That embarrassed silence again. "Yes. Except yours, obviously. You wouldn't like to move into the Interrogation Suite and tell us how it worked, would you?" he asked.

"No, I bloody well wouldn't! I wouldn't have bothered trying if I'd known about you lot," I said.

"No-one knows about us," he said.

"Not strictly true. You know about yourselves. You have to go home each day, knowing you've ruined time travel for some poor adventurous bastard," I said.

"Sadly, no. They wipe our minds at the end of each day. I couldn't tell you what I did yesterday," he said.

"So you won't remember me tomorrow?" I asked.

"No," he said.

"In which case I'd like to take this opportunity to say you're a WANKER!"

"Was that really necessary?" he asked.

"You don't need to get over it. You'll have forgotten it ever happened in a few hours," I said, unapologetically.

"I have feelings. I'm just a guy doing his job, at the end of the day," he said.

"Who ruins time travel and has his mind wiped so there's no associated guilt or remorse. That's a pretty shitty excuse for a job if you ask me," I said.

"It pays the bills. And I *didn't* ask you," he said, slightly forlornly.

"Is there some kind of store room, where you keep time machines whilst the owners are being interrogated?" I asked.

"There is. Why?" he asked.

"I don't suppose you could nip in there and see if there's a big blue rectangular box that says *Police Box* on it could you?" I asked.

"Doctor Who is fictional," he said.

"At least you've heard of him," I said.

"There's no DeLorean in there either. Nor is there an American phone box, or a hot tub. It's currently empty. You're our only guest right now," he said.

"You're expecting others though?" I asked.

"We always expect new arrivals. As I said before, there are more and more coming every day now. Time travel is becoming extremely commonplace," he said.

"How much will it cost to get you to ask the next arrival to give me a lift home?" I asked.

"I'm not sure you can afford it," he said.

"Try me," I said.

"An apology," he said.

"For what? I've done nothing," I said.

"Except call me a wanker," he said.

"Well remembered. I wholeheartedly and unreservedly apologise for my foul language, my bad manners and my rudeness. I'm sorry," I said. "Will that suffice?"

"Good enough. I'll ask whoever gets captured next," he said.

"Can I ask a question?" I said.

"Go ahead," he said.

"How long were you waiting from the last guy until my arrival?" I asked.

"Rounded down? About three million years," he said.

"*Three million years?* Are you all immortal in the future?" I asked.

"Cyborg. Living brain in mechanical body. Not quite immortal, just living a really long time," he said.

"Oh," I said. "So I might have a bit of a wait on my hands?" I asked.

"Yes. A little bit. It's why you're in the Waiting Room. You might want to get comfortable. It may be a while."

The End

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**[The Man Who Created Himself](#)**

By **[T W Embry](#)**

As I thrust my walking stick deep into the campfire to knock it down for the night, pops echoed off the surrounding trees. Glowing sparks were violently launched skyward, burning out before they hit the dry grass. Slowly at first, then in a crash of more sparks, the fire collapsed in on itself. I lay back against my pack and sleeping bag, watching, listening, and waiting for the nightly symphony of the swamp to begin.

*I was at my favorite camping spot deep inside the Everglades National park. The native people had been camping here for hundreds of years before the white man came. Campfires are forbidden this time of year but I didn't care.*

The rain-starved saw grass was a huge tinderbox, beckoning for an afternoon lightning strike or a stray camp fire; the wet season had not yet begun. Wildfires had always been a natural part of the Everglades ecology and each year a seasonal threat to the city of New Miami.

*I came here often to rid myself of the stress of a job I hated and the aches and pains resulting from it. I was well outside the city's security zone. If a government patrol drone happened by I could get in a lot of trouble. Fortunately for me they rarely strayed this far from the automated highway. They concentrated more on issuing speeding fines to those good citizens who illegally disconnected their transports from the automated interstate.*

As the flames died down, the fire began to smolder enough to keep the rising clouds of mosquitos at bay. I rolled out my sleeping bag and climbed in. I was soon lulled to sleep by the many sounds of night in a swamp.

The buzzing of the crickets, the croaking of many species of frogs, was accented by an occasional grunt from the nearby alligators. The still of night in the swamps was often punctuated by the screams of terrified prey and thwarted predator, harmonized with the sweet cries of courtship. The sounds of both death and life.

*As I slept, strange dreams overtook me, causing much tossing and turning, bunching up my sleeping bag. I did not see the glowing red ball of light that silently rose from the waters of the nearby lake. I did not know it was the source of my dreams, nightmares of a dark future for Earth, terrifying and full of death.*

I woke to the bright sunlight of the beginning of another perfect Florida winter day shining in my face. With highs in the mid-seventies and an overnight low in the lower sixties, it was perfect camping weather.

I stretched and wiped the sleep from my eyes, finding to my dismay several large mosquito bites on my neck, where the sleeping bag had exposed it in my thrashing about to the strange dreams. About which I could not remember anything. The harder I tried the more the dreams slipped from my memory. Finally, with a snort of disgust, I dismissed them as gibberish and went about packing up my gear for the hike back to my transport.

It was a steady drizzle by the time I reached my transport. As I deactivated the security system I knew my transport would be low on charge. It had been overcast or cloudy for my entire three days at the lake. As a result, the security system had drained more power than the solar panels could replace.

I stowed my wet gear in the trunk, then slid into the driver's seat. As I brought the main computer up I checked the power reading. I was right, less than a quarter charge remained, not nearly enough to get home. The navcomp calculated I would have to use the diesel engine just to get to the nearest charging station.

That made me decidedly unhappy, as the price of diesel fuel was over one hundred and seventeen dollars a gallon, if they had any. The hydrogen revolution in America had all but made petroleum based fuels a thing of the past. The big oil

companies with their dying gasp charged whatever the shrinking market would allow, unwittingly sealing their own fate faster. Only those of us who couldn't afford the new hydrogen powered transports relied on petroleum anymore.

The Federal Government had put a mandatory end to internal combustion engines in 2030. The mandate to turn in my transport for disposal was less than a month away. *If I was going to qualify for the cash for clunkers I had about ten days left. I had my eye on a new Ford hydro powered, two door economy model, the Laser they were calling it.*

*With the money I would get from the government in its cash for clunkers reclamation program, I would have the down payment on that new Ford Laser. That would only leave 200,000 dollars to finance. With my mandatory good credit I could get at least 27% financing. I would haggle for 25%. But I knew I would probably get 27% and count myself lucky.*

No citizen in their right mind volunteered to go to debtors' prison, not after the horror stories the State media broadcast every night. The courts ran twenty four hours a day to keep up with the stream of economic criminals, sentencing citizens to a work camp until their debts were paid. Citizens who had run up debts and were unable to pay were the new criminals of the state.

The big companies and the banks were in control of America now, using the government as their enforcement muscle. If you owed and couldn't pay, to the work camps you went. You were there until you worked off your debt to society at a very low wage.

The companies that ran the prisons for the government would then make their newest prisoner pay for their own food and housing. Generously, and legally, tacking it on to the end of the sentence as a gesture of good will.

Those who survived debtors' prison owned nothing except the clothes they wore out the gates. They had no place in society and no legal rights. The big companies, run by the banks, would then put them to work in the factories for room and board, but only as long as they continued to meet quota. Fail to make quota and that now newest prisoner would be sent to Debtors' Hell. *No-one ever survived for long at Debtors' Hell. Not even the brutish or the homicidal maniac.*

*I must be crazy to even consider taking out a debt to the banks, to buy a new transport; they owned whatever the government didn't. If I was smart I would try and save the money I got from my clunker and buy an education at one of the technical schools that accepted government education grants.*

*Well, I have a month to think about it.* As I started my transport, I said a silent goodbye to my favorite place in the world. It was too far from the city to hike to on the occasional three day weekend I got off. After the end of this month I had to turn my transport in for cash for clunkers, or pay the fines, which were huge.

I logged into the net and pulled up the location of the nearest charging station on the info net with my transport's navcomp. By good fortune, the nearest charging station was only sixty kilometers away and they offered bio-diesel. I set the navcomp autopilot once I got on the automated-highway to the city of New Miami, and settled in for a short nap during the ride to the charging station.

I was in luck. There was an empty spot on the solar charger, which was free. Combining my savings by buying biodiesel put a grin on my face. I truly enjoy depriving big oil of its insane profits. It always gives me a warm glow of satisfaction. I realize they will not miss my five hundred dollars but it is the principal of the matter. The only downside was, it was cash only for the biodiesel, and I only had five hundred and ten dollars on me.

So as I stood in line to buy my four hundred dollars' worth of biodiesel I heard myself asking for a multi-state lottery ticket. It had been almost a month with no winner and the jackpot was one of the largest in lottery history. Without thinking, I tucked my change and the ticket in my wallet and dismissed it from my mind. *I mean, does anyone ever really win that much money?*

It was late when I finally arrived at my apartment; the traffic on the automated interstate leading into New Miami had been heavy and slower than usual. I went straight into the shower, washing off the grime of sweat and smoke from the last three days. I felt like a new man as I unpacked my soggy gear, spreading it out all around the apartment to dry.

I really wanted a beer. But I have to work the morning shift and after a weekend off there was mandatory drug testing for all the line workers at the mech factory. I spent my working hours assembling mechs who would one day take a human's job. I worked twelve hours on and twelve hours off for the next fifteen days, then I would get two days off. That had been my life for the last five years.

As I turned on the holovision to unwind, I noticed I had a message in my inbox. It was from my supervisor, telling me that our factory's quota had been cut back and I was required to take the next shift off. *Time for that beer*, I told myself.

I was surprised it was only one shift. The demand for mechs that I assembled had already peaked, declining sharply since the release of the new generation of mechs, which were built in fully automated factories. Only a handful of humans were needed to oversee production. I knew I did not have enough seniority or education to warrant a management position at the company's new factory.

I realized I may soon be out of a job, as I finished my beer, reaching for another. In my despair I thumbed through the vid-channels, finding nothing that I wanted to watch. It seemed every channel was carrying reruns of those really awful reality shows from the twenty teens. An era often referred to as worse than something called disco.

As chance would have it, I stumbled onto the live lottery drawing. If anyone matched all eleven numbers the payout was estimated to be 10,000,000,000 American dollars. It was an unbelievable fortune, the largest Powerball jackpot ever. The odds of any one person winning were approximately 5,000,000,000 to 1. Suddenly I remembered the ticket I had bought earlier that day on a whim.

As I rummaged through the pocket of the pants I had worn home, I heard the first number 49, then 50 then 51, then 60 then 61 and 62. *No one would ever choose those numbers*, I thought to myself as I unfolded my lottery ticket. *That will send the players into a worldwide buying frenzy tomorrow*, I thought, all but reassured by the strange combination of numbers.

The shock of seeing the first six winning numbers on my ticket seemingly made time suddenly stand still. Each second seemed an eternity as I waited for the next number to be drawn. My heart was beating wildly in my chest and I suddenly couldn't breathe.

As the last number was displayed, a roaring sound engulfed me. I slumped over, unconscious from the shock of seeing that my ticket matched every single number drawn. I had just won 10,000,000,000 dollars. I had gone from pauper to prince in sixty seconds.

It was some months later that I found myself back at my favorite campsite next to the lake, deep in the Everglades National Park. I had spent my time since my big win traveling and throwing lavish parties to entertain starlets.

The gossip vid crews constantly followed my every move at first. Slowly the spotlight turned on someone else. Fortunately for me the President had been caught frolicking with another young White House intern, and a world class scandal had temporarily distracted the gossip papers.

As I lay stretched out by the camp fire I rolled up a bit of the finest Florida purple I had ever come across. I was just happy to be out of the spotlight for once. I had been on the front page of all the gossip papers worldwide for months. I couldn't even slip out for takeout without it being a news flash on the local evening gossip show. I was safe from that here, my platoon of security mechs standing guard silently until needed.

As the purple worked its magic I uncorked a bottle of some aged and very smooth peach moonshine, unwinding slowly as my cheeks flushed and my toes tingled from the effects of the nectar of the gods. Slowly the troubles of the last couple of months slipped away, as I floated into a haze of artificial pleasure. I was soon far too buzzed to notice the silent, glowing red ball that rose silently from the lake, hovering over me as I lay sprawled out and snoring next to the now burned out campfire.

I awoke with a start with the sun high in the morning sky, covered in mosquito bites; my sleeping bag still rolled up and unslept in. As reality and its brother my hangover slowly let their unpleasant selves be known, a wave of shame swept over me. I realized I had accomplished nothing. I had intended to change the world and instead all I had done was party and waste lots of money.

As I packed up my gear, another wave of shame swept over me. I reached into my pocket for my stash. As I looked at its beckoning, beautiful purple color it suddenly took on the appearance of such an evil thing that I threw it as far as I could into the surrounding swamp. I was glad to be rid of it.

By the time my Mercedes all terrain transport had reached the main trail back to the automated highway I had made up my mind to never again lose myself to partying. By the time I had reached my estate on the edge of New Miami I had a plan. I resolved I was going to change the world, or die trying. But where to start?

If I let my intentions be known I would have every crackpot and their brother pounding on my front gate. Each with a sure fire plan: if only I would give them the money to bring it to fruition. I would need a front man. Someone I could control.

As I forwarded through the pages of investment brokers, a name jumped out at me, Goldswindle and Crookedstein. Providers of expert financial advice, life insurance and personal injury law, all under one roof, the huge ad proudly proclaimed.

*A perfect place to start, for greed is a powerful tool with which to control someone without them knowing it.* I placed the call as my Mercedes purred through the massive front gate of my estate, making an appointment for 8:00 am sharp the following Friday at the new office in the city. The one I had just rented from the classifieds, using my credit card to pay 2 months' rent in advance. With a few more zeroes added on for no questions asked and no records of the agreement. Security concerns, I explained to the landlord's office mech that answered my call.

"All right Guberman, I have a hot new client for you. It's that guy who won the big lottery jackpot a couple of months ago. This is your last chance. If you screw up such a sweet deal, I will fire you, nephew or not," said Crookedstein, the most senior partner, shaking his fist. "I want you to bleed this chump dry. Is that clear, Guberman?" he screeched, having worked himself up into a nearly maniacal fit from the thought of so many easy dollar signs dancing in front of his eyes. "And stay out of the liquid joy or I will fire you even if you are my sister's son. Do I make myself

clear?" Crookedstein shouted, saliva spraying into his nephew's face, a wild look in his eyes.

"Yes, Uncle, I will bleed him dry. It will be different this time, you'll see," mumbled the young Guberman.

"It better be. Now get the hell out of my office and find out everything you can about this guy before you meet him at this address on Friday," shouted Crookedstein, dismissing his now crestfallen nephew.

It was just after 8:00 a.m. and Guberman squirmed in his seat as he waited for the client to arrive, having been announced by the secretary mech manning the reception desk. It was now 8:20 and still no client. *He is probably hung over from partying until the morning hours* thought Guberman. The fact was that his soon to be new client was all over the gossip vids, each party a little more outrageous than the last.

At long last the huge wooden doors swung open and a heavy set, balding, redheaded man strode toward him, his right hand thrust out. *I imagined he would be bigger* thought Guberman as he shook the client's hand. *This will be easier than I thought.*

"Please come in Mr. ...?" I said to the young man waiting for me in the reception room. The security mechs had profiled him as Otto Guberman, a junior partner, known drunk, womanizer and the son of the senior partner's sister and, most importantly, no threat.

"Otto Guberman is my name sir," he answered, returning my handshake with a firm grip.

*If his good manners continue I will start my acquisitions. That will give me two nights to spring my trap on young Mr. Guberman,* I thought as I slid into the chair behind my new desk. I grinned inwardly: calling this work of art, made from driftwood and Flexi, a desk was like calling a Siberian tiger a large house cat.

"Today is your lucky day, Mr. Guberman. Your commissions from today alone will be worth several million dollars," I said as I called up the comterm from the "desk's" innards. As I watched, the younger man worked his mouth several times but no sound came out, such was his astonishment.

He finally managed to squeak out "I won't disappoint you sir. I will double your investment."

"Be that as it may, I have a list of assets I want to buy. It must be done discreetly: I don't want the gossip vids to find out. Is that clear, Mr. Guberman?" I asked.

"Yes sir, absolutely sir, you can count on me, my uncle has some very good 'connections', if you get my drift," answered the young Guberman with a grin.

"I am not opposed to using less than legal means to acquire what is on this list. BUT only as a last resort. Is that clear, Mr. Guberman?" I said in my sternest voice.

"Yes sir, absolutely, you can count on me," he gushed, his youthful enthusiasm obvious.

"All right then Otto, sit down and let's get started, shall we," I said in a more friendly, almost fatherly tone.

It was on the second night that young Otto took the bait, or perhaps it could be called a fall from grace. *It depends entirely on your perspective I suppose.*

As he put another on the stack of shot glasses in front of him Guberman said to the mech bar tender, "Then he says to buy all this land in the desert. That's not even the stupidest thing he wants to do. He bought a research facility that specialized in

Virology. Seems he thinks he can cure R.E.D.S and cancer at the same time. THEN he is going to give away the vaccine to anybody who is sick for FREE,” slurred the now very intoxicated Guberman, who was oblivious to the many trades being made on the advice he was giving the mech bartender. “I mean I can understand buying the automated highway construction equipment manufacturing company, even though no one is going to build a new highway any time soon. But he still got one hell of a deal.

“I think the best deal he got was on that bankrupt concrete manufacturing company. I mean, concrete is almost never used in construction anymore. My new client says he can modify the plant to produce something he calls carbon blocks. Gunna revolutionize the building industry he says,” mumbled the now nearly unconscious Guberman, his head on the bar, drool on his chin.

It was sometime the next day when young Otto Guberman woke to the smell of fresh made waffles coming from his apartment’s small kitchen. As he tried to rub the grainy sleep from his eyes his hangover came crashing in.

Once the room stopped spinning Otto noticed he was in the wrong bedroom in his apartment. *Just who is cooking in my apartment?* Otto thought as he lurched to his feet, the room spinning again. He finally made his way into the tiny living room to see who was in his kitchen. As Otto passed the floor length mirror, he noticed that the clothes he was wearing were not the ones he had on the night before.

“Ahhh, good afternoon, sleepy head,” called out a disgustingly cheerful and vaguely familiar male voice. That fact brought a whole new set of questions with it to Otto’s pounding brain. *What happened last night?* Otto wondered, half afraid of the answer. *Did I do something stupid again?* Otto thought as he approached the male figure, which was busy at the stove working a waffle maker. It occurred to Otto that not only did he have no idea what transpired last night, nor who this person was, but that he owned no waffle maker.

As the man finished piling a plate with a huge serving of golden brown waffles, he turned, placing them on a table set for two. Otto realized with a shock that it was his client, the lottery winner, from the day before yesterday, the chump. *What the hell is going on?* was the question that threatened to make Otto’s hung over brain explode, causing flashes of pain to stab at the back of his skull. “Damn’ tequila,” he mumbled, his tongue dry and his mouth seemingly full of cotton.

“What the hell are you doing in my apartment?” Otto finally managed to half shout half mumble past his tongue that seemed too large for his mouth.

“Now now, Otto, that is no way to treat a guest, especially one who can send you to prison for a very long time,” the client said cheerfully.

“Get the hell out of here,” bellowed Otto with much false bravado, wondering what his uninvited house guest meant by prison. *What had happened last night?* Otto could not remember, despite struggling mightily to.

Instead of leaving, the client sat down and heaped several waffles on his plate, buttering them as he spoke. “I will gladly leave if you insist; however I should tell you that you were a very, very bad boy last night. I mean, babbling my secrets in one of the most popular bars for stock market traders in New Miami. You really should not drink so much,” he continued.

“There were several large trades made on the advice you spilled in your drunkenness. Insider trading is a crime as I am sure you are aware,” said the client happily.

“You will never be able to prove anything,” blustered Otto, not nearly so sure of himself as he sounded.

“You see,” the client continued, “there were some very heavy hitters in that bar last night. All of the confidential trades I instructed you to make on my behalf were acted upon and now the stock is in play. So tell me Otto, who do you think will take the fall for all that insider trading that transpired last night? Surely you don’t think the CEO of Sterns Trading or the OOE of Briar Financial will do you? Both of whom were in the bar, by the way, and who were listening very intently to what you had to say. Do you think your uncle is going to sacrifice himself to save you? Who does that leave holding the bag, my young friend?” asked the client.

“You son of a bitch,” Otto snarled as his situation finally sank into his tequila soaked brain: “You set me up!”

“Actually, yes I did,” answered the client nonchalantly as he stuffed in another mouthful of waffles. “I arranged for your date to take you to that bar, your stupidity did the rest. I am, however, here to help you, not prosecute you,” he said once he finished chewing. “Now sit down and have some waffles.”

“What do you want from me?” mumbled a much subdued Otto, as he slumped into the empty kitchen chair.

“Not much actually. I like you, Otto, and I think you might be smarter than your uncle gives you credit for,” said the client. “All I require is two years of faithful service doing what I say just the way I want it done.”

“Two years,” moaned Otto.

“After which you will be free to go, and you will be a very wealthy and hopefully wiser man,” answered the client reassuringly.

“Do we have a deal or shall I call the FCC task force?” asked the client with an innocent smile.

“How do I know you won’t double cross me?” asked Otto.

“You don’t, you will have to trust me,” answered the client. “From now on you will be working for Ben Cross, a false persona I created just for the occasion. Any and all communications with me will use that name. Is that perfectly clear?” the client now known as Ben Cross asked. “Now eat up, my boy, you are going to need your strength; we have a lot of work to do.”

“It was almost a year later before I saw Ben Cross again. That is when he told me the craziest thing I ever heard. *Otto*, he said to me, *I want to mine the moon for Helium 3 with automated miners*. If any one of my other clients had said that, I would have called the mental health commission and had them committed for psychiatric treatment,” Otto said. “And then I would take all their money after they were committed to the government sanitarium.

“However, this was not just anyone. That virology company he bought found the cure for both REDS and cancer. Then, just like he said he would, he gave the cure away to anyone who was sick, wiping both illnesses out forever.

“Then there was the matter of his carbon blocks made from all that reclaimed desert sand. He revolutionized the construction industry just like he said he would. And then he did the same to the aerospace industry.

“So what else could I do but believe him? It was hard to tell what his next move would be. As his fortune approached 1,000,000,000,000 dollars he began to give away grants to any invention he thought worthwhile. Everything he thought worthwhile, from an organic fertilizer to water desalinization and waste reclamation. There was no industry he didn’t have an interest in. It wasn’t long after that that he released me and disappeared off the face of the Earth. True to his word, I am a very wealthy man. I spent a considerable fortune trying to locate him so I could thank him

in person but I never did find him,” Otto said, finishing his official statement to the Government agent who was interviewing him.

“You sound like you would do anything for him. Perhaps even lie to protect him,” said the interrogating agent accusingly, watching Otto’s reaction with a trained eye.

“If I knew where he was, I would not tell you,” declared Otto defiantly. “But since I don’t, you will get nothing more from me. What is your interest in Ben Cross anyway?”

“He is considered at this point to be an enemy of the state and his meddling in government affairs must be stopped. If we find out you are hiding him you will be charged as an accomplice and spend the rest of your life in prison. If he contacts you, it is your duty as a patriotic American citizen to contact us immediately,” said the major, standing behind the interrogator, as he handed Otto his card. “You are now free to go, Mr. Guberman, for now.”

I knew that eventually one government or the other would connect the dots and poor young Otto Guberman would be in a great deal of trouble on my behalf. No private citizen had ever amassed as much wealth as I had.

The governments of the world would soon see me as a threat, so I had to disappear. The question of the hour was if I should leave poor Otto holding the bag or not. I decided not to. He had done his job faithfully, telling the state the story I had drilled into him for all these years. Some people never change, however; he continued to skim the profits even after he joined the Church of True Enlightenment quite some time ago.

So I returned to my favorite place one last time to say goodbye. I had always found the answers I sought here by the lake. Sparks flew as I poked the campfire with my walking stick, the same one after all these years, for the last time.

The only safe thing for me to do was leave Earth, because there was no place I could hide from the governments for much longer. They were getting closer to finding me by the day. I had doubled my security mechs but they were no match for a Special Forces raid, which I expected to come at any time. The mechs were a delaying tactic, one that would give me just enough time to escape in my sub orbital transport.

The colony on Luna would be complete very soon and ready for human occupation. I had spent most of the last ten years working on its completion and staffing. As I had not used any government technology or money there was little the government could do or say, it was a private enterprise. That is when I realized that I would have to die, or everything I had built would crumble in a world war against the super-rich.

To placate the U.S government, I had arranged for an exclusive agreement for the purchase of all helium 3 harvested. To keep the peace, I brokered deals with the grossly overpopulated countries for the anticipated grain shipments from the hydroponic growing domes on the surface of Luna. The 24 hour light cycle and the intense sunlight made for an estimated phenomenal growth rate for the genetically modified wheat.

I had spent months working on the problem of staffing such a large enterprise with qualified experts of every branch of science. I finally hit upon the solution of training the experts I needed without them knowing I was doing so.

I recruited from high school any student who excelled in the fields of science and mathematics, arranging for college scholarships and then graduate school for those who met the criteria I needed. As a result I was intimately familiar with every soon to be citizen of Luna’s background and education.

The day finally came when I stepped into Luna city for the first time, having lost myself in the throng of pioneers who clamored to escape the festering socialist boil Earth had become. Everything was so new it looked otherworldly in design. As if a race of aliens would return at any moment. *I can only imagine their shock to find that their new city had been infested by humans.*

I slipped away from the milling crowds awaiting billeting assignments, making my way to my secret quarters. Everything went smoothly for the next several weeks as the new citizens of Luna City made themselves at home.

Then came the day of the mysterious holo-message, from an older me to me today. I was sitting at my command terminal observing the day to day operations of Luna city, when a hologram activated itself from the com terminal. As the image of a man in a dirty and worn p-suit slowly came into focus I was stunned to see myself as an old man. I will never forget what I said to me.

“If you want to save Earth from a terrible fate you will follow these instructions precisely. If you don’t, Earth will be destroyed and you will end up a lonely old man. One who watches every citizen on Luna, driven crazy by grief of losing Earth, die in a mass suicide. All you have to do is find the origins of this message. When you find that answer, follow it no matter where it takes you. I am sorry I can’t be more specific but if anyone else were to find this holo-message Earth would be doomed to becoming a radioactive ball of nuclear waste. Once they start shooting off those missiles they will not stop until the planet is uninhabitable. We are the only ones who can stop it. I only hope we are in time.”

As the hologram faded, my mind was racing. *Earth destroyed in a nuclear holocaust. Why? What would start such a thing?* Then I remembered Ben Cross. Horrified I logged onto the Earth news nets. They were highlighted by the hunt for Ben Cross and the riots that resulted from the governments’ heavy handed search. The war against the super-rich, the banks and the world wide government had begun.

Individual freedoms had been suspended as martial law was declared. Border skirmishes between Russia and China had brought the world to the brink of World War Three. For the next 2 months I watched as Earth slowly tore itself apart. *How was I going to save Earth if I couldn’t even find where that message came from?* I had searched every inch of the databases and found nothing. I was at my wits’ end. When suddenly the door leading to my command center slid open, and a young woman stepped inside.

I recognized her immediately, of course. I had recruited her straight out of high school and arranged for her college and graduate school in computer design. Her designs ran most of Luna city’s many automated functions. I was stunned to say the least.

As I sat there with my mouth hanging open, she blushed, then smiled a shy smile and said, “I thought I might find you here.”

I was speechless. “You know who I am?” I finally managed to say in a hoarse whisper.

“Yes,” she said simply, “you are Ben Cross. You are the one who recruited me out of high school. You are the one who saw to my scholastic opportunities. You are the one who saw to it that I ended up here on Luna. I have been looking for you for a very long time. I am glad to finally meet you,” she finished.

“Who else knows?” I demanded.

With a giggle she said, “My name is Patricia.”

“I know who you are, what I want to know is who else knows about me,” I snapped.

“I told no one,” she said meekly. “I mean, who would believe such a story from a slightly neurotic computer nerd? If I told anyone that I thought someone who couldn’t be found and that I had never met was manipulating my future, I would have been sent to mental reconditioning for a psychosis.”

“Well, now that you are here maybe you can help me find something,” I said.

“You are looking for the origin of the mysterious message from you as an older man,” she said quietly. For the second time today I sat with my mouth open in amazement.

“How do you know about the message?” I snapped.

“That is why I am here. I came across it two days ago while I was doing some recompiling of the automated systems database. I also found the plans that revealed the location of your hideout,” she answered, pretending to pout.

“Did you find out where the message came from?” I asked excitedly.

“Of course I did,” she answered, a little too defensively. “It came from an encrypted file that was uploaded after the city was complete but before any personnel arrived.”

“WHEN did you say? After completion and before occupancy? That’s impossible: who could do such a thing?” I wondered aloud, completely lost in thought, pacing back and forth in the suddenly much too small room.

“What is even stranger is where this message was uploaded from,” said Patricia.

“Huh? WHAT, What do you mean uploaded from,” I asked as I quickly turned to face my new partner in crime.

“That signal was originated at these coordinates,” Patricia continued. As I fed the coordinates in to the computer we both reached the same conclusion, saying almost in tandem, “That’s on the dark side of Luna.”

Turning to Patricia with a mischievous smile I said, “Go and get your p-suit and helmet. Then meet me at transport bay. I think we need to go to those coordinates. I don’t know why exactly but go we must.”

It took me over an hour to commandeer a Luna rover suited to our needs. One with room for two people, enough power to get to where we were going and return with fuel to spare.

As Patricia and I glided over the lunar surface at the top speed of 10 kilometers an hour, we took turns piloting the rover. It was easy at first as we followed one of the main automated miners’ tracks.

We soon reached the end of the miners’ track and the terminator was just ahead. We would have to slow down and navigate the pitch black lunar landscape with what lights the rover had, and sensors very nearly blind, carefully navigating the many pitfalls.

“Sensors indicate our target coordinates are just ahead at the top of that mound,” Patricia’s voice came in over the p-suit com channel. I adjusted the rover’s course to navigate the steep rise that was just ahead.

Once we reached the summit of the mound we found a most unusual thing. The top was perfectly flat with four columns, one at each corner of the perfect square.

“That is not man-made,” I said in amazement.

“If not us, then who?” whispered Patricia.

“Who is a good question indeed,” I answered.

As I turned back toward the rover I saw a glowing red ball of light hovering right behind me. I did not jump in fright; I stood transfixed, my face frozen as the hidden memories crashed in. I now knew that my good fortune had not been by accident as I had thought all along. My plan was not my own. Well, it was formed by an older me

so I guess in effect I was responsible for the path my life had taken. I had simply been following the orders given to me by the red ball of light. But why?

*The message said Earth would be destroyed by a nuclear holocaust if I didn't find the source of this message, or if anyone else found it. Patricia had found the message and it was with her help that I found this place. Old and alone echoed in the back of my mind as I realized how much of a part Patricia played in my future.*

Then I saw the bright flashes of light from Earth. The realization that Earth was for all practical purposes now a soon to be lifeless, radioactive ball, hit me hard as I sank to my knees in grief. I was too late to stop it.

Patricia pulled me to my feet as she asked, "What's happened, what's wrong?"

"Did you see those flashes of light coming from Earth just now?" I asked.

"Yes, but I thought it was just the solar power stations array reflecting the sun," she answered.

"Unfortunately I think the war against the super-rich has turned nuclear and engulfed Earth. Whatever wasn't destroyed right away will slowly die as the radiation kills everything. We are orphans and the last of our kind," I answered bitterly, "because we are too late".

The question of the origin of the red light surfaced through my grief, capturing my attention. *If I found this place as an old man then how did the red light get to the lake when I was a young man? I must have sent it back in time!*

Then came the realization that if I had sent it once before, why not again. I could save Earth; I would just have to change the plan in my past and not create Ben Cross. That had been my mistake, inadvertently starting the war of the masses against the super-rich.

As I turned to face the red ball I heard a disturbingly familiar sound creep into my consciousness. The red ball had now become bright white light causing me to squint. I remembered where I was as my reality snapped back into focus.

That sound, it meant the orderlies were coming; they were dragging their batons on the wall. I instinctively huddled in my cell in the corner farthest from the door, praying aloud that they weren't coming for me. "Please lord, not me," I begged, "not again please not again."

The sound of the key scraping in my cell door lock filled me with dread, which quickly turned to terror as I saw which orderly had come for me. It was Robert. He was the cruelest and most sadistic of them all.

After dragging me to the shock therapy room, he leaned over me as he strapped my head into place on the examination table, my arms and legs already shackled.

"Ben," he said, "first we are going to resume your shock therapy, only a little higher this time. The Bishop is very angry with you. You tried to smuggle out a message again, didn't you?" He smiled, his pupils enlarged by his mania, spittle on his chin. Sparks flew from the metal contacts as Robert touched them together, testing the conductivity of the circuit.

"Then," he whispered in my ear, "I am going to cut your tongue out so you won't be spreading any more lies about life on other planets. Somebody might actually believe your story. Then they would be in here too and that makes more work for me. Plus the fact that I am so, so tired of hearing your blasphemy no matter how well you tell it. We all know that man is the only intelligent life in the universe," he hissed, grinning savagely, one eye twitching, his mania now in control.

As I succumbed to the blackness caused by the second high voltage electrical jolt running through my head, my last thought was *who would save the world now? For I have failed again.*

The End

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## Coded

By [Elizabeth Grace](#)

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

The sound of the alarm clock was loud enough to wake Jason from his nightmare. Like most dreams, nothing remained in his mind except for the feeling that it was bad. Bad enough that Jason could feel the sticky sweat pooled on the back of his neck. Rubbing it off, Jason rolled over and pressed the snooze on his alarm. He couldn't remember what day it was or why he had even set an alarm in the first place. Opening his eyes, it was obvious that the combination of the early morning and what had likely been a late night blurred his vision. The digits on the clock looked like a blur of red. Had he blacked out? How had he gotten home? Questions ricocheted through his mind as he rubbed his eyes. He felt a burning sensation from the sweat on his hands and swore. Opening his eyes again, the digits on the clock were still blurry red.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

The sound came from behind him and Jason realized the alarm wasn't in front of his face. It was his blood covered hands.

More questions filled his mind. What had he done last night? Had he hurt someone? Jason was frantic.

A knot tightened in his stomach. Had they done something to him? The alarm continued to blare behind him and Jason turned and struggled to find the off switch.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

*The old man was telling him to run but young Jason's mind wasn't able to comprehend the command until the old man pulled his arm roughly. Almost falling on his face, Jason caught his balance and moved his legs as fast as they could go. Every scanner they passed beeped, trying to read their presence, but there was nothing to read. It was as if they were only dogs passing in front of the devices.*

*"In here." The old man pulled the child into an old building and navigated him through outdated equipment and debris until they were in a back corner.*

*"Sit," the old man said. Jason did as he was told and realized everything in the room was beginning to blur.*

*"It's okay to cry." The old man used the bottom of his shirt to wipe Jason's face. Jason's vision was clear enough to see the white shirt turn red with every stroke. Jason looked at his hands and saw they were speckled in blood.*

*"I'll wash them next," the old man said and Jason shook his head.*

*"It's all I have left," Jason said.*

*"No," the old man's voice was forceful but he took Jason's hands into his own gently. "You have their memories. That's better than bloody hands."*

*They heard the characteristic sound of the scanners searching for them. The old man held his index finger to his mouth to indicate that Jason should be quiet.*

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

The hospital scanners sounded as the patient walked out. She gasped when she saw Jason but he was almost to the door. She glanced at her watch. She was already late and didn't relish the thought of having to spend more time in the hospital. Taking her keys out of her purse, she pointed them at her white Volvo, not realizing it would be ten minutes before anyone else noticed the man dying in front of the hospital.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

Jason heard the sound of the car being unlocked and saw the blurred form getting into it. He tried to call out but his voice sounded like a frantic whisper. His arms were like blocks of lead and he couldn't move them to wave. The blood loss had made him weak. He hadn't been this weak since the time he had run for his life with his grandfather. Jason didn't know the old man was his grandfather at the time because he certainly didn't know how to act like one. A smile crossed Jason's face. Maybe death wasn't so bad after all. Maybe his family was anxiously waiting for him someplace else. Someplace better.

Jason was tired, and even though he could see the blurry glow of the hospital entrance he knew he couldn't make it on his own. He discarded the idea of crawling the rest of the way and succumbed to the tiredness that was gnawing inside of him. He closed his eyes.

Screams woke him from his oblivion and he felt oddly rested. He couldn't remember anything until he opened his eyes and realized he was still blind. There were forms surrounding him and Jason sensed he was about to receive help. He was lifted onto a board and carried quickly into the hospital and transferred to a bed.

"Doctor," Jason heard a nurse call out to a form across the room. "We have a patient about to go into shock from blood loss."

"Is he current?" The doctor asked. "I'm not authorizing anything till we know his status."

"We haven't checked. He's in serious condition and-" The nurse was cut off.

"Call me back when you know his status. This is a waste of my time until then." The doctor left the room.

"Get me a mobile scanner now!" The nurse shouted at someone Jason couldn't see. "This is life and death." The nurse hooked Jason up to a heart monitor and flipped the switch.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

*Jason faded off to the lull of the heart monitor. He was no longer in the hospital but rather on a paved sidewalk tightly holding a warm hand in his own. There was a woman smiling at him, she was the one gripping his hand tightly. Jason felt his heart racing as he admired her smile. She laughed at something he couldn't remember and he smiled. Everything about her was perfect. Her laugh reminded him of his mother's. It was something he would never tell Lisa. He knew it was strange but when she laughed he would close his eyes and imagine his mother was with him. It made him happy to imagine and the fantasy was innocent enough. When he opened his eyes, Lisa looked nothing like his mother and it ended there.*

*The warm hand tugged his as Lisa stopped at a store.*

*"You want anything?" Her smile weakened him but he knew he couldn't.*

*Jason released her hand. "No. I'm fine. I'll wait here."*

*Lisa eyed him quizzically. "You sure?"*

*Jason insisted he was fine and watched Lisa as she entered the store and looked at the shelves lined with colorful bottles of soda and juice, making a selection. Jason*

*watched her come back through the scanner to him. The scanners made their classic sound as they charged her purchase.*

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

“It’s not working,” the nurse said with frustration. The mobile scanner she held in her hand was trying to read his code but nothing was ringing up. It wasn’t even coming up maxed as she expected. It was very strange.

“Get me a coding specialist.” The nurse aimed the scanner at Jason again and it beeped but the screen remained blank.

“Let me see.” The coding specialist came into the room and looked at the back of Jason’s neck. “I don’t see a code. I don’t even see an injection site.”

“What are you saying?” The nurse was stunned. It was impossible.

“I don’t think he’s been coded. I haven’t seen a case like this in 20 years.” The coding specialist put his equipment back in his bag. “Sorry, I can’t help.”

The nurse hardly noticed as the coding specialist left. She stared at the uncoded man sleeping. The hospital had a strict policy against providing free care. If you weren’t current you didn’t get service and this man didn’t even have an account. How could they know if he could pay for his care?

The nurse noticed he was wearing a ring on his left hand. How was it possible he was married and not coded? Did it even matter? The uncoded man could have kids that were waiting for his return and she wasn’t going to allow what had happened to her kids to happen to others if she could help it.

The painful memory gave her a thought. Accounts for deceased weren’t closed until all pending after death fees were closed out. Her mind began to formulate a plan.

In the other bed in the room, the doctor that had refused to provide care for the uncoded man was having a discussion with an elderly patient.

“The results came back positive.” The doctor looked at the test results in his hands. “You have colon cancer. I’m recommending you for an aggressive chemo program to stop its growth before it spreads further.”

The doctor handed the patient a cost chart. “This is the price we can lock you in at today per treatment. I can scan the charge today and have you at your first session within the hour.”

The patient looked devastated. “I can’t afford this.”

“I’m sorry,” the doctor said. “We’re going to have to discharge you today then.”

“Wait.” The patient looked at the numbers again. “I can afford a couple treatments. Will it help?”

“It won’t hurt. Do you want to do your first treatment today?” the doctor asked without compassion.

The man nodded and the doctor had an assistant bring in the mobile scanner. The doctor pointed the reader at the patient and pulled the trigger.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

The doors made a sound as the nurse entered the morgue. The morgue was always cold and the nurse shivered. The wheels on the mobile scanner squealed as she pushed it across the dingy vinyl floor. She uncovered the first body and scanned his code but it came back with a red screen reading “Account Empty.” It wouldn’t work. After 6 more rejections, she began to lose hope. Empty accounts were the reason many were down in this dark space in the first place.

The nurse scanned a middle aged woman and the green “Account Current” screen lit up. Grabbing a scalpel, the nurse wasted no time. She lifted the woman’s head by

her hair and made a single swift incision on the back of her neck. The nurse wished she had thought to wear gloves as she felt for the code chip in the woman's cold flesh. Finding the small electronic piece of plastic, the nurse slipped it in her pocket and re-covered the body. She hoped no one missed the woman because if they did, her code chip would missed be as well.

A guard stuck his head into the morgue as the nurse was wheeling the scanner away from the dead woman.

"What are you doing down here?" An alarm began to sound and the nurse knew she was caught.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

*The heart monitor continued to faithfully sound, letting everyone within earshot know that Jason's heart was still pumping. However, no one cared. Even though he was asleep, his mind was frantically trying to solve the mystery of why he was in the hospital in the first place. He opened a door deep within his subconscious and remembered his last experience in a hospital. In this hospital. The day his wife had given birth to his child.*

*"Don't," Lisa had said. "Someone could overhear."*

*"We discussed this. You were fine with it," Jason tried to keep calm.*

*"I was. I was fine with it. Now, I'm not so sure." Lisa held the small child tightly and looked at her lovingly.*

*"She'll be fine. We planned this."*

*"Really? And how 'fine' will she be when they find out?"*

*"They wouldn't hurt a child."*

*"What would you call growing up without parents? Helping her?" Lisa's voice was strained and Jason could tell she was upset. They had planned this before they had even conceived their first child. The hormones were clouding her mind.*

*A nurse interrupted them as she entered with a baby carrier.*

*"I need to take the child for her shots and registration." The nurse eyed Jason suspiciously. "Who is this?"*

*"That is the baby's uncle," Lisa said.*

*"Visitation ended at 5. He needs to leave." The nurse glared at Jason.*

*"Please," Jason said. "Give us a couple of minutes. I travelled from out of town."*

*The nurse frowned but turned and left.*

*"Lisa." Jason looked at her with desperation. "If they do this there's no going back. Please, let me take her."*

*Lisa closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Fine. But promise me you'll keep her safe."*

*"Everything will be fine," Jason assured her. "You know where to find us when they discharge you."*

*Jason kissed her forehead and put the sleeping child to his chest and covered her with his coat. He hurried out of the hospital with the child and made the brisk walk back to the apartment. The child woke up just as he locked the apartment door. Jason put her in the bassinet and turned on the brand new mobile. Its simple repetitive sound put the baby back to sleep and Jason suddenly felt tired. He fell asleep happy.*

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

The sound of the heart monitor woke Jason from his dream.

“My baby!” Jason sat up in his hospital bed and screamed. He tried to get up but was surrounded by nurses and doctors. He didn’t care. His baby was at home alone and he needed to get to her.

“Hold him down,” the doctor who had refused him care earlier shouted.

“Someone give him more sedative.”

The nurses and doctors held him down, and Jason flinched as a needle was inserted into his arm.

“My baby,” Jason moaned as the sedative took effect. His eyes closed tightly.

“Is everything ready?” The doctor asked the nurse and she nodded. She set the tray of surgical tools in front of him.

The doctor gave her a doubting look. “Did you charge everything?”

“Yes.” The nurse grabbed the bottle of sedative she had just injected in Jason and smiled at the doctor. “I didn’t forget this either.” She held the scanner to the bottle and pulled the trigger.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

Jason’s eyes fluttered and the nurse picked up her pace. He turned his head toward his right arm and opened his eyes just in time to see the nurse pull out the last IV. His heart monitor continued its gentle pulsating, a reminder that he was in a hospital. His mind was cloudy from the sedative and everything was a blur. A wave of memories flooded his sensory system and he realized how bright the lights were in his room – and how glad he was that he could see them. You really don’t appreciate sight till it’s gone, Jason thought. Jason remembered his wife and child. Where were they?

“What happened?” Jason asked the nurse. He hardly recognized the hoarse voice that came from his mouth.

“You just had surgery,” the nurse said as she removed his heart monitor. The room was suddenly very silent.

Jason wiggled his extremities. Everything seemed fine. He put his hand to the back of his neck and felt stitches.

“Don’t.” The nurse pulled his hand away. “It’s still healing. Be careful.”

“Please. What happened?” Jason asked again.

The nurse explained how Jason had been found outside the hospital with a multitude of wounds. He had been bleeding from the neck, head, and chest. Stab wounds most likely.

Jason didn’t remember being stabbed. It was one of those things he figured he should. He thought hard but came up with nothing.

The nurse finished clearing him of all tubes and monitors. “You need to go.”

“Go?” Jason felt a bit queasy. It was probably due to all the medication, he decided. He didn’t feel like going anywhere.

“I did something,” the nurse said. “I wasn’t thinking and I did something really stupid.”

Jason’s interest was piqued. Before, he had just seen the nurse as an object, a device to answer questions and do anything he needed. Now, it was evident that the woman was in distress. Her face conveyed a mix of fear and embarrassment.

Jason didn’t say anything. He didn’t need to. The nurse opened up and told him the entire story, not leaving out a single detail. When she finished, Jason couldn’t help but be horrified.

“Do you realize what you’ve done?” Jason asked, feeling repulsed that he was even in the same room with the woman that had violated the one thing he stood for.

“Yes,” the woman said meekly. “Please, I was just trying to help. You were going to die. And they were going to let you.” The woman looked to her feet and spoke quickly and seemingly without breath. “Just like my husband. I saw your ring. I imagined you had children. I couldn’t bear the thought of you dying just because of some stupid system.”

Jason’s hatred melted into pity. The woman told him about her husband, dying because his account was maxed and he was refused service. It was unfair and completely absurd that her children would now grow up without a father.

“Thank you,” Jason said, and he meant it. “I appreciate it. I do have a child and I need to find her. Please, help me take the code out.”

The woman’s face was one of pure shock. “You can’t take the code out.”

“You put it in, didn’t you?” Jason voice was forceful. “So take it out.”

“But, I…” The nurse tried to come up with an excuse other than the obvious. *It’s going to kill you!*

“Please. I know the odds. 1 in 10. 1 in 20. My odds of not being discovered with the dead woman’s code once I leave this hospital are nil.”

The nurse knew he was right. “I can’t. I’m sorry.” She left the room and stood in the hallway. Quickly thinking it over, she decided to do it. Even if it killed him.

Entering the room she gasped. Blood was flowing freely from Jason’s neck and it stained the pillowcase. In his limp hand was the code. His fingers uncurled and the device fell to the floor.

*Clink Clink Clink*

The code bounced on the floor but the nurse didn’t care. She needed to get rid of the body before anyone noticed. In the corner of the room there was a wheelchair. Thank God the other patient was in chemo, she thought. The nurse grabbed the wheelchair and lifted the dead weight of Jason’s body into it. She put a blanket around his neck to cover up the wound and pushed him through the hospital.

She left the hospital with Jason’s body, and the scanners at the exit sounded to signal their departure.

***Beep Beep Beep***

Everything was dark and immediately Jason thought he had gone blind again. He quickly realized that he was covered in a blanket. He pushed it off his face and saw that the noise he heard was a garbage truck backing up toward him. The truck immediately stopped: its driver got out, looking none too pleased.

“You damn’ homeless are always in the way. I almost ran over you, you pile of trash.” The driver shook his head in disgust. “I don’t know why you hang around here. The hospital food is repulsive the first time around. Can’t imagine what it’s like the second time around.”

Jason pushed the blanket off of him and the driver realized he was in a wheelchair. Guilt washed over the driver’s face. “Sorry man,” he said. “Need any help?”

Jason shook his head and tried to stand but he couldn’t feel his legs. He felt a burning sensation in his neck and felt the gaping hole he had made. Removing the device hadn’t killed him but it had paralyzed him. Jason didn’t really know if that was much better.

The driver stared at him curiously as Jason wheeled away. He got back in his truck and put it in reverse.

***Beep Beep Beep***

The hospital scanners chirped as the nurse entered back into the hospital. A feeling of incredible stupidity and naivety swept over her. She had risked everything for this man and now he was dead.

The nurse had bought herself some time to clean up. She put his body by the dumpster where the homeless liked to hang out. No one would notice him for a couple of days until the stench of rotten flesh was unbearable. She had even covered him with a blanket to keep the flies away.

Everyone in the hospital seemed to look at her like her secret was stamped across her floral printed scrubs. She hurried back to the room, trying to avoid eye contact along the way. She'd warned him it was dangerous and it was his own fault he was dead, but why did she feel so responsible?

Back in Jason's room, she spotted the device on the ground. She stepped on it and it made a gratifying crunching sound. In the moment, she realized with horror that she'd be caught. The device would be tracked and they would know that her code was with it so often. The evidence would be irrefutable, damning her to an unforeseeable punishment. The nurse realized that she was going to lose everything...her kids....they'd grow up in the foster system. She almost laughed with mock amusement at the whole situation. A simple attempt to do a good deed, trying to keep a child from losing a parent: and now her own children would grow up without their only parent.

She finished stuffing the blood stained bedding into the trash as the pager at her side went off.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

The sound of the garbage truck continued to sound as Jason wheeled away from the hospital. His apartment was close and he knew he had to check it first. Maybe his baby was there, maybe she was fine. Jason doubted it but he had to look. As he got out of the elevator on his floor, he wondered how he would get in. Where had he left his spare key? He felt the door knob and realized it was open. Pushing into his apartment, Jason knew something terrible had happened here. Everything in his apartment was in a state of chaos. Their apartment was filled with broken objects, trash strewn all about, and the caramel carpet was stained with blood. *His blood.* None of it mattered. The guitar that had been a gift from his wife lay in a sad pile, its strings sticking this way and that. Jason didn't care. He wheeled to the bassinet where he last remembered seeing his baby but it was empty. Jason's heart fell and felt like it had landed in his stomach. Staring out the window, the sight of the balcony tempted him but he knew that at three stories he was likely just to be terribly injured and would have to endure the same painful end that the nurse's husband had suffered.

He couldn't do it for more than just that reason. His child was alive and he knew she was out there. His wife! How had he forgotten? She was in the hospital but what if she was discharged early? Could she have found their child and taken her to safety?

Jason found his cell phone in his bedroom and called his wife but there was no answer. He called the hospital and inquired but the woman on the phone told him she wasn't there any longer.

"She checked out?" Jason asked, confused by her answer. He couldn't believe that she simply wasn't there.

"I'm not really supposed to talk about this but she was taken to have an evaluation done," the woman gushed. Jason normally didn't care for gossip but this was one of those exceptions.

"An evaluation?" Jason asked. "I don't remember requesting that?" Jason was playing the role of a physician who had thought he had made a mistake with a

patient's prescriptions. It was the perfect ruse. The nurse checked the records without becoming suspicious, because giving up information to her primary care physician wasn't a breach of anybody's privacy.

"Her baby disappeared from the room and there was no one in the room but her. They looked everywhere but never found it. No one knows what happened." The nurse rambled on about the likelihood of finding pieces of missing child. Or the general consensus that she cut it up and flushed the pieces down the toilet.

"I hope they took her someplace good. Too many "fluff" mental hospitals around and someone like that needs serious help," Jason said when the woman paused to take a breath. She of course immediately revealed that Lisa was in Central Health, one of the premier mental hospitals in the state.

Jason thanked her for her time and just before he said goodbye, she asked him for his name in a friendly, afterthought sort of way. Without another word, he hung up the phone, leaving her with the empty sound of the dial tone.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

The nurse ignored the seat belt warning sound and continued driving, exceeding the most generous take on the speed limit. She had already called the principle and her kids were to be waiting for her outside the school when she arrived. The principle was a reserved man that didn't ask too many questions. If you wanted to take your kids out of school for a beach day or take them out for ice cream he didn't care. As long as they were doing well in their classes the principle was not one to keep a tally on sick days or days missed for more suspicious reasons.

The woman waiting outside of the school doors with her three kids was not cut from the same understanding cloth as the principle. The first thing she asked the nurse was what she and the kids were up to the rest of the day. The words in and of themselves were innocent enough but the tone she used was so conniving that the nurse knew that anything she said would be freely spread at the next PTA meeting like butter on warm toast.

"Dentist," the nurse said with a laugh. "Completely slipped my mind until today!"

"*All three of them?*" The woman cocked her head expecting a more thought out response.

"Group discount. Nice seeing you Michelle." She intentionally pronounced it Meeshell rather than the way the woman preferred – Meekell. The woman opened her mouth to protest the incorrect pronunciation but the nurse had already slammed her door.

As her tires squealed sharply on the dark black pavement and out of the parking lot, her kids buckled up without a word. Her seat belt reminder sounded in an attempt to tell her that she too was supposed to have the safety belt securely fastened, but the nurse ignored it. After all, concern for her safety had gone out the window a long time ago.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

Jason strained to pull the cup of steaming water out of the microwave. Some of it spilled on his hand but he managed to avoid doing more damage by spilling the entire cup onto what likely would have been his crotch. As such, he refrained from swearing. The small burn on his finger was a godsend comparatively.

He wanted to have a cup of coffee to mull over what to do about his stolen child and his wife locked up in a mental hospital, but his crazy wife kept the coffee on the

top shelf. Crazy. The subtle attempt of his own mind to amuse himself wasn't working and Jason instead grabbed a stale tea bag from the bottom shelf. Lisa didn't like throwing things out, even when replaced. She had long since bought new tea and stored it on the top shelf with the coffee but in her mind the other tea was still perfectly acceptable and therefore she kept it on the bottom shelf for emergencies. In any other life, this tea would sit on the bottom shelf neglected for years, never to be remembered again due to the new, fresh tea that was at eye level. But in this life, Jason was thankful for his wife's little quirks. It also meant there was plenty of expired canned goods and stale crackers for him to eat on bottom shelves throughout the kitchen. Jason didn't realize how hungry he was but he didn't remember having eaten for several days. It was possible that he had, but his memory was so cloudy that so much was a blur. He knew why, too. Removing the code had messed up his mind.

*Nothing made sense.*

And then it did. It all fell into place. The wound on his neck, the blindness. *The weakness.* Everything made sense. They had taken his child and implanted a code in him. And he had ripped it out, just like he had done when he was at the hospital. It was the only rational thing he would have done. They put the code in him so he couldn't find his child. They wanted to know where he was at every moment. They wanted to have the upper hand.

So he had ripped the code out, knowing full well that he would either die by his own action or inaction. He wouldn't have been able to live knowing he hadn't done everything to save his only child.

With the revelation, the cup of tea slipped out of his hand and landed almost silently onto the caramel carpet. The yellowish liquid oozed its way through the plushness of the carpet until it had made a considerable wet spot. He thought about where the towels were to clean it up but he realized that everything was kept up high out of his reach. He closed his eyes in frustration at the feeling of helplessness of being in a wheelchair. There was nothing he could do to clean up this mess in his state.

Jason opened his eyes again and realized that the helplessness was not confined to the small problem of the spilt tea. It summed up his entire problem with trying to help his wife or save his child. *It was impossible if he was crippled.*

Jason wheeled into the kitchen and opened the knife drawer. Contained within were the only weapons that he had at this level. He put a couple of the sharpest inside of a compact backpack and left his apartment. He had a vague idea of what he had to do but he was uncertain of how to accomplish it until he was wheeling away from his apartment building down the back alley where he would take the trash out. Lisa didn't like the alley because there were often bums hanging out by the garbage can, ready to salvage any bits of edible morsel like a bear at a campsite. Jason didn't mind the bums so much, and tonight he was hoping he would come across one. *Just one.*

It was as if God was smiling down on him, although Jason knew that there was no god alive that would give him what he prayed for, no merciful and loving god anyways. There, right next to the garbage can, was a bum. His hair was in knots and he smelled of piss. Jason couldn't believe his fortune as he noticed that the bum was passed out, beyond smashed, with a bottle of what smelled to be rum, or at least used to contain rum, in his hand. As Jason slowly wheeled over to the passed out bum, the bottle fell out of the bum's hand and he slid in slow motion down the brick wall until the left side of his face was firmly planted in the dirt. The passed out, fallen over bum revealed the fine stitches on the back of his neck. He had a code. It was almost a sign, or as close to a sign as one could get. Jason took out the appropriate knife and stared

into its gleam. He knew what he was going to do but he ignored the fact that he was actually doing it. He didn't gain any pleasure from the thought of taking a life, but Jason felt it was necessary in order to save two. This man wasn't contributing to society. His life was a waste anyways; every night spent being passed out drunk in front of the same garbage cans. Jason got as close as he could to the man without running over any of his extremities. He was close enough and in one swift cut, followed the line of the old suture. The drunken bum staggered up, bumped into Jason, and fell back down. Jason, caught off balance, fell onto the bum and reached around his neck. Feeling the code, Jason pulled and in an instant it was as though the very life of the bum was switched off. Jason felt sick, partly from the overwhelming stench of piss and partly from the overwhelming distaste of killing someone, no matter how lowly, for something that he despised so much. The one thing in life that he hated more than anything. He held the bloody code in his hand and removed the spinal tissue that clung to it. This was the reason why codes were considered permanent. Without an external power source, the codes ran off the power of the electrical impulses that traveled up and down the spinal cord. First designed to help paralysis victims regain use of their body, codes became more and more sophisticated until they could be used for everything from a GPS location device to a type of credit card that was practically theft proof. Then, it was decided that these perfectly safe little devices would be implanted in every child, for the child's safety of course, so that if anything bad ever were to happen the child could be quickly located. Adults started having the devices installed so they never had to worry about having enough cash on hand. The phenomenon spread and as the crime rate shriveled, "happiness" soared. But what the government left out of their fun little numbers was that the death rate hadn't changed significantly.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

The rhythmic sound of the seat belt reminder continued to sound and the nurse finally clicked her belt to silence it. She pushed on the gas a little harder.

Her kids, who were used to erratic behavior ever since their father died, were silent in the back seat.

"Mom?" Finally one piped up. She looked in the rear view mirror at her youngest son. "Are we really going to the dentist?" His eyes contained more than a hint of fear.

She laughed. Her foot pushed down harder. "No, we're not going to the dentist."

Her youngest sighed in relief but her oldest gave her an obstinate look. It was his favorite now that he was a teenager. "*Then why are we here?*" His tone was sarcastic.

The nurse held it together. "I made a big mistake," she said. "I did something very bad and we have to leave."

"Leave?!" her middle son squealed. He was the one that was an animal lover and there was a houseful of pets they were abandoning. "What about Pepper? And Chloe? And the rabbits?" The boy looked horrified at the thought.

"The neighbor is going to take care of them until we can come back," she said, hoping her lie wasn't too obvious.

"Where are we going?" her oldest asked. "And what did you do anyways?"

She had heard of a place where rebels had gone to hide out. It was in Nevada, in some rock formation. There was some type of metallic rock that masked the devices they all had. It was going to be a long drive but they would be safe there. She felt guilty and hoped the settlement was as nice as she heard. Her children were going to have to grow up there.

The nurse told the three boys about the place in the mountains; making sure to emphasize all the fun they would have skiing and white water rafting. They seemed enthusiastic enough and had plenty of questions. She responded with plenty of lies. Her oldest pressed her again for the reason for the trip and she told them the honest truth – or at least part of the honest truth. She had made a mistake with a patient and he died.

“He was like your father,” she told them. “His account was empty and no one wanted to help him.”

Her kids gave her looks of approval and she was thankful for that. She wanted them to think of her as a good mother that was doing the best for them, not one that wanted to do everything she could to ruin their lives.

Behind them a siren began to wail. The nurse glanced at the speedometer and she wasn't speeding. An ominous feeling swept over her entire being. *This was it.*

She kept driving, hoping that the patrol behind her was on his way to a crime or had bumped the siren switch by mistake. Pulling over would be an admission of guilt. Surrender. She wasn't ready to surrender.

The sound of rotor blades whirred overhead. The youngest looked out the window and was excited at the sight of the helicopter, not realizing what it meant. The other two looked at it solemnly.

There was no way that she could outrun a helicopter to Nevada, she thought to herself. She pulled over along the side of the otherwise deserted highway, and the police pulled up behind her. The nurse took a breath, told her kids how much she loved them, and stepped out of the car. A warning bell reminded her that her keys were left in the ignition.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

“Confirm on target.” The man in the helicopter read the output on the device pointed at the woman still dressed in scrubs standing outside of her car.

A single shot rang out and the woman fell to the hot pavement. The sound of the helicopter masked any sound from the ground. The officer on the ground, however, heard the screams as loud as day.

“Oh no,” the officer said to the air patrol. “The woman stopped to get her kids.”

“I have more ammo,” the sniper in the chopper said coarsely.

“Save it,” the officer said.

“Whatever you say, boss,” the sniper said, and the chopper veered away.

The officer stared at the car and wondered what to do. The warning noise coming from the car mixed with the sobs was giving him a headache.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

The device in his hand chirped, indicating it was running low on battery power. It was no wonder. Jason had ripped it from its power source and he was now parked in front of his neighbor's apartment. Clyde. Or Claude. Jason didn't remember. All he knew was that the man was a respected neurosurgeon.

The man that opened the door didn't look like a respected neurosurgeon. His hair was disheveled and he smelled similar to the bum – the dead bum - by the garbage can. He didn't seem that bright either and almost closed the door upon deciding that no one was there.

“Down here,” Jason spoke and startled the man. His drink of choice – scotch – violently hit the ground.

“Thank God I have more,” the man wasn’t the least bit concerned about the broken glass. He grabbed a bottle from the cabinet and poured himself another drink, all while waving Jason in.

“I didn’t think you’d be home,” Jason said, opening the conversation with the man.

The man laughed in an almost maniacal way. “Do you know how many people are going to die because I’m not there?”

Jason said nothing, unsure of what the correct answer was supposed to be.

“A lot,” the doctor said in a way that seemed almost pleasantly surprised by the notion that people actually died when he didn’t go to work. He told Jason every last detail about his mandatory leave of absence due to differences in opinion between him and the hospital.

“Do you know how hard it is to wire someone’s brain back together and worry about making sure every part is properly rung up?” The doctor’s voice was loud and sarcastic. “I’m a neurosurgeon not a-” He couldn’t think of a derogatory term for *cashier*.

“I understand,” Jason said, filling in the awkward silence. “But I have a small problem and I was wondering if you could help.” Jason produced the chip and the doctor examined it.

“How hard is it to put one of these in?” Jason asked.

“Simple,” the doctor said. “I could put in one of these in my sleep.”

“So can you help me?” Jason asked, and the doctor nodded.

“Let me get my tools.”

“Wait,” Jason protested. “You’re drunk.”

“So?” The doctor said, slipping on a surgical gown. “I’m still the best neurosurgeon there is.”

Jason cringed but knew he had no other choice. The device in his hand reminded him of its presence with its continuous sounding.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

There was ringing in his head and he was weak but he was standing. Jason wanted to dance but his legs were tired and he had to finish what he started.

The doctor was pouring himself another scotch. Jason thanked him as he walked out the door, and the doctor gave him a courteous wave and downed the glass in one drink.

Pushing the wheelchair back down the alley, Jason found what he was looking for. His body was weak but his will was strong and he lifted the dead bum into the wheelchair. No one would notice him pushing someone in a wheelchair toward a hospital. Jason was going to leave the bum’s body where the nurse left him. He hoped his plan worked.

As he pushed the body past the street scanners he heard their characteristic sounding. Jason had never been so happy to hear that sound in his life.

### ***Beep Beep Beep***

As Jason covered the body in a blanket he heard the sound of a garbage truck down the street. He hurried away, not wanting to be discovered. Right down the street was where Jason needed to go. The mental facility where his wife was being held.

Jason entered the building and noticed how plain the interior was. Mental facilities, like prisons, were government regulated and didn’t bother with the

nonessentials like hanging portraits or shiny desks. Everything was very simple, too simple.

The receptionist eyed him with a look that asked him what he wanted in a friendly sort of way.

“I’m here to see a patient,” he said.

“The patient’s name?” The receptionist pulled up the database on her computer. Jason spelled it out for her.

“I’m sorry, but that patient was released on Wednesday,” the young woman said suspiciously.

“Released?” Jason was confused. “I thought she was suspected of murdering her child?” Pretending to realize something, he put out his hand. “Jeff. Jeff Woods. I was hired by her family to represent her.”

“Sorry Jeff,” she looked sympathetic. “She was released. Guess one of the nurses collaborated her story.”

Wednesday. Wednesday. Wednesday. Jason’s brow furrowed. He had crawled to the hospital on Wednesday, leaving his child at home to be abducted. Could it be possible?

Jason hoped it was true. He thanked the receptionist and left. The memory of a night ten years ago pressed in on him, when he had made his wife promise him that she would meet him poolside at the Hilton if they ever were separated and had no other way to contact each other. Jason waved at a taxi and hopped in the first one that stopped. The drunken bum he had taken the chip from had apparently saved up enough for a can of Budweiser or a half a taxi ride to the Hilton on the beach. Jason thanked the taxi driver and walked the rest of the way. It was hot and he was sweating but there was only one thing on his mind. Two things, actually. A beautiful woman and a beautiful baby girl.

Reaching his destination, Jason walked around the towering hotel to the pool area. He and his wife had been given a night’s stay at this hotel as a wedding gift. With the busy road right along the pool area, it hadn’t been the most relaxing, but lounging with his wife in the pool chairs, Jason had made her promise that this would be their spot to meet should anything happen. He desperately hoped she had remembered.

Pushing through the gate that led to the pool, Jason heard laughter. It was the kind of laughter that makes a person long to join in. In the kiddie pool was the face he longed to see. Jason smiled. He had never been so happy to see his wife.

“Jason!” she squealed. She held a baby – his baby – close to her chest and effortlessly climbed out of the shallow pool and came toward him.

Time seemed to stand still as Jason’s ecstasy dissipated. The sound of squealing tires was the first indication that something was wrong, but the glow in Lisa’s eyes and the sight of his child had Jason frozen in place. In an instant, a crashing sound - and a pickup truck followed, smashing its way into the pool area.

“No!” Jason screamed, his mind slow to comprehend what his eyes were registering.

The man in the pickup truck jumped out of the vehicle and, with a single glance, ran.

“You can’t get away with this, we’ll track you down,” Jason called after him, tears and rage building within.

The man stopped and looked at him, avoiding looking at the horror he had created. “I’m uncoded.”

The End

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## Angel

by Rod Martinez

She stood alone, staring out over the many grave markers in the dark. The warm Florida rain drops bounced off her hard skin. Angel was alone and no one saw her, no one else was there. The droplets found their way off her robe to the muddy ground. The lightning strike in the distance didn't cause her to jump, neither did the screeching brakes of a car that stopped in a rush and slid three feet on the slick asphalt just to the other side of the fence from her.

The headlights shone bright on her, she didn't even blink. Out of the car stepped a man, holding flowers in one hand, and he quickly yanked out the huge golf umbrella. He wiped his face, signaling the end of a crying fit he must have had during his drive, and he stepped over the short picket fence and walked over to a marked grave. Angel stood quiet, standing on a slab of stone surrounded by a puddle of rain water.

The man stopped at the grave marker, shoved his keys in his pocket and looked down. He never even bothered to acknowledge Angel, who stood silently in the shadow, her long hair riddled with water.

His shoes were already soaked and he didn't care. He let out a long disheartened sigh, knelt down and placed the flowers on the grave stone.

"I love you Mom," he uttered. Then he stood and stared at the grave, let out painful tears that only he and Angel witnessed.

"She loves you too," he heard.

"Huh?" he turned, saw no one: "... who said that?"

He looked around.

"She loves you," the voice said again in the dark.

The car's headlights were illuminating the entire area; no one else was there – no one, but the marble statue of an Angel just feet away from him, and they locked eyes. The angel was a local legend. She was there before the graveyard was. It was the people who formed Angelica, Florida who decided to name it Angelica, because the six foot marble statue of an angel complete with wings and a robe that touched the floor covering the cement slab that held her up was there, and nothing else was. That was back in the year 1927 when a family moving away from Tampa found the perfect spot to build their home. The home became the only train stop in Angelica and an entire town was built around it, and the Angel.

"Excuse me," the man said, "... who's here? I just need a moment alone with my Mom."

He looked around, saw no one, but the Angel was staring back at him with dead eyes.

"Hello?" he said.

He heard a flapping, something like wings.

"Your mother wants you to know that you can stop blaming yourself, she is at peace and she needs you to be at peace too. Can you do accept that, David?"

"Who's out here?" he asked.

He saw the form, the silhouette in the dark, and it seemed like it was moving. The rain drops fell cold on his back but he ignored it. A hand reached out to him. He saw it, it stretched out, almost inviting him to touch.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Angel. I am the watcher of the graves in my care.”

He walked closer and realized that he was speaking to a statue.

“Uh..?”

“David, it is ok. Your mother wanted me to convey the message. Live in peace. My work is done.”

Then she backed off and looked up into the rain-filled sky. In one heaving leap, she hopped into the air and disappeared into the night sky.

“Hello?” he said.

He looked up into the sky, shielded his eyes from the drops pounding down on him. He turned and stared at his mother’s grave and read the inscription.

“Elizabeth Racquel Jimenez, loving mother, rest in peace.”

He smiled and his face was totally wet from a mixture of tears and rain. He walked over to the cement pedestal where the Angel was standing just minutes before.

“I am at peace Mom,” he smiled, “... I am at peace.”

He stood there and stared out into the cemetery, then suddenly felt the ground starts to move. He started to jump off the pedestal, but for some reason his feet wouldn’t budge. He felt the sensation of something crawling up his legs. It was almost like wet cement bubbling up from the pedestal. He struggled, but slowly his entire body was stuck there.

“What’s happening!?! Angel!!?”

In a matter of minutes his entire body was molded and had changed into that of... an angel. The last thing on his body to turn into stone was his mouth, and he screamed in pain as wings sprouted out of his back.

“Auuuughhh!”

It was a dark, sweltering Florida summer night. The lone motorcycle coasted off the main road in Angelica, Florida and came to a slow stop at the graveyard. The rider slowly hopped off the Suzuki and walked up to the grave stones. The helmet was peeled off and the long hair of the rider flowed down on either side of the rider’s head. The tall brunette put the helmet on the seat and she strutted over to the grave on the far end and pulled the roses from the backpack. A tear crept out of her left eye and dropped softly down her cheek.

“Daddy, I miss you...” she signed.

She knelt on the ground at the gravestone.

The angel’s eyes followed her.

The End

## Machine Language

By Doug Rains

*One*

*November 9th 1979*

Air force Major Joe Thompson started this day like he had many others, stuck way beneath the ground in a nuclear missile complex located in the boonies of western Illinois. His only company was first lieutenant Kirk Longley who had been recently assigned here.

*“Yes, three more months of this damn’ boredom and I will be transferred out of this hole,” Thompson mused.*

“Is the coffee on, lieutenant?”

“Yes sir, just beginning to perk.”

“The donuts?”

“I thought we would change the pace a bit Major, I have some Italian pastry and a new issue of playboy to read.”

“Good man.”

*Being the ranking officer had its privileges.*

All of the sudden the overhead screen lit up like an over-decorated Christmas tree.

“What the fuck is that?” Thompson yelled.

“Holy shit! We have a launch from the Soviet Union. The inbounds are headed to the continental United States,” Longley shouted.

“That does not make any sense; we were at Defcon 5 a minute ago.”

“We are now officially at Defcon one sir.”

“Jesus, I would like to know what the hell is going on here. Going directly to Defcon one from five does not make any sense at all. ”

“We are being attacked, sir. I heard the Soviets went to a new nuclear response program taking the human element out of the loop.”

“Lovely, so now some damn machine has gone berserk and they are not going to stop it?”

“It does not appear that way sir. Perhaps someone is sleeping at the switch.”

“I need authentication before I waste twenty million people.”

“Confirming authentication code,” Longley replied while punching on his keyboard.

“Authentication Code is Tango, November, Delta, Omega, Foxtrot, sir.”

Major Thompson removed a manila envelope from the top drawer of his desk and hurriedly ripped it open.

AUTHENTICATION CODE: TNDOF., it read.

“Sir?”

“It matches. Insert your key in the activation slot.”

“Done, sir.”

No one person could turn both keys at the same time due to the distance they were spaced apart.

“On my count turn key to the left, one, two, three: Now.”

“Done sir, missile silos are activated. The bull pen is getting hot.”

“Oh sweet mother of God,” Thompson moaned.

“Sir, do you think this is just a drill?”

“No, not when the authentication code begins with a T, we most likely are in a shooting war. Some underground missile centers will balk and think it is a false alarm and refuse to launch. That is why we have an overkill factor. What is not wiped out by the land based missiles the nuclear subs will take out as well as the scrambled bombers.”

“Awaiting orders sir.”

“Open up the ground and use the damn’ phone - it has a direct line to the commander of Norad.”

“Sir, I can’t get through.”

“Well keep trying, damn it!”

After several minutes Kirk Longley shook his head in futility.

“The phone lines are jammed sir.”

“Well that doesn’t surprise me, every Tom, Dick and Jane are trying to find out what is coming down.”

“Sir, the inbounds have entered our airspace.”

“Elevate weapons to surface excitation.”

“Weapons elevated to surface excitation status.”

“Initialize firing order.”

“Fire order initialized, sir.”

“Launch first salvo.”

“First salvo launched, sir.”

“Launch second salvo.”

“Second salvo launched, sir.”

“Launch third salvo.”

“Third salvo launched, sir.”

“Launch final salvo.”

“Final salvo launched, sir.”

“May God forgive me for what I have done,” Thompson cried.

Shortly before 9 a.m. on November 9, 1979, the computers at North American Aerospace Defense Command’s Cheyenne Mountain site, the Pentagon’s National Military Command Center, and the Alternate National Military Command Center in Fort Ritchie, Maryland, all showed what the United States feared most—a massive Soviet nuclear strike aimed at destroying the U.S. command system and nuclear forces. A threat assessment conference, involving senior officers at all three command posts, was convened immediately. Launch control centers for Minuteman missiles, buried deep below the prairie grass in the American West, received preliminary warning that the United States was under a massive nuclear attack.

## ***Two***

*May 8th 2019 (And things that happened before)*

John Morris was a fatalist. He grew up during the cold war and was deathly afraid of a nuclear holocaust. He had lived through the missiles of October, the Kennedy/Khrushchev years and for this reason built the best fall-out shelter that money could buy. When that fateful day occurred in November of 1979 he only had a limited warning before he was able to secure his wife and three year old son in the sub-basement of their home in Chicago where they would live for the next forty years. John was an Electro-mechanical engineer and was only 27 years old at the time but he had amassed considerable wealth from a lucrative salary and an inheritance from the premature death of his parents.

The fall-out shelter was State of the Art. He had gallons of diesel fuel to run a generator which he used sparingly. Slow burning candles were used many times to provide lighting and he had battery powered lamps that were rechargeable when the generator was running. He had designed a way to capture rainwater from above and distill and purify it using propane tanks as a source of heating. They had a huge storeroom of canned goods but he would have to be careful to limit his family’s

caloric input. They were even able to grow a small garden from some soil he had brought down to the shelter. It was a Spartan type of life, but at least they had a life.

The radio he had produced nothing but static. He had a way to measure the outside radiation levels but they never seemed to diminish very quickly. He had many video tapes and a VHS player but after ten years they had watched all of them in the dim light.

They slept about ten hours a day but John would not allow his family to become lethargic. They did routine exercises and played board games to keep their minds active. Their food eventually ran out and John would have to go up to the surface to scavenge for canned goods. He always went armed with his .38 caliber pistol because there were crazies on the upside that had not been killed off by the radiation. Occasionally when he returned home he would become sick but these episodes would pass fairly quickly. John would always wear a cloak lined with lead bricks and a helmet to keep from being too affected by the residual radiation.

One upside trip produced something very surprising for John.

When John was stumbling around a decimated supermarket trying to salvage some canned goods, some monstrosity leaped out in front of him. It was a horrible mass of former humanity. Its body was bloated and distorted; its face looked like it had been twisted in a number of different directions with no final destination in mind.

“Gabba horis much offa quell,” it grunted.

John backed away.

“Stay away from me!” he yelled.

The creature/man ignored him and continued to advance.

John took out his pistol and shot it in the head.

The mass of coagulated and discolored flesh went down and did not move again.

“You killed Harry!”

John whirled around in the direction of this new voice.

Before him stood someone who at least somewhat resembled a human being.

He was tall but stooped, he had pointed dark beard, one ear was absent and his left eye was the color of milk.

“James Worthy?” John shouted.

“Hello John; it was difficult recognizing you in that outfit but you have a very distinctive walk.”

“So you survived after this nuclear war, how were you able to resist the radiation?”

“Oh, some have more resistance than others: but I am dying. I pounded on your door when this lunacy all came down but you would not let me in.”

“I told you people that this could happen someday but you all laughed at me. I did not want to compromise the survival of my family.”

“Oh yes, sweet logical John, but now you will have the others to deal with - they are only in their infancy but I think they will take over the Earth.”

“What are you talking about? Who are these others?”

“You will find out, John.”

James Worthy collapsed on the ground and threw up a mass of blood.

“Adios, Sabata.”

John felt his pulse: there was no pulse - he was gone.

Despite their protests John did not want to allow his wife and son to accompany him on his upside excursions but he knew it was only a matter of time before he

would have to relent and accede to their demands. They had been buried beneath the earth for almost twenty years now.

On one upside excursion, John had hit pay dirt. He found some spare propane tanks and was able to siphon some diesel fuel from a dilapidated gasoline station. The problem was that he needed to keep moving further outward to find new supplies and always being on the lookout for the ‘crazies.’”

His family would have to help him with this, he was becoming too old to do it all by himself anymore. In the twenty-ninth year, the radiation had reduced enough to allow all of them to stay on the surface for a limited time without protection. The crazies were no longer a problem and appeared to have vanished. But John knew he was being watched.

After ten more years of living beneath the ground and on the surface for short periods of time, the radiation levels went into the safe zone, and John and his family left their fall-out shelter and decided to live where they could see the sun again and no longer live in the semi-darkness. John was now 67 years old and his wife Janice was two years younger than him. Joshua his son was now 43 years old, he was incredibly smart but had the social skills of a ten year old.

### ***Three***

*Now you are totally for me (Or how I wished I never met these beings.)*

John loved tree houses as a kid and built one for his wife and son. They had journeyed far from their house/fall-out shelter, carrying as many supplies as they could. The City of Chicago was in ruins so they ventured further out into the suburbs. None of the houses were worth living in, most had been leveled but John found some scraps of wood and some tools in a half demolished hardware store, allowing him to build the tree house. Living elevated off the ground had its advantages. It kept them safe from roaming predators. The days were very warm - John had no idea what month it was; when it became colder they would have to find other living arrangements.

“Do you think we will find other people like us?” his wife asked.

“I hope so dear, maybe there is a commune somewhere, so if we don’t meet any presentable people here we will have to keep moving.”

They had encountered some decaying bodies; the odor was almost unbearable.

The tree house had three levels. The upper level consisted of their sleeping quarters, three sleeping bags and a kerosene lamp. The second level had a crudely made picnic table and the last level was used mostly for storage. The last level was still eight feet above ground level. John had made a rope ladder allowing the access to their new home. At the ground level was a gas grill fed from a propane tank.

So far John had found no cars that were operable, most of them were melted metal pieces of junk.

They found no life around them except birds and a stray cat and a wild rabbit. There were insects - mostly flies, spiders, and mosquitoes, but even their population had been significantly reduced.

When it started to get cold they were on the move again. They were lucky to find an abandoned Winnebago that was in livable condition. Whoever owned this mobile vehicle had left in a hell of a hurry. There were some soft drink cans and a half eaten pizza on the table behind the driver and shotgun seats. There was some spoiled food in a small refrigerator that was no longer working. John used a spatula he found to bury them away from the unit. Some keys were left in the ignition but the engine would not turn over.

There was a small kitchenette with an oven powered by some propane tanks below that still were about half full. In the cupboards were some paper plates and some pots and pans and plastic utensils. A five gallon jug of water was in the rear of the Winnebago near a queen sized bed. While Janice was heating up some canned chili, Joshua and John built a fire outside.

As they sat on a blanket eating their chili and watching the flames of their bonfire, Joshua proposed a question.

“Daddy, do you think we will find any people like us?”

“Well my son, that is why we are on the move, to see if we can make that happen.”

When they started their scavenger hunt the next morning they came upon a something that looked completely out of place with the topography. In an open field were over fifty huge mounds. They looked a bit like giant ant hills but their construction reflected light in such a way that indicated a metallic type of consistency.

Nine figures emerged and approached them. All of them were about equal in height, about 6 feet tall, and seven of them had small horns protruding from the top of their oversized heads and some brownish fur on each side of a face that had large dark eyes. They were nude except for a loin cloth around their mid-section. The two others had no horns but had three ample breasts on a barrel shaped chest.

*Females?*

They all stopped about ten feet away, then one of them took three steps forward. John noticed they all had long arms and slender fingers but their feet had no toes: they were hoofs.

“You can call me Maliky.”

“Hello; my name is John and this is my family. Who are you folks?”

“Dad, they look like a cross between a human and a cow.”

“Hush, Joshua,” Janice admonished.

Maliky laughed; it sounded hideous and sent shivers up John’s spine and backbone.

“Yes, we evolved from cattle. Cattle that went to your slaughterhouses so you could have your Mc Donald and Wendy’s hamburgers and eat your prime rib and filet mignon at your fancy restaurants.”

“Okay, so what? You have now evolved into something else besides common cattle, we evolved from the apes.”

“Yes, but you did not slaughter the apes did you?”

“What is the point you are trying to make here?” Janice yelled.

“We retained the memory of our vanquished ancestors. We can still hear their pain and torment. A cow is a noble animal and this waste that you humans placed on this world allowed many cattle to mutate into what you see before you. Some cattle had more resistance to the radiation than the humans and we are the result: a wonderful metamorphosis!”

“Okay, can’t we be friends?” Joshua asked.

Maliky laughed again. “Yes, we will be your friends as we dice, slice, cut and cook you up. We like aged beef, it is payback time. You killed children so you could have your veal scaloppini and picante.”

John pulled his pistol out of his pocket, but Maliky kicked it away.

“Nice try, meat. We have not met many people who are unsoiled like you. Most of them had been trashed by your poisonous weapons. You are a delicacy, but we will keep your son alive for breeding purposes.”

“Can’t you allow us to meet other people like us?”

“Oh, you will meet them in our stomachs - at least, pieces of them.”

The cow people cheered and carried John and his family away.

John's last thought was:

WHY DIDN'T I TELL THEM I WAS A VEGETARIAN?

The End

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## [The Exclusion Zone](#)

by [Crystal Vaughan](#)

THE OLD woman emerged from her run-down shack, making her way laboriously through the heavy snow to the rutted and gouged tracks of the tiny road that ran east and west, a hundred feet away from her door. In spite of the day's chill, and her advanced age, her ruddy cheeks were flushed with good health. She wore a brightly colored orange and blue kerchief around her head, called a *platok*. Her simple homespun garments were layered over thick, knit stockings, the feet of which were stuffed into heavy soled boots. An enormous black leather handbag completed the ensemble, containing her bible, her knitting, and a snack for the return ride home. The old lady hummed to herself while she waited for the monthly bus to pick her up and take her to the only nearby church in the wasted city of Chernobyl.

The woman was Hannah Roshenko. She returned to her village of Starryl a mere four years following the disaster at Chernobyl in 1986. Others began to trickle back as well, their ties to the land they loved worth any risk of radiation exposure. Most of those who returned were older women, widows like her, who felt they had nothing left to lose and everything to gain by returning home. They got along fine on their pensions and small farms. Now, twenty-six years after the meltdown at Reactor Four, Hannah and her contemporaries were not the only ones to return. Unbeknownst to the rest of the world, some 3,800 souls had returned to the Exclusion Zone surrounding Chernobyl, living in small villages that were once thriving but now sat hushed in the snow like ghosts of their former selves. Many of these people were workers at Chernobyl, cleaners responsible for trying to mop up the mess left by the destructive radiation. The workers lived a rotating schedule, fifteen days in the Zone and fifteen days out, to prevent risk of radiation sickness. Others, like Hannah, lived where they pleased and were left alone as long as they stayed away from the restricted area, an eighteen mile radius of land that surrounded the reactor site and the deserted town of Pripyat. Tours were allowed there, for four hours at a time, as long as people stayed out of the buildings; habitation by humans was out of the question.

Hannah and her neighbors took advantage of the monthly bus that came through to deliver goods to Chernobyl. There, they attended church and replenished the supplies they needed to live on the outskirts of a dead civilization. Also, it was their opportunity to catch up on gossip; another transport was provided for the workers, which suited Hannah and her friends just fine. The supply bus was all theirs. Hannah's nearest neighbor was some ways away. She was alone for at least six miles before another tough old *babushka* like her could be found. Her best friend, Galina Utopa, lived to the east of Hannah's place, closer to town, and Hannah was eager to spend time with her friend.

Hannah's small homestead was the farthest from town, on the very edge of Starryl village. Only twenty people lived in Starryl, spread out across twenty square miles of wilderness. Hemmed in by thick forest, she thrived on the solitude and hard work. Since the disaster, the area known as the Exclusion Zone had undergone a marvelous transformation. With very little human habitation or interference, the area thrived. In fact, the restricted zone surrounding the reactor site was a veritable Garden of Eden, teeming with wildlife and lush vegetation, despite the fact that the ground was drenched in fifty times the radiation level deemed safe for humans. It spoke volumes to Hannah about the effect of humanity on the planet; where death was supposed to reign supreme, life took hold and flourished in their absence. Where humans had decreed that they could no longer live for the next two hundred years because of their own foolishness, the kingdom of earth reclaimed its tarnished soil and triumphed. Hannah remembered going to the magnificent town of Pripyat, now an overgrown wilderness full of ghosts and empty buildings. She had taken her children to the year-round fair they held there with her husband Petyr, a worker at the plant, and her children, daughter Irina and son Ivan. Both very young, they hardly remembered the panic, the evacuation, the pain of their father's wasting death...

Hannah shook her head, clearing her mind of old memories. Ivan was now a successful doctor in Kiev; he wrote to her every week and sent her money. Once a year, she visited him in the city for a weekend before the longing for her home compelled her to kiss his cheek and request that he drive her back to the first checkpoint just outside the Exclusion Zone. He never visited her at her house and she understood that his role as a doctor gave him too much knowledge of what could happen if he were exposed to the radiation. She was old; her bones had less time to absorb the poison. He was young, and vital, and necessary. She never pressed him to visit her, insisting he leave her at the checkpoint. Residents were treated differently than tourists by the checkpoint guards; her transport to Starryl village was arranged easily.

Her daughter Irina had married, a scientist like her father, and was living happily in America. Her husband, Aleksy, worked for the government there. A nuclear physicist, ironically. Hannah kept a framed photograph of her teenaged granddaughter, Anya, on her fireplace mantle. She was a beautiful blond-haired, blue-eyed girl with rosy cheeks, just like her *babushka*.

The bus was running late. Hannah stamped her booted feet in the snow, her toes starting to go numb. A movement across the small, snow-filled lane caught her eye and she stilled, trying to catch a better look at whatever had moved. She wasn't afraid, not then; living on the edges of a broken society meant she had to learn to take care of herself. She was mostly curious to see if it was something she might trap for the pantry.

She strained her old eyes for a few minutes longer, then dismissed the movement as a trick of light on a tired mind. She started to stamp her feet again to encourage circulation when a menacing snarl drifted through the trees, echoing through the empty woods and bouncing back upon itself, magnifying the sound as well as any high-tech amplifier.

Hannah sucked in a breath. "*Volk*," she thought. Mind racing, she scanned the nearby treeline urgently, backing away and wondering if she could reach her door before it broke from the trees and was upon her.

Wolves do not attack people, as a general rule, but Hannah knew that an old, defenseless woman might be an enticement for a hungry predator during a harsh winter. Since so few people had returned, and the animal population had exploded,

wolf sightings were commonplace. It was a great concern, talked to death at the monthly gatherings. Many had lost livestock to the predation of wolves. Hannah could not recall if anyone had been attacked but knew she'd rather not find out first-hand if the wolves of Chernobyl had acquired a taste for human flesh.

The animal snarled again, louder, closer this time but still invisible. She backpedaled to her door faster, still seeing nothing in the trees but hearing the animal's angry voice reverberate through her bones like the buzz of a million bees. It was on all sides of her, penning her in, cutting her off from her door, her safety and her defense. She wondered if there were more than one wolf, but still saw nothing.

Hannah panicked; still seeing no enemy to fight against, her ears filled with the sounds of its rage, her every nerve ending screamed at her to flee. She blindly threw her leather purse towards the trees with a scream and turned to run for her front door. Fully in the grip of terror, she was panting and sobbing, cursing her age and slow pace. The door never seemed to get closer, and now over the sounds of the beastly snarling she heard the unmistakable thudding of heavy feet making impact with the frozen snow packed earth. She dared not risk even a second to look behind her, to see the nature of her own death approaching. Her heart pounded in sympathy with the beast's feet hitting the ground. She increased her efforts to reach her door alive, to lay her hands on her rifle and blow the thing's head off. She expected at any second to feel its hot breath on the back of her neck, waited to be thrown to the ground with the force of its weight, already hearing the crunch of its sharp teeth as it crushed her windpipe and drained her life's blood into the snow.

Its snarls changed as it gained ground on her, now a grunting exhalation with each lurch forward, an eager sound full of longing. In the forest around her, eerie howls punctuated her flight, confirming her stalker was not alone and egging on the one who chased her down like a deer.

Her wrinkled and age spotted hand slipped on the doorknob of the entryway to her house, turning it briefly before the back of her coat was seized by a powerful force and she was ripped away from imminent safety by the cruel jaws of fate. She waited to die and join her beloved Petyr.

The howls in the woods ceased suddenly, like the needle of a record player suddenly cutting off unearthly music. The instant cessation of sound left a ringing in her ears in the silence, broken at once by a single massive groan of pain and the meaty sound of bodies making impact with one another. The ugliest sounds she had ever heard replaced the silence and she rolled over quickly to face this new threat, using her legs to scramble back toward her door. Not quite certain she wasn't dead, she forced her teary eyes to take in the scene before her.

Two massive wolves rolled in the snow of the small clearing in front of her house. Deep, visceral snarling issued forth from them both as they attempted to rend each other limb from limb. One of the wolves was the typical gray and white coat of a wolf, the other as black as coal. Hannah watched in open-mouthed disbelief as the two enormous predators fought harder, both bleeding on the snow. In the nearby trees, silvery wolf shapes watched the melee, their eyes never moving from the two fighters. A low, agonized whine issued forth from the throat of one of the watchers, and the black and gray wolf broke apart as though it were a signal. They stood a few feet apart from each other, their hot breaths and blood steaming in the cold air. The black wolf flicked his blue eyes to where Hannah lay sprawled in front of her door in the churned up snow and peeled its lips back from wicked ivory teeth. He made as if to lunge for her and the gray wolf threw himself at the black wolf again, the battle resuming with even greater fury than before.

Their clash was short lived; the air filled with the growl of another sort of beast. At last, the town bus wheezed and clacked its way through the forest, gears grinding a cacophony as it labored toward her house. Hannah closed her eyes in thanks. When she opened them, the wolves had melted into the trees. The only proof she had that it wasn't all in her imagination was the blood stained snow where the two creatures had battled.

She climbed shakily to her feet and tottered toward the bloody snow. After a moment's thought, she scraped her boot across the worst of the stains, covering them with somewhat cleaner snow. She hobbled over to where her purse had landed after she threw it at her then unseen attacker. Feeling foolish now, she stooped to pluck it from its snowy bed. Her bones protested in agony; the day's over-excitement was going to cost her later. She made a mental note to pick up some ointment, hoping she wouldn't forget as her mind replayed the scene over and over.

The bus, an ancient relic painted bright blue for unknown reasons, ground finally to a halt a few feet from where she stood. Javan Petrescu, the driver, was a retired school bus driver, portly and gray haired but always smiling kindly. Hannah was always his first passenger on the way in, and his last passenger on the way out. He enjoyed her company immensely; in fact, he had a bit of a crush on her, though at sixty-seven, he was twelve years her junior.

Today, as he opened the wheezing pneumatic doors, he noticed she was pale, shaking. With great concern, he hurried down the steps to grab her arm, escorting her onto the bus. At this, some of her fire returned to her.

"I'm no baby, Javan! I need no help from the likes of you!" her surprisingly deep voice admonished.

He smiled; this was the Hannah he knew. But a moment later, his smile faded as he noticed her coat was torn in the back. "Hannah! *Dorogoy*, your coat, it is injured!" "I'm not your darling, Javan Petrescu. Cease pawing at me! I merely fell, if you must know, but happily for my coat it is nothing I cannot mend. Now, let me go so we can be on our way. We are already late as it is!"

He grinned sheepishly. Not wishing to draw her ire further by commenting on her well-being after falling, he meekly followed her onto the bus. She took up her usual seat directly behind him, settling in like a dowager queen. With his pleasure in her company fully restored, he closed the doors and put the decrepit bus into gear. He began chattering away, telling Hannah of his activities over the past month since he'd last seen her.

Hannah knew Javan was in love with her but did not draw attention to the man's infatuation. He was a good friend, nothing more. All of that love business had died along with Petyr.

She gazed absently out the window, the events of the past hour seemingly unreal, like a fairytale told to a child, half remembered, rather than something she had lived to tell.

The feeling of unreality disappeared as the bus labored to get moving. Out of the cover of the trees, the gray wolf appeared in the soft light of the fading morning. He gazed unblinkingly at her through the glass window, watching her leave. The creature's eyes were as green as bits of brightly polished bottles. Hannah's breath caught in her throat at the sight of them; not wolf eyes within that lupine face, her mind screamed. Every hair on her body stood straight at attention and fear flooded her veins like antifreeze.

"*Oborotyen*," she breathed as, finally, the bus left the house, the trees, and the wolf behind. Javan continued talking, unaware of her turmoil.

Every myth and story she had ever heard or read about werewolves flooded her mind. In human form, folklore said, one could only identify a werewolf--also called *volk dlak*, or "wolf skin"--by the bristles beneath its tongue. In the Songs of the Volga, and the teachings of Ralston, werewolves had made a pact with the Devil to receive the incantation that changed men into wolves. She crossed herself unconsciously at the thought.

Other mythology was equally troubling where *oborotyen* were concerned. Yet...Hannah could not help but recall that the gray wolf had intervened on her behalf, saving her from the jaws of the black wolf not once but twice. She felt a sudden chill thinking about the black one's wrath. The Exclusion Zone encompassed some thirty kilometers; who knew how many of those brutes were out there?

She resolved to treat the gray one as apart from the others, and to buy some extra food while she was in town to leave for him. At some distance from her house, of course.

As for the black wolf and the others who had watched, she also resolved to buy more bullets.

The End

###

*We hope you have enjoyed this anthology of stories. You can find out more about all the contributors and their other books below.*

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

### **Roger Bone**

The third boy in a family of four children, Roger Bone is in his forties and lives in Missouri. His children's book *Little Bear's Trial* is due out soon from Crimson Cloak Publishing.

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

*Little Bear's Trial*



*A Native American child must make a journey alone in order to complete his Coming-of-Age Trial. His quest for the eagle feather leads him to the discovery of age-old wisdom.*

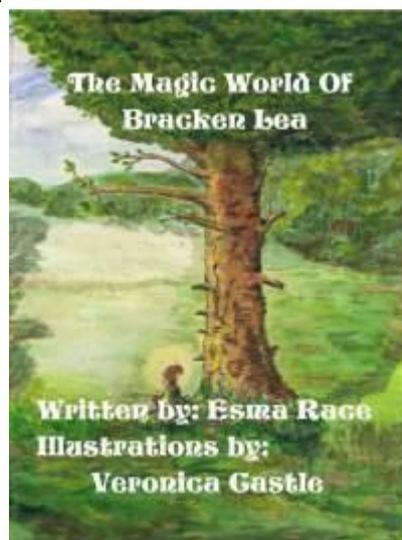
A children's story with timeless appeal, out soon from Crimson Cloak Publishing.  
Illustrated by Veronica Castle.

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### **Veronica Castle**

Veronica Castle lives in the High Pennines of northern England. She is the illustrator of *The Traveller*, published by Solstice, and *The Magic World of Bracken Lea* by [Esma Race](#), and *Little Bear's Trial* by [Roger Bone](#), releasing soon from Crimson Cloak Publishing.



*Links to more information:*

<http://raceesma.wix.com/esma-race#!veronica-castle/c1tpe>

<http://www.farcourt.co.uk/ge/zentangle.html>  
<https://www.facebook.com/esmarace>  
<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/veronicacastle>

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### [Janice Lewis Clark](#)



Janice Clark lives in the Pacific Northwest, where the morning fog drifting over the coastal hills could easily conceal dragons or any number of magical creatures. She and her brother share a home on partially wooded acreage, frequented by a variety of birds, deer, squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, the neighbor's free-range chickens, and several cats who hunt the area. She does not currently own (or is not owned by) a cat or any other four-footed being. Frequently-resident grandchildren and a large garden are sufficient to occupy any time not taken up by writing.

<http://www.janiceclark.net>  
<http://www.teawiththeblackdragon.blogspot.com/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/PrincessButtermilkBiscuit>  
<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/JanClark>  
<http://www.amazon.com/Janice-Lewis-Clark/e/B001K86P3C/>

#### **The Hall of Doors series:**

*Book one, **The Mountains of the Moon**: Sammy's worried. Her cat has disappeared again. No one knows where Princess Buttermilk Biscuit goes on full-moon nights. Will she come back this time?*

*When Sammy follows her cat up a moonbeam to a world of mist and moonlight, she meets Selena, who lives in a beautiful fairy-tale castle. Sammy is fascinated by the Hall of Doors with its magical portals to other worlds. But the dreamlike adventure turns into a nightmare when Sammy is faced with the hardest decision of her life. Will she have the courage to make the right choice?*

*Book two, **The Door in the Sky***

*Book three, **The Mirror Door***

*Book four, **The Secret Door***

*Book five, **The Water Door***

*Fairy Gold* This is a “prequel” to the story of Teeka, Angelina’s daughter, in the *Apprentice Healer* series. The first chapter of *To Heal a Broken Planet* is included. Publication of that novel, and its sequel, *Into the Unknown*, is pending.  
*A Brave Doll*

Other free materials on the website include “extra scenes” for the first three Hall of Doors books and an assortment of short material.

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### [Mark Conte](#)



Mark Randolph Conte has published fiction, poetry, articles, interviews and Guest Columns in 67 publications including Yankee, Crazy Horse, Potomac Review, Washington Post, Miami Herald, Philadelphia Daily News, Tallahassee Democrat, New York Arts Journal, Northwest Florida Daily News, Southern Poetry Review, Poetry International, Poet, Devil's Millhopper, Apalachee Quarterly, Snake Nation, Poem, and others. He was Director of the Florida State University Poet Series, and was appointed Master Poet for the Poet in the Schools program by the Florida Arts Council and Assistant Director of the Center for Participant Education. He is a member of the Authors' Guild & Academy of American Poets. He won honorable mention in the PEN American awards in short fiction in 1979, first prize in poetry in the Barbwire Theater awards and the Packard Poetry Award.

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

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/fictionguy>

<http://www.amazon.com/Mark-Randolph-Conte/e/B003U4ULJ8/>

*Walking on Water*, Cross Cultural Press

*In the Arms of Strangers*, Gaius press

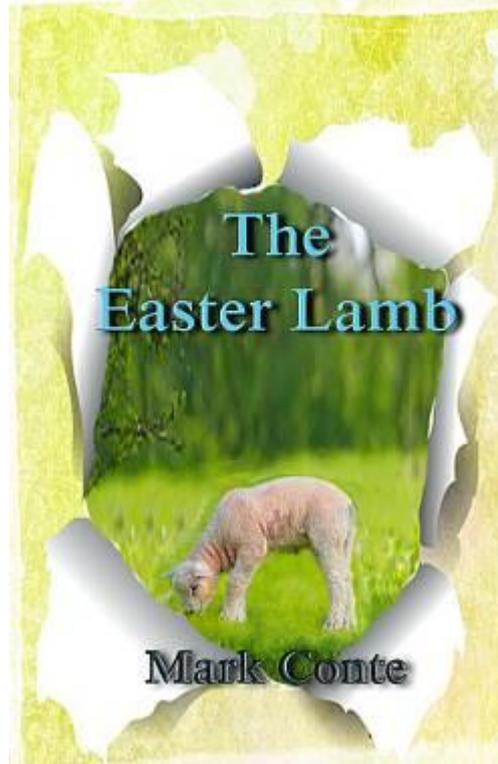
*Of Flesh and Stone*, Aberdeen Press

*The Ghost*, Solstice

Anthologies:

*Florida in Poetry*, Pineapple Press, 1995  
*In The West of Ireland*, Enright House, 1992  
*A Friend of the family*

*The Easter Lamb*, out soon from Crimson Cloak Publishing.



*In the Vianello family a lamb is bought on Good Friday, fattened up all day Friday and Saturday, and slaughtered Saturday night to be cooked for Easter dinner. But this year, the three Vianello boys, Dante, Johnny and Carlo, along with the Irish girl next door, become fond of the lamb, which they have named Delilah, and devise a daring plan to rescue it from this fate. An amusing and inspiring family story for all ages.*

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[Ray Daley](#)



Ray Daley was born in Coventry, UK, & still lives there. He served 6 years in the RAF as a clerk & spent most of his time in a Hobbit hole in High Wycombe. He is a published poet & has been writing stories since he was 10. His current dream is to eventually finish the Hitch Hiker's fanfic novel he's been writing since 1986.

<http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/RayPDaley>

[Twitter: @RayDaleyWriter](#)

<https://www.facebook.com/raymond.daley.10>

<http://raymondwriteswrongs.wordpress.com>

<http://www.fartherstars.com/2014/03/32014.html>

<http://linguisticerosion.blogspot.co.uk/search/?q=ray+daley>

<http://365tomorrows.com/?s=ray+daley>

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### [Madeline Dow](#)



Madeline is a former mental health nurse who turned her skills toward entrepreneurial pursuits when she became an operations and sales manager for a national health care company. After leaving the corporate world she worked as a marketing and development consultant for a regional symphony. When her son Travis, a singer songwriter, became ill she had just begun to manage his song publishing career. She

became his caregiver instead. Madeline has written a memoir and short stories and is now working on a book about her son and his music.

<https://toughlovetruelove.wordpress.com>  
<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/arpeggiata>  
[http://blogs.calstate.edu/voicesviews/?page\\_id=16](http://blogs.calstate.edu/voicesviews/?page_id=16)  
<http://www.heroesinrecovery.com/share/>  
<http://hometown-pasadena.com/featured/field-of-poppies/91209>

Works by Madeline Dow:

*Letting Go*, Ventura County Writers Association Magazine,  
*Hear My Song* (story), CSU Voices and Views,  
*Tough Love*, *Heroes in Recovery*,  
*Why I Write*, Author's Publish Magazine Contest, first runner up

***Hear My Song*** (Synopsis of work in progress; a memoir about my son Travis's life and music.)

*My son took his last breath in my arms on the night of his forty first birthday. Shortly before he became ill he asked me to take the lead in marketing his songs. I enthusiastically put my own writing on the back burner and completed my last consulting job, ecstatic at the chance to help Travis, a gifted and prolific singer-songwriter since age six. We had only just begun when Travis became ill. Instead of managing his publishing I managed his care.*

*Months later my friend Cecile and I stood on the banks of the Colorado River and placed a memorial stone for Travis. "I have to keep Trav's music alive, Ceil. That's what he wanted when he got to Nashville with his songs."*

*"Can you help me now, Mom? You're the only one I can ask."*

*I was his biggest fan. Of course I would help him. I promised.*

*Cecile mused, "But I see you as a writer."*

*"No, I have to focus on Trav's music."*

*His words lingered, "Treat my music like gold because that is what it is to me."*

*I struggled with unspeakable grief, wondering "how will I keep my promise?"*

*One day as I stood atop Mt. Washington, Los Angeles spread its lonely wings below me. Cecile's prophetic words guided me back to my path.*

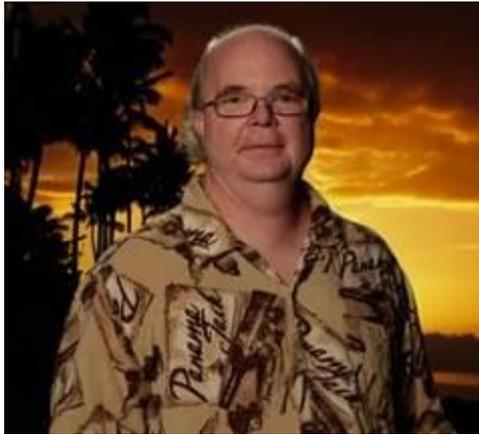
*"You're a writer, Madeline."*

*The book deals with the universal themes of an artist's struggle to make his way in our contemporary society, the conflicts a performer faces in his relationships, the fight to stay true to his art while making a living wage and finally, to stay alive. It tells Travis' story through his music. I keep my promise.*

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[T W Embry](#)



Todd was in culinary school doing an essay for the English portion of his AA degree. After finishing his assignment in a scant 20 minutes, the professor looked at his work, then asked him: "How many books have you written?" Todd had forgotten the young boy who used to write ghost stories to scare his grandmother. Later, he met an author who was giving a lecture at the local library and thought that would be a cool thing to do. Remembering the words of Professor Wolfson in culinary school, he sat down at the computer and started what would become *Revenge from Mars*, his first novel.

Todd's book *Alien Manifesto* is published by Crimson Cloak Publishing.



*Synopsis: When orphaned ex-Navy S.E.A.L. Thomas Scott decides upon a life of crime, he does not expect to be recruited to join an elite Special Forces operation charged with stealing an alien artifact. Especially a mixed-species alien team headed by inter-galactic billionaire Snarth. The close-knit team soon becomes Tom's family in more senses than one, which complicates matters when the mysterious artifact turns out to hold secrets that may plunge the whole of the known universe into a devastating war...*

<http://twembry.com/>

<http://www.amazon.com/T.W.-Embry/e/B00FYA91NS>

<http://marielavender.blogspot.co.uk/2014/10/interview-with-author-tw-embry.html>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/twembry0>

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## Jane Finch



Jane Finch has been writing since she was a child. She is the author of fourteen books and online editor for two American publishers. She is a proofreader and reviewer of adult and children's books.

<http://www.finchlark.webs.com>

<https://www.facebook.com/jane.finch.14>

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

[www.bookchoice4u.com](http://www.bookchoice4u.com)

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Jane-Finch/e/B0034O2FA2/>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/Finchlark>

### ***Sandcastles in the Air***

*Synopsis: After a painful and acrimonious divorce Kate Osborne decides to have a new start with a new job in the Seychelles. She knew it would be a wonderful new life for her and her son, but Kate's life is put in turmoil when the Court awards care to her former husband until she is able to make firm arrangements for her son's accommodation and schooling. Fearful of leaving her son with Alec, her former husband, she has no choice, and whilst she is away he takes the child, Davie, intent of depriving Kate of ever seeing her son again. The trauma of the divorce has affected Alec's mind and his paranoia grows as he attempts to put his plan into action, but he has not anticipated how hard it would be to keep a mother from her child. Alec tries everything in his power to thwart Kate's plans and when she returns to England for her son she realises that he has kidnapped his own child. Unwilling to wait for the police to act, Kate goes off in search of her troubled ex-husband and child, only to experience the full extent of his unstable mind and paranoia with devastating consequences.*

Watch for ***Twelve Days to Save Christmas***, a Christmas short story coming soon from Crimson Cloak Publishing.

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## [Don Ford](#)



A Native American writer and an Environmentalist caring for the natural world of water, land, air, and all living things, Don has published works throughout the U. S. and Europe, Portugal and Cyprus in particular, with connections in 62 other countries. From 2006 to 2011, he was the Forum Moderator for both the Humor Forum and the Spiritual Forum for Readers Digest Magazine. He was also the named Storyteller for the New York State Parks and Recreation Dept. at the New York State Fair Aug./Sept. 2011.

<https://www.facebook.com/donford2013>

<http://tinyurl.com/14al233>

<http://www.awritercomestocall.webs.com>

<http://www.amazon.com/Don-Ford/e/B006S7AQ2G>

[http://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=44086905&trk=hb\\_tab\\_pro\\_top](http://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=44086905&trk=hb_tab_pro_top)

<https://twitter.com/DonGreywolfFord?refsrc=email>

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

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/dgford>

*Cave Land: No decent self-respecting modern homo sapiens should miss getting this Stone Age parody. This book rocks, or at least has its own share of rocks in it.*

*A Story Runs Through It*

*Adventure Road*

*Clay Pond and Other Fish Tales*

*Royal Ferdinand and Other Tales*

*Return to the Forest*

*Chilly, the Very Warm-Blooded Polar Bear*

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## Elizabeth Grace



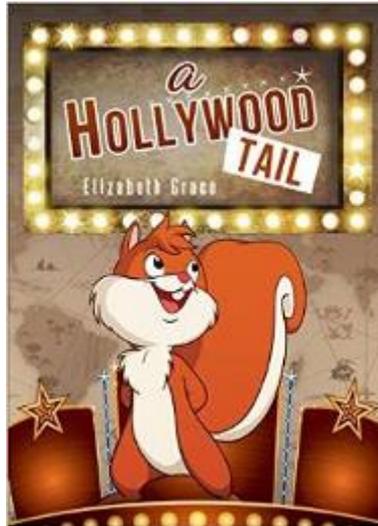
### “Lizzy the Writer”

Elizabeth Grace was born and raised in Minnesota where she spent most of her time either exploring the woods or finding new pets to adopt. Her love of animals and adventure is what has inspired both her children's book "A Hollywood Tail" and has created in her a love of travel. Moving to Miami, Elizabeth spent weekends exploring all that the nature side of South Florida had to offer. From the Everglades to Key West to hidden gems throughout Miami, her adventures have now become a travel book "24 Hours Miami." Elizabeth invites you to join her in her journeys and to connect with her on her blog.

Website/blog: <http://www.lizzythewriter.com/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/authorelizabethgrace>  
<https://twitter.com/lizzythewriter>  
<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/ElizabethGraceProspera>  
<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/LizzyBeePublishing>

Author of  
***24 Hours Miami;***  
***A Hollywood Tail*** (Tate Publishing);  
***Mr. Waggles' Pet Resort;***  
**24 Hours Hong Kong** coming soon.  
***Patches***, published through Christine F. Anderson Publishing & Media

Synopsis of ***A Hollywood Tail***



*Jerry McIntyre McGregory Jacobs has one dream. He wants to become famous. The problem? He's a squirrel! Being famous is a people's job so Jerry decides to run away from home in order to pursue his dream. Along the way, Jerry meets new friends including a duck named Ben and an iguana named Lizzy that help him on the journey to stardom, which mostly means saving him from one tricky situation after the next. Jerry realizes that becoming famous is hard work and that true friendships are more important than a paw print on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. A Hollywood Tail is a humor-filled story about one squirrel's journey to fame and his realization that being famous isn't all it's cracked up to be, and is available through Tate Publishing.*

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### [Rod Martinez](#)



Rod Martinez was born and grew up in Tampa, Florida. He wrote his first book "The Boy Who Liked To Read" (about himself) with construction paper and pencil in the first grade. As a student in school he was drawn to reading, writing and drawing and by high-school had completed several comic books of his own creation.

<http://rodmartinez.us>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/rodmartinez>

<http://www.amazon.com/Rod-Martinez/e/B00QWIH1W4/>

Short story (and author interview) in the November 2014 issue of

<http://www.openingline.org/2014/11/november-issue-out-now-makinghistory.html>

*The Juniors*, Synopsis: A quartet of middle school friends who find themselves constantly in the middle of mystery, adventure and chaos. Their wits and character get them through most of it, but usually it's teamwork that saves the day. Join Marion, Derik, Christine and Dylan on their journeys in and around Tampa Bay as they fight crime, solve the mystery and still try and make it through school.

*Orphans of Danica*

*The Gray Man* coming soon from Crimson Cloak Publishing

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[Rodney Page](#)



A graduate of the Grady College of Journalism at the University of Georgia, in 2005 Rodney authored *Leading Your Business to the Next Level...the Six Core Disciplines of Sustained Profitable Growth*, a hands-on guide for companies navigating the perils and pitfalls of a high growth environment.

His first novel, *Powers Not Delegated*, was published in 2012

A Georgia native, Rodney lives in Hendersonville, North Carolina. His passions include hiking, photography, history, reading, and, of course, University of Georgia football.

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

<https://www.facebook.com/jrodney.page>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/rpauthor>

<https://twitter.com/JRodneyPage>

[www.linkedin.com/in/RodneyPageAuthor](http://www.linkedin.com/in/RodneyPageAuthor)

<http://www.amazon.com/Rodney-Page/e/B001KDGZM8/>

Works by Rodney Page:

***Leading Your Business to the Next Level...the Six Core Disciplines of Sustained Profitable Growth***

***Powers Not Delegated***

Synopsis of *The Xerces Factor*, Release, April 2015:

*Investigative journalist Charles Arrington was writing a book. It wasn't finished; in fact, he almost dropped the project because he discovered no evidence. But the*

book, *The Thieves in the Pentagon...Corruption that Threatens Our National Security*, motivated someone to try to kill him.

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### [Esma Race](#)



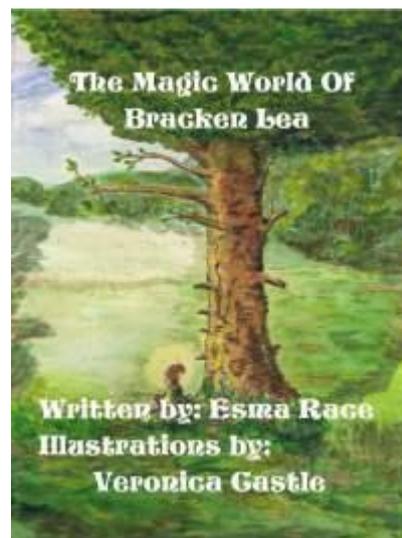
Esma Race was born and raised in the small Cheshire village of Weaverham. She has a great love for the natural world, and has always been able to sense the nature spirits which feature in her Bracken Lea stories. She is very interested in natural healing, and is a practising reflexologist in the North of England, where she now lives with Geoff, her husband of 45 years. She is a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother and enjoys reading, walking, travelling, gardening, and English history.

She is the author of:

*The Traveller* (short story), published by Solstice,

*A Trio of Friends* (on Smashwords), *Horrid Rex Bites the Dust*, a children's short story in Volume 1 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, and

*The Magic World of Bracken Lea*, to be re-released soon by Crimson Cloak Publishing.



*"Discovering the Magic World of Bracken Lea was a treat"*

*--Long and Short Reviewer*

*"... adorable ... After two stories I was hooked."*

--OnlineBookClub Reviewer

<http://www.esmarace.co.uk>

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

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/esmarace>

[https://twitter.com/Esma\\_Race](https://twitter.com/Esma_Race)

[https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8020628.Esma\\_Race](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8020628.Esma_Race)

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/esmarace>

<http://www.amazon.com/Esma-Race/e/B00GX99ZQM/>

*Some story Titles from the next book in the Bracken Lea Wood series:*

The Celtic Princess

The Custard-Coloured Car

A Horse Called Magic

Croft Cottage

The Painting

Synopsis of ***The Magic World of Bracken Lea:***

*A series of ten short stories featuring the Fairy Folk of Bracken Lea Wood: a tale of Nature Spirits for humans of all ages.*

*Welcome to the magic world of GLODWYN the Gnome. His friends include other gnomes, flower fairies, a Twisted Tree, Astrid the Fairy Queen, and the birds and animals who also live in the wood.*

*Glodwyn the gnome is a bit of a rebel. He lives and works in the ancient woodland. He is unusual amongst the Fairy Folk in enjoying the company of humans. His good-natured interest in their world seen through the eyes of his unknowing "friend", Walter the Stacker Truck Driver at the local factory, leads him to interfere in their affairs, with interesting results both for the Fairy Folk and humans. With his help, the Fairy Folk rescue a little boy from drowning, save the life of an injured cat and later that of a confused old lady who collapses in the Wood.*

*The Fairy Folk raise the alarm when a baby's mother is taken ill, and later prevent disaster at the baby's Christening, when a bad fairy threatens the child's happiness. They help a Leprechaun find his way home, and get a lost engagement ring back to its owner. Both unwitting humans and Fairy Folk work together to save nearby woodland from development. From arranging a litter-pick in the woods to finding a new wand for the Fairy Queen, it is a busy life for the Fairy Folk.*

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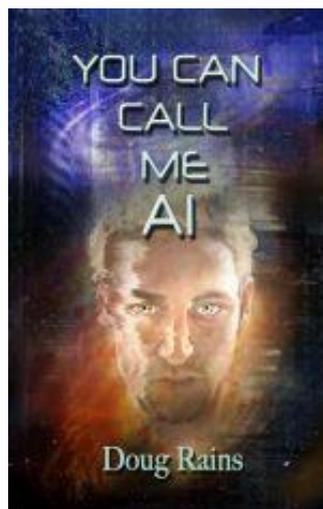
[Doug Rains](#)



*It is with regret that we must announce the death on Easter Sunday 2015 of Doug Rains, author of **You Can Call Me AI**. He was a talented author and friend who will be greatly missed.*

Doug was reading science fiction and fantasy since grammar school. One of his true desires was to write a science fiction story of his own: while in the United States Army he wrote *The Moebius Strip*, about an eccentric professor/inventor and a college student and their voyage across the universe. He became inspired to write again after seeing an ad in a local journal soliciting sci-fi writers in 2003. His new story was *The Mouth of the Beast*, about a robot with a human consciousness that was deemed obsolete by the present society of Earth, and that robot's struggle to maintain its existence. *Have you seen Alice?* is about an astonishingly beautiful female android that 'fell to earth'.

Both *The Mouth of the Beast* and *Have you seen Alice*, along with his book *The Timeliner*, will be re-released soon by Crimson Cloak Publishing.



Synopsis of ***You can call me AI***, his fourth novel, available now from Crimson Cloak Publishing: *A mysterious android takes a young teenaged boy on an incredible journey to meet his father whom he never knew. Spanning strange dimensions and*

*unusual realms of existence, this is a real page turner. Suitable for readers of all ages.*

<http://www.amazon.com/Doug-Rains/e/B00J6B5W16>  
<http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/dougrains2>  
<http://www.crimsoncloakpublishing.com/doug-rains.html>

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## **P J Roscoe**



P J Roscoe is the author of two novels, and several historical articles published in 'Country Quest', a Wales & Border magazine. A Trainer and supervisor for Cruse Bereavement care and a qualified counsellor and therapist, she is also a clairvoyant, and it is these experiences that have helped to shape her stories.

<http://www.pjroscoe.co.uk/>  
[https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/6575717.P\\_J\\_Roscoe](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/6575717.P_J_Roscoe)  
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/PJ-Roscoe/566905963377366>  
<http://bookblogs.ning.com/profile/PJRoscoe>  
<http://www.amazon.com/PJ-Roscoe/e/B008N9GF7C/>  
<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/storylady>

***Echoes*** won the e-book category in the 2013 Paris book festival.

*Synopsis: A mysterious woman moves to a secluded cottage on the outskirts of a lonely village in Shropshire, hoping to start a new life after suffering years of abuse. But the echoes of the land refuse to lie quietly... A supernatural thriller moving between present day and the 15th Century when Henry Tudor claimed the throne of England. There were many casualties of war, but some injustices refused to be forgotten.*

***Freya's Child***

## *Adventures of Faerie-folk*

Various articles: [www.thenewsinbooks.com](http://www.thenewsinbooks.com)

*Love Alters All* short story in anthology of love stories *Inevitable Love*

Coming soon *Where Rivers meet*

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## **Aysha Samrin**

(Cover art)

*“During my early years, my preferred choice of medium was oil pastels, but in the past couple of years, I have started exploring different kinds of media from argyrotypes to screen- printing and digital prints. I have grown fond of the kind of expression that collage, both traditional and digital, allows and using this medium has given me a freedom like never before.*

*“As an illustrator, my prime area of focus is children’s book illustration. Disney has been one of my biggest influences and one of the reasons for illustration being my chosen field. My time on an illustration course at university has opened me up to the various bits that form a part of the huge world of illustration and has had a huge effect on my style and thinking process.*

*“When I am not working on my illustration projects, personal or commissioned, you can probably find me somewhere in the studio making hand-made sketchbooks.”*

<http://ayshasamrin.weebly.com/>

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## **Wesley Tallant**



The son of a WW II disabled veteran, Wesley Tallant is himself an ex-Navy veteran of the Viet Nam era. He has a wife of 41 years and three grown boys, and lives in Blossom, Texas. Retired after 24 years with the Paris Texas Fire Department, he now writes full time. He is the author of “*Mr Sparks, the Firehouse Dog*”, a children’s short story in Volume 1 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, as well as the following books shortly to be re-released by **Crimson Cloak Publishing**.

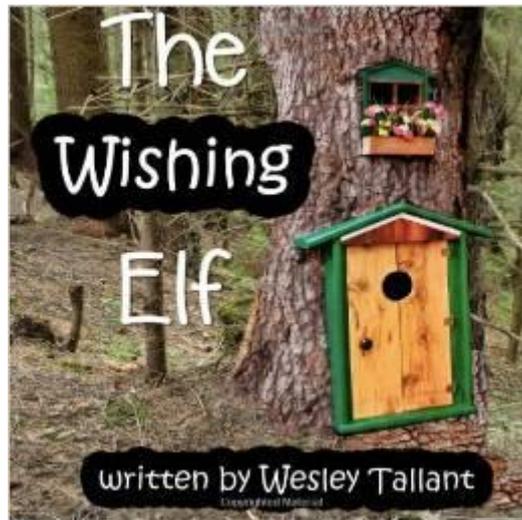
<http://wttallant.wix.com/wesleytallant>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Wesley-Tallants-Author-Page/484791544922209?fref=ts>

<https://www.linkedin.com/pub/wesley-tallant/55/2a8/704>

<http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/wesleytallant>

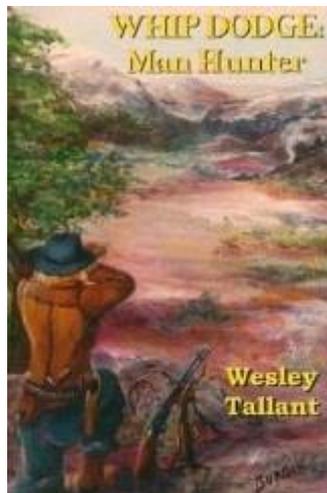
### ***The Wishing Elf***



***Little Big Toe***

***Jake Hardy***

***Whip Dodge: Man Hunter***



***The Yellow Rose***, synopsis:

*In 1886, Bexar County rancher Mike Callahan goes for his yearly pilgrimage to honor the father he lost in the battle of the Alamo. While he is there on the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of the Alamo, his wife Rose is kidnapped. He leads a posse of men, including the county sheriff, in an attempt to rescue her. He is killed but questions soon arise as to who shot him. Intrigue and family betrayal follow Rose as she and her foreman, Dusty Hayes, strive to keep the ranch that Mike named after her, running.*

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## [Chrystal Vaughan](#)



Chrystal Vaughan was born in Ashland, OR and grew up all over Southern Oregon where she currently resides. She is married and has two daughters and a son; she enjoys teaching others and imparting her love for the written word to her students. When she is not writing, Mrs. Vaughan enjoys spending time with her family and various pets, spinning yarn, and is a voracious reader.

<http://mermaidsandmayhem.blogspot.co.uk/>  
[www.facebook.com/chrystalwrites](http://www.facebook.com/chrystalwrites)  
<https://twitter.com/TheChrystalShip>  
<https://plus.google.com/100316225728181412565/posts>  
<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/ChrystalVaughan>

### Synopsis of *Conspiracy of Ravens*:

*Sophia Pascale is a rising star at the Philly Herald. Her latest assignment sends her to the Philadelphia State Penitentiary to interview the "Raven Witch Killer," a self-proclaimed serial killer who is willing to talk...to the right people. Sophia gets more than she bargained for when she steps foot into the prison; Catherine Meara is more than she appears, and the handsome Officer Shaw is a wrinkle in Sophia's plans she didn't count on. Struggling with her past, her beliefs, and her desire, Sophia will be tested by her ordeal in the prison in more ways than one. She confronts her inner demons and the very real ones embodied in the black shapes perched above the prison entrance...and etched into the skin of her enemy. Will Sophia find true love and launch the story of her career? Or will she be yet another victim of the "Raven Witch Killer"?*

*Dead in the Water*

*Sideshow*

*Christmas in the time of the Great Fall*

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## [Barbara Weitzner](#)



Originally from New York, Barbara lives in Delray Beach, Florida. For many years she has published articles in a South Florida magazine, and in *New England Writer's Magazine*. Her play, *Robbie Von Hooten Is A Jerk* was read to an audience at Sugar Sand Park, 2010 in Boca Raton, Florida. *An American Christmas* received honorable mention in the 2006 La Belle Lettres short story contest.

<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/barbara-weitzner/56/841/140>

<https://www.facebook.com/barbara.weitzner>

<http://www.amazon.com/Barbara-Weitzner/e/B00J0JNX10>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/barlon22>

Books by Barbara Weitzner:

*A New Start*

*The Parradine Allure*

*Choices*

*The Most Glorious Thing Ever*

*Choices*, an anthology of short stories, available on *E-books*

Short Stories: *Please Wake Up* was published in Soundings Magazine; *First Love*, appeared in Gemini Magazine; and the article *Never too Late* appeared in Southern Writing.

Synopsis of *The Most Glorious Thing Ever*:

*A couple meet in a bar. He buys her a drink. He can hardly believe his luck. She's gorgeous and fun. Where could it lead?*

*This is a story for every man or woman who has ever loved the wrong person; who yearns to experience true rapture—the kind that gives you shivers, staggers you, all-consuming, and leaves you breathless, ready for anything.*

*The Most Glorious Thing Ever* begins as a romantic romp that segues into a tragedy and is based on a thirty-year-old newspaper article.

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[Gary Winstead](#)



Gary Winstead, the youngest of eleven children, was born in 1948 and grew up in Pontiac, Illinois, an obscure farm town in the middle of the Illinois Corn Belt. At the age of eighteen, he joined the United States Marine Corps and served for four years, rising to the rank of corporal (E-4) before earning his honorable discharge. He went on to receive a bachelor's degree in physical education, a master's in educational administration from California State University, Fullerton and a PhD in Veterinary Science. He has been married to Faye, the love of his life, for forty-five years and has three stepchildren, all grown, and four grandchildren.

He is the author of **So You Want to be a Marine**, and the short story *The Pony No-one Could Ride* which appeared in Volume 1 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies.

<http://savingliteracy.blogspot.com/>

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

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/371850629606243/>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/gwinstead>

<http://www.amazon.com/Gary-R.-Winstead/e/B00N98092Y/>

***So You Want to be A Marine***, autobiography



*The Marine Corps immortalized by Hollywood hardly resembles the dysfunctional organization I joined in 1967, just as the Vietnam War was heating up. Incompetence, arrogance, sadism—all was rampant from the top down in an indifferent hierarchy that rewarded obedience over competence and sycophancy over truth-telling.*

*Like so many other Marines, I joined the corps because I had few choices available to me. As the youngest of eleven children, all of us living in poverty in rural*

Illinois, and as someone who had lived his whole life intimate with deprivation and hardship, I had few paths available to me.

*I was surrounded by characters—outsized individuals with larger-than-life personalities, colorful ticks, and perplexing complexes.*

*There was the lance corporal from Pittsburg who liked to call himself Pitt. Rail thin; with a neck like a turkey's to support his oversized head, he owned a crooked set of teeth that had yellowed from tobacco smoke. He had a quirky habit of sprinkling his cigarette ashes into whatever he was drinking at the time and then chugging it down, all in order to attain a more perfect high. Pitt, as I learned during my first night in Vietnam, was all about getting high, even while manning a checkpoint as an MP.*

*So it was that I endured four years of indifferent and sometimes sadistic leadership, the absurdities inherent in any impersonal hierarchy that values group-think and obedience over individuality and integrity.*

Coming soon from Crimson Cloak Publishing:

***A Dream Come True***

***Murder in Auburn***

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Alzheimer's Research UK



<http://www.alzheimersresearchuk.org/>

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Former Patron: Sir Terry Pratchett

We fund the very best biomedical research, from basic to clinical, that improves global understanding of all the causes of different dementias or improves diagnosis, prevention and treatment. Our ultimate goal is a preventative treatment or intervention for neurodegenerative diseases.

We have built a reputation as a flexible and responsive funder, committed to supporting the best and most innovative ideas from across the field. We encourage applications that: address fundamental gaps in our knowledge of disease processes; have a translational path or vision and are collaborative and transparent; ensuring reagents and data are shared with the scientific community.

Our funding is directed towards both translating scientific discovery into patient benefit and in growing the research base. A significant proportion of our funding is allocated towards response-mode applications. While we provide guidance on areas of basic science that are of particular interest, we will fund the best research that takes us towards defeating dementia and we encourage radical new approaches and thinking that change paradigms.

Twiddlemuffs



Twiddle® creator and business founder, Margaret Light, developed the prototype Twiddle®Muff more than a decade ago for her grandmother, Lily. A Twiddlemuff is a basic hand warmer (muff) decorated with things like buttons, beads, ribbons, little pockets and zips – things to fiddle with. They have proven calming and helpful for those with Alzheimer’s and dementia as well as autism-related conditions, by providing sensory stimulation and occupying restless hands. They can also help maintain dexterity and mobility in arthritic fingers. [Learn how to make one below.](#)



comfort · warmth · activity

Twiddle is a trademark of <http://www.4twiddles.com>.

Here are their Twiddletips for using one of their Twiddle comfort aids:

Introducing the Twiddle®

Before you give a Twiddle® to someone, think about the approach to which he or she will be most receptive. Perhaps the gentleman who likes to fix things could be handed the Twiddle® for “evaluation.” The woman who is a nurturer might appreciate “looking after it for a while.” Does he or she like animals, or fear cats or dogs? As in all things, be thoughtful about the choice of Twiddle®, and its introduction.

Stop the “Pick Up” Game

Some individuals habitually toss onto the floor items they are given, then ask for help picking them up again. One advantage of the Twiddle® is that a belt can be inserted through the activity/comfort aid, then tied or loosely fastened behind the person’s waist. This keeps the Twiddle® up where it can be used and enjoyed, and not on the floor.

Change It Up

For the sake of variety, move the gadgets around on the Twiddle®. Put the beads inside, and affix the ball on the outside, for example. If someone tends to chew a particular attachment, don’t risk an accident. Unbutton and remove the potentially problematic gadget, without compromising the quality or usefulness of the Twiddle®. Once in a while, take off all attachments and run the Twiddle® through the washer and dryer to keep it clean and fresh.

Pocket Potpourri

The Twiddle's® side pocket can hold a handy tissue, a family photo, a simple memento, or perhaps a sweet-smelling sachet. Customize the contents to the individual, and keep it fun and surprising.

Make It Personal

We know many Twiddles® are given to individuals living in institutional care. Staff may request or require that personal belongings be clearly labeled with owners' names. If you want your Twiddle® sent directly to a care facility, we gladly will put the recipient's name on the pocket, using indelible marker. When you order, please put this request in the "Comments" section with the exact spelling. Note: There will be no refunds on customized orders.

Some Twiddles by 4twiddles.com -



After a hospital department appealed for people to knit basic twiddlemuffs for patients, volunteers began making and donating twiddle muffs, and twiddle cushions, twiddle bags and twiddle lap blankets, to hospitals and nursing homes, to the great benefit of the recipients. Below are instructions to make a twiddlemuff in fabric, knitting or crochet work. Try making one in an animal shape for an animal lover, or

attaching small keyring-fob pictures of loved-ones or pets for those afflicted with loss of memory.



Basic Twiddlemuff knitting pattern:

Patterns and pictures of handcrafted decorated twiddlemuffs by kind permission of WOOLLIES FOR THE WORLD charity knitting facebook group
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/398771750143974/>

8mm needles. Use 2 strands double knitting wool or 1 strand chunky.

Cast on 40 st, work 1 row knit, 1 row purl, for 11 ins (that's the inside.)

Change to different wool of any thickness: you can use anything but try to create an interesting visual and tactile fabric. Carry on knitting until work measures 23 ins, then cast off. Fold in half lengthwise, sew up side seams to make a tube, turn inside out so that the first knitted section forms the plain lining of a double-thickness tube. Then seam the lining and the top together. Decorate as you like.

These can also be made in crochet, create a strip twelve by twenty-three inches and make up as for knitted twiddlemuff.



Fabric Twiddlemuff:

Use fleece fabric or similar for lining (you could use part of an old jumper). If using thin fabric, either interline with light wadding or use the lining fabric double. Choose a nice firm fabric for the outside: twiddle items can be sewn on to this prior to making up the twiddlemuff if desired.

Lining/interlining: 12 inches square

Exterior: 12 inches by 13 inches.

Sew together into one long strip and make up as for knitted twiddlemuff.



If YOU would like to donate your time instead of money to helping people with Alzheimer's, contact your local Elderly Care Center/Nursing Home and ask to volunteer.

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE: Have you noticed any of these warning signs?

If you have concerns that a loved one might be developing Alzheimer's Disease, use this checklist to list any concerns you have and take this sheet with you to the doctor. *Note: This list is for information only and not a substitute for a consultation with a qualified professional.*

1. **Memory loss that disrupts daily life.** One of the most common signs of Alzheimer's, especially in the early stages, is forgetting recently learned information. Others include forgetting important dates or events; asking for the same information over and over; relying on memory aides (e.g., reminder notes or electronic devices) or family members for things they used to handle on their own. What's typical? Sometimes forgetting names or appointments, but remembering them later.

2. **Challenges in planning or solving problems.** Some people may experience changes in their ability to develop and follow a plan or work with numbers. They may have trouble following a familiar recipe or keeping track of monthly bills. They may have difficulty concentrating and take much longer to do things than they did before. What's typical? Making occasional errors when balancing a checkbook.

3. **Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure.** People with Alzheimer's often find it hard to complete daily tasks. Sometimes, people may have trouble driving to a familiar location, managing a budget at work or remembering the rules of a favorite game. What's typical? Occasionally needing help to use the settings on a microwave or to record a television show.

4. **Confusion with time or place.** People with Alzheimer's can lose track of dates, seasons and the passage of time. They may have trouble understanding something if it is not happening immediately. Sometimes they may forget where they are or how they got there. What's typical? Getting confused about the day of the week but figuring it out later.

5. **Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships.** For some people, having vision problems is a sign of Alzheimer's. They may have difficulty reading, judging distance and determining color or contrast. In terms of perception, they may pass a mirror and think someone else is in the room. They may not recognize their own reflection. What's typical? Vision changes related to cataracts.

6. New problems with words in speaking or writing. People with Alzheimer's may have trouble following or joining a conversation. They may stop in the middle of a conversation and have no idea how to continue or they may repeat themselves. They may struggle with vocabulary, have problems finding the right word or call things by the wrong name (e.g., calling a watch a "hand clock"). What's typical? Sometimes having trouble finding the right word.

7. Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps. A person with Alzheimer's disease may put things in unusual places. They may lose things and be unable to go back over their steps to find them again. Sometimes, they may accuse others of stealing. This may occur more frequently over time. What's typical? Misplacing things from time to time, such as a pair of glasses or the remote control.

8. Decreased or poor judgment. People with Alzheimer's may experience changes in judgment or decision making. For example, they may use poor judgment when dealing with money, giving large amounts to telemarketers. They may pay less attention to grooming or keeping themselves clean. What's typical? Making a bad decision once in a while.

9. Withdrawal from work or social activities. A person with Alzheimer's may start to remove themselves from hobbies, social activities, work projects or sports. They may have trouble keeping up with a favorite sports team or remembering how to complete a favorite hobby. They may also avoid being social because of the changes they have experienced. What's typical? Sometimes feeling weary of work, family and social obligations.

10. Changes in mood and personality. The mood and personalities of people with Alzheimer's can change. They can become confused, suspicious, depressed, fearful or anxious. They may be easily upset at home, at work, with friends or in places where they are out of their comfort zone. What's typical? Developing very specific ways of doing things and becoming irritable when a routine is disrupted.

If you have questions about any of these warning signs, the Alzheimer's Association recommends consulting a physician. Early diagnosis provides the best opportunities for treatment, support and future planning. For more information, go to <http://alz.org/10signs> or call 800.272.3900.

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