

BOOKS^NPIECES

A Magazine for Writers and Readers

DECEMBER 2018

INTERVIEWS

GRANT FAULKNER

JIM CHRISTINA

MARC WATSON

ROBIN BAREFIELD

SUSAN LAKIN

BILL COLOUMBE

WRITINGS

LUKE ORLANDO

J.T. MACEK

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EDDIE GENEROUS

BOOK CHAPTERS

LAURA LEFKOWITZ

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ARTICLES PLUS

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WINE WHILE WRITING

MARC WATSON

**Pen & Paper Author
At Large**



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Books 'N Pieces *Magazine*

December 2018

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FROM THE PUBLISHER:

Welcome to the December issue—our final issue for this year.

I'd like to thank you all for reading this magazine, and supporting it through the many changes throughout the year, and helping us end this year well. **In this issue we have SIX SHORT STORIES and SIX INTERVIEWS, and a whopping 120 pages.**

When I started Books 'N Pieces Magazine, the original goal was a small sideline to my writing and publishing business. Along the way we changed that. As the readership grew, both in numbers, and in scope—we have a global readership—it became more of a tool for new writers, established writers, and people who just enjoyed reading short stories. The number of submissions has soared, thanks to bloggers, Twitter authors, and site such as Duotrope.com that lists market sites for writers.

For 2019, our focus continues as we are: adding new sections; mentoring new writers, teaching those who wish to self-publish how to do so themselves, without the need for outside publishing companies. And bigger writing contests.

Please share this magazine with your writing friends and family. It is FREE to read online as a PDF, ePub and even a mobi. And, if you are like me and enjoy print copies, you may buy one from Amazon. The print copy interior is B/W to keep your cost down.

I wish you all a Merry Christmas, and, if you do not celebrate that, I wish you peace, good health and prosperity for the upcoming year.

Best wishes,

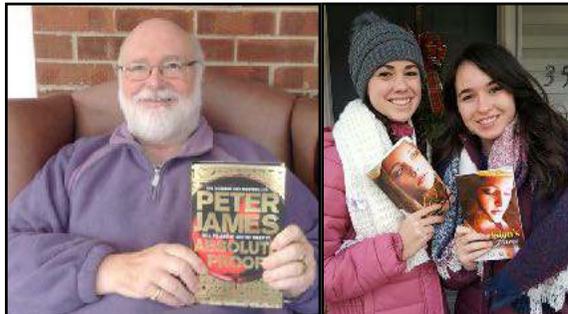


William Gensburger
william@BooksNPieces.com

WINNERS:

In November we held an easy contest. Just for joining our newsletter e-mailing list, entrants could win several prizes. These included signed and personalized copies of Peter James' latest novel "*Absolute Proof*," signed and personalized copies of the first two books of JS Ririe's romance series "*Indecision's Flame*," personalized and signed copies of my non-fiction book "*Homo Idiotus*," signed and personalized copy of Danielle Calloway's upcoming novel "*The Lost Child*," as well as print copies of Books 'N Pieces Magazine, August and October issues.

Winners were as follows: Steve Catell won the Peter James novel, and sent us a photo with the book. Amber Homer won the JS Ririe books, and sent us a photo of her two daughters, Makenna and Kaila, holding the books received. Said Alvarez won the signed, personalized copy of my non-fiction book, "*Homo Idiotus*," and Petra Dancelle and Terry Lofter were winners of the print edition copies of Books 'N Pieces Magazine. Janice Weston won the drawing for a signed, personalized copy of Danielle Calloway's novel "*The Lost Child*" when it is released this month.



Steve Catell, Makenna & Kaila Homer, with copies of their personalized and autographed novels.

Interview:**MARC WATSON**
A Pen and Paper Author

Calgary, Alberta author, husband, father of two, **Marc Watson**, has just come out with his new book *Catching Hell (Part Two)*. *Catching Hell* is about a sci-fi/fantasy epic about two friends separated on their quest to avenge their destroyed home. One goes into the world of the fantastic and mystical, while the other goes to the technological. Each are worlds they were raised to fear, but now must face to defeat their common enemy.

His debut novel, *Death Dresses Poorly*, a dark comedy/urban fantasy, is about a directionless twenty-something who has finally cast off the heartbreaking responsibilities of his broken boyhood home, but not without irreversible scars.



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Q: You are a pen and paper author! I like that. Why, and what is your favorite writing instrument?

A: Although I've strayed lately and have focused more on capturing things on my keyboard first, I've always been dedicated to a black Uni-Ball ONYX. 5mm pen. In high school when I began writing my first book (all by hand, and I still have the pen dent to prove it) I used a lot of different pens but didn't fall in love until I randomly found one of these. They never streaked or faded, and I have tiny writing so I appreciated the fine tip. I've had a few boxes nearby ever since. There's one beside me right now!



And it wasn't just my creative writing that it's been a part of. After I finished my first three hand-written books, I knew I needed that pen in my life. My publishing contracts, my first autograph, the marriage certificate on my wedding day, and even the paperwork when my kids were born were all filled out with the same model. If it's important to me, it'll be signed with that pen.



[Learn More HERE](#)

Q: You've done a bit of everything. Outdoorsman, martial arts... What makes you an author and what do you draw on for the needed inspiration?

A: Well I admit to being a bit of an anomaly in the writing world, in that although I've released books and continue to write, I still don't feel like an author. It's part of my anti-author personality. I feel like I'm a poser a lot of

the time, especially when I see friends and the writing community talking about writer's retreats or workshops or other things I have no time for and likely wouldn't attend even if I did. I admire their passion and commitment, but it's never been me. That said, I consider myself extremely lucky to have made it where I am today. I suppose the only thing that makes me an author is that I've written things, and those things have been published, and I'm thankful for that. Or maybe that's the real answer: what makes me an author is that I'd rather they were published and out in the world than living peacefully on my hard drive. I want the world to read my stories.

My inspiration is more simplified. Being a genre fiction writer, I'm inspired by popular culture and the work of others. I grew up consuming anime, video games, and comics in the 90s with my friends, while at the same time being dedicated to sports, martial arts and hiking. I love physical activity. Then my real-world experiences were filtered through the lens of great story tellers. Also bad story tellers! I love embracing schlock and tropes just as much as I love breaking them. These days I find that gripping, interesting fiction is everywhere, so I'm at no shortage of places to look when I need an inspirational kick in the pants.

Q: Describe your writing process?

A: Happily! I'm not a plotter, that's for sure. When an idea inspires me, I'll usually write down a paragraph or two of the general concept, and then I'll start with a prologue or first chapter and I'll see if that grabs me enough to keep me writing. Sometimes I'll be in the middle of something and another idea will come along and I'll abandon my first work and bounce to the second. I've got a collection of half-finished manuscripts kicking around. I love them all, but I only have a small amount of time.

Which is the next part of the process. Going back to the idea of my being an anomaly, I usually write for 45 minutes to an hour a day on weekdays only, during my lunch break at work. My wonderful wife works evenings, and I've got two active kids to cook for and run around places, so once I get home from work I'm on daddy duty until they're in bed. Writing in the evenings is totally out of the question for me since my brain is mush after 15 hours of go-go-go, and weekends are for family. However, I've always loved writing in a busy environment, like school or work. The constant thrum of activity around me is relaxing. I've dabbled in writing in bars and coffee shops, but sitting at my desk at work is when I'm the most productive.

Once I've finished something, I'll run it through a personal edit five or six times, and then send it off to an editor. That personal edit can be longer (my

*Catching Hell series took about five years from initial concept to when I finally stopped tinkering with it) or lightning quick, generally speaking (I only personally edited my first published book *Death Dresses Poorly* twice, and it only took me six weeks to write. After that I was 100% satisfied with it).*

Q: *Catching Hell (Part Two)* has been released. Could you tell our readers a little about it?

A: *I would love to. **Catching Hell (Part Two): Destination** is the second part of my Science Fiction-Fantasy epic **Catching Hell** duology. The story follows two lifelong friends, Johan and Aryu, whose home was destroyed by a robotic army. They come from a society that has been raised to fear technology, as well as something called “The Power,” which is the magic of this world. In Part One they are separated, with Johan leading a small group to a futuristic city seeking revenge, and Aryu (who was born with mysterious wings) being taken by a large armored phoenix-man named Nixon Ash into the world of The Power.*

In Part Two, the gap between these two friends and their new compatriots is closing. Johan has made his way to the city and needs to adjust to this new and scary world, and Aryu has begun to master magic and mysticism which he hopes to use against their enemies.

The story admittedly checks a lot of the standard 'Epic Fantasy' boxes, and I did that happily and with my eyes wide open. I'm not out to reinvent the wheel. I wanted to put my own spin on the well-worn path of those that came before me.



[Click to Learn More](#)

Q: What authors were your favorites?

*A: Another thing that sets me apart from most authors is that I'm not as active a reader as maybe I should be. I love to read, but I also really love sleep! I have always liked the formula of Terry Brooks and the **Shannara** series, which I didn't get into until he released the '**Word and Void**' series. Then he was like, "hey guess what, this is actually the start of **Shannara**!" and by that point I was hooked so I just saw it through to the end and read every book.*

Much of the concepts I love in writing were inspired by Neil Gaiman and Brent Weeks. I love Gaiman's world creation and whimsy, and I appreciate Weeks' ability to craft interesting settings and magic concepts, as well as morally ambiguous protagonists; characters you're never entirely sure you should be cheering for.

All that said, I will always cite Canadian author, Gordon Korman, as my favorite of all time. He's a YA writer from Ontario and he wrote stories about the world I lived in. He started incredibly young, writing his first book at 14, and although I don't really read his stuff anymore (though I have read some to my kids at times), he is the one who got me reading, and his personal story is what inspired me to write. I just took a little longer.

Q: What is the worst part about being a writer?

*A: Sometimes I say it's finding the time, because if my work would just pay me to sit at my desk and write for hours instead of doing my actual job, I'd be a happy man! However for being a writer, and necessarily not the process itself, it's got to be the emotional roller coaster of putting a new work out into the world and seeing if anyone wants it. With **Catching Hell** specifically, after the usual string of rejections it was picked up by a local publisher, which sent me over the moon after the journey I'd been on to complete it, only to have that publisher go under two weeks later and I had to start again. Then I had it picked up again, but only Part One, and was then told by my new publisher that they were restructuring and changing focus, and they likely wouldn't put out Part Two, so if I wanted to pull Part One before it was released, just to keep them together, I could.*

In the end, I spun it around and persuaded the publisher to release both of them before the restructuring began, though it took a lot of extra work on my end since Part Two wasn't where I wanted it yet. That why Part One and Part Two were released so close together.

*And in the middle of all this, **Death Dresses Poorly** was picked up by another publisher, and I had that release to focus on as well; for which I was so excited and am incredibly proud of.*

All this is to say it can be a serious journey of the highest creative highs and the lowest personal lows, if you let it. There is A LOT of picking up and dusting off, and it's a process I've seen break incredibly talented people. In the end, don't give up. Everyone's path is different. Stay strong, and be a hero.

Marc Watson's **Website** is <http://marewatson.ca>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/writewatson>

Amazon Books Site: <https://amzn.to/2rhRv7y>

SHORT STORY:**SHADES OF THE SEASON**

by Eddie Generous

Birds squawk an inconsistent rhythm and frosty leaves rustle background vocals in the breeze. It's the first morning of a week off work and Bernhard Koenig plans to spend much of that time perched in a camouflaged hunting blind, rifle by his side.

He's been out for an hour already, sipping coffee from a steel Thermos brand thermos. It's mostly calm, calming further as the air shows signs of a quick chill impending. It's the moment Autumn officially blends into winter.

Feeling the drink reach his bladder, Bernhard climbs out of the blind, stretching his legs and then unzipping next to a birch. Up until that morning, the weather has been unseasonably warm for November. Though not sure if it is reliable, Bernhard is almost certain he can smell the snow building in the clouds.

"Give me a shack and a wood stove any day," Mike from work had said the Friday preceding holiday shutdown. Most heads bobbed in agreement, raining sawdust onto the cement floor around the punch clock. Unlike his coworkers at the factory, Bernhard prefers the cold. Fresh snow provides the perfect canvas for the crimson droplets of the hunt. Not often does a kill shot drop even a doe dead on the spot. Death overcomes in its time and no faster. Which means tracking. Which means clues.

Red on white is a treasure map to a hunter.

Additionally, again unlike his coworkers, Bernhard hunts alone—to start the week anyway. If he bags an early kill then he might consider tagging along with a group for the camaraderie. Loneliness has Bernhard in a way that hanging around with other men can't quite mend, but it can quiet the pain, for a time.

The absence of romantic love eats at him.

Bernhard zips his fly and lets his eyes bounce lazily off the muted tones of the season. His nose is colder than the rest of his face and he thinks he might head back to the truck for some Kleenex, but later. Now, the world is still and all right, drip or no drip.

Thirty-five, strong, fit, handsome, he hasn't had a serious relationship since high school. He tries. He dates. He has online profiles. He sticks out his neck and talks to women at markets, department stores, the break-room, and often, these women reciprocate an interest. Lashes batting, or grins spreading to smiles, or leaning in to touch hip to hip.



Beneath his bulky jacket, Bernhard's arms are tired. Little flexes, mostly of his biceps, touch skin to polyester lining. The gym had been his first stop of the day, still dark when he put in a diligent twenty minutes of glamor muscle reps.

He met Eden Abbott at the same gym. She's proven interesting and interested. Dinner and show are on the docket to follow a day in the bush. Bernhard smiles wide thinking about her as he watches the trees, killing time until the date.

The trees are still and solid and like wallpaper...until they aren't. There's a rustling, bigger than the breeze.

He watches a tangle of limbs about thirty feet away. Orange and brown maple leaves cling like curled monkey paws to the browns and greys of the felled flora.

More rustling.

Bernhard squints and begins imagining shapes.

And more rustling yet.

Being as he's out of the blind, he's at a slight disadvantage, but cannot help himself. He steps. The leaves and needles crinkle and crackle.

Another step, quiet, but not quiet enough. The rustle has ceased, has become palpable in its calm. Bernhard lifts the bulky rifle and spies

through the black scope: brown on brown on brown, that wall of dead autumn shades. Waiting. Watching. Nothing more.

He exhales a pent breath, assumes imagination mingles with anticipation. The rifle lowers. Being patient in the woods is not easy. Being patient out the woods is not easy.

“Could go for something good,” Bernhard whispers, words encompassing the entirety of his existence. “Like Dad gets.”

Father and son are best friends, and earlier that morning, Graham Koenig, had gone out to the western side of the farm and sat in a tree sipping green tea, awaiting opportunity. It came quickly and pleasantly, and he was ready. It wasn't his best-shot lifetime, but close to it. The deer jumped, took two strides, and fell.

Graham had met Bernhard in the laneway. The man was happy, and a good hunter, but also lucky. Lucky in most things. The farm's paid for. Married young. Happy life.

Bernhard turns away from the rustle and returns to the stand without climbing up and pours steamy coffee into the lid of his Thermos brand thermos. He spies the woods from where he leans against the blind; lonely and slow, still, at its worst, hunting beat the hell out of the factory floor.

Bernhard screws the lid back on the Thermos brand thermos after finishing his cup and imagines a deer. He takes aim. He makes a tiny blast sound like a child with a toy and then half-turns at a telling sound.

From the corner of his eye, he spots a doe. It's suddenly on the move, hooves punching the dead forest floor in a way that reminds Bernhard of Corn Flakes. He can't help himself. He's impatient. He loves Corn Flakes. He chases.

Glimpses of a tail, of an eye, a leg, flash ahead amid the autumn palette. Bernhard quickens his steps beyond a jog. He needs this one good thing to work, this little bit of immediate satisfaction to tide him over in case—he doesn't want to think it—but in case Eden works out like the rest.

The animal recognizes danger's chase, finds its overdrive gear. Quickly, it's out of sight and the atmosphere feels devoid of life. Bernhard's breaths puff before his face as he half-spins and scans for life.

“Where are you?” he says.

As if in answer, a tail flicks and Bernhard slinks low, inching, lucking onto a route where the leaves are too soggy for frost and silent. Twenty feet. Fifteen. Ten. Bernhard leans against a tree, levels his scope. The pale morning plays well into the lenses within. He exhales and squeezes.

The deer screams. Its white tail is on the move, jittering and bouncing, visibly scared and pained by the strike. Bernhard starts to rethink what he's done. That scream sounded almost juvenile, abnormally so. Stomping forward, already working out an excuse if he's shot Bambi, he's ready to put the beast from its misery.

The rustling begins again and there's hope. Bernhard's breath puffs steady like a steam engine. The cold has become a blanket as the sun rises higher—a reversal of norms.

He's breaking as quickly as he can, an image of jungle running like a Vietnam soldier comes to mind and leaves almost as quickly as his feet move. Bernhard is smiling inside. If the animal wants it, he will gladly chase. A chase suggests size and strength.

Another scream echoes amidst the stocky grey trees. It's sickening and small, maybe forty feet away.

A pool of blood has formed and trickles an easy enough trail to follow. Wordlessly, Bernhard prays to the hunting gods that this deer is bigger than it seems. Bigger than it sounds. His head bobs between blood and the trail ahead, like a texting driver checking the road.

The deer is gone from sight, but that's okay. It's left breadcrumbs.

Big and shining, the amount of blood shows a pace not that much faster than Bernhard's; he'll be on the deer soon. Surely. He forces himself to move quietly, tries to move quietly.

The blood stops and Bernhard skims, holding his breath. No prey. Only trees. The scope rises to his eye and he scans the landscape.

Brown on brown on brown.

Brown on brown on brown.

Red on white on brown.

The beast leans into a tree taking long gasps and exhaling in great puffs. Bernhard exhales a great puff of his own and straightens his rifle. The animal has suffered enough. Bold and strong, respectful of nature and Her gifts, Bernhard stares into the deer's eyes.

He blinks.

Those bulbs are different, odd, unlike any deer he's ever seen, they are green, bright green, and menacing. He approaches. It's smallish, but on an angle, so difficult to judge exactly how small.

Too much, he looks away and points, glad nobody can see him falter from strength.

The animal screams again. Bernhard juggles the noise. That close, it doesn't sound adult, but it doesn't sound juvenile either. He's still inching until the muzzle touches something pliable. He squints and aims for the beast's head.

His eyes close tight.

"How come?" the deer whines.

Shaken, Bernhard drops the rifle, staggers backwards, and falls to the forest floor.

Blood pumps from her breast, the soft brown fur gone for an off-white, wool pea coat. "It hurts."

"I didn't...oh no, please, no." Bernhard covers his eyes.

"You shot me."

"Eden. What are you doing here?" Bernhard crawls. Blood blooms a wide flower on the front of her coat like a November poppy. "I think it went through. Maybe it's okay. Let me get help." He gets to his knees.

"You can't leave. I'm cold. Don't leave me."

"Right, god...I'm so sorry."

He pats his pocket for a cellphone, knowing he's left it in the truck. Always does while hunting. Frustrated, terrified, and confused, he snuggles tight and takes Eden's hands in his.

Snow falls and he rocks. She's breathing in his ear, on his cheek, hot and tinny smelling. "I wanted to," she hacks, a spill of deep red liquid pours from her mouth, "surprise you."

Bernhard squeezes her hands tight, but gently.

"I really like you, you know? I was scared you wouldn't ask me out, but you did. I was so excited I wanted to do something spontaneous. I wanted to surprise you."

Tears roll down her cheeks. Bernhard holds her tight. Words fail him. He fights tears of his own and kisses her forehead.

"I think we would've been good together," Eden says. "It isn't easy for me." She coughs a mouthful of blood that continues to trickle from

her lips as she speaks, bubbling and trailing sticky strings. “Single men in their thirties are such jerks, it’s no surprise—”

“Shh, please. We need to get you inside.”

“I don’t think it will help.” More coughing. More blood. “I can’t feel my legs. My chest hurts too much to move. Just stay with me. Stay with me. I want to be next to you, you’re so warm.”

Tears burst from Bernhard’s eyes. Eden gasps several times, hacks, spilling a deluge of crimson, and then she slumps.

“No, please!”

The snow falls and Bernhard doesn’t move. He can’t move. He’s killed a woman, a woman he’d hoped might become *his*...in a way she has.

The air grows so cold so fast that the snot dripping from his nose and the tears running on his cheeks freeze before having a chance to dry.

“I’m so sorry,” he says into her scalp.

~~~

Four-thirty. The sun no longer fills the sky and Graham is worried about his son. Hunting can be dangerous. He rides out to Bernhard’s deer stand. It’s vacant, but the Thermos brand thermos, extra boots, and ATV remain.

“Bernhard, Bernhard, you out there, boy?”

No answer, he drives on.

He dials his son’s cell, doesn’t get an answer, knows Bernhard leaves the thing in the truck, but desperation is setting in.

Wheeling around, shouting out, he finds nothing.

“Where are you?” he whispers to the slate grey skies.

At a quarter past five, he comes upon a scene.

“Wake up.” He nudges his son’s shin with his snow-freckled Sorel boot.

Bernhard opens his exhausted eyes. The head of a deer leans against his chest and a hoof lay in his hand. He leaps to his feet. The dead deer rolls sideways.

“I, I, it was...” He wipes crust from beneath his nose onto the sleeve of his jacket. The full power of the chill in the air hits him. He shivers.

Graham looks at his son, the expression, the shock and mystery, and then he looks at the deer. It’s smallish, but not bad, the kind of thing

a body might shoot during the latter days of hunting season if they didn't get anything better before that.

"Let's get her in." Graham pats his son's back.

Bernhard stares at the deer, unmoving. "No, it was—"

"You need to get ready for your date."

"It was... I shot..." He tries again. He's soaked with blood. Imprinted blood kisses stand out in stark contrast on the deer's white fur between its eyes.

Graham pulls his boy close, shoulder to shoulder, father to son.

"You know, I shot your mother three times before I had the courage to ask her out."

Bernhard's eyes remain on the deer that was so much more than a deer.

"Two coyotes and a doe. I was so scared, I couldn't bring myself to talk to her, but then...I *had* to ask her out."

Bernhard turns at this, looks at his father.

"Three times... It's like destiny's call. Come on, you've got a date." Graham's smiling at the memory.

### About the Author:



**Eddie Generous** is the author of the forthcoming novel "*Radio Run*" (from Severed Press), the collection "*Dead is Dead, but Not Always*," and the novel "*Camp Summit*" (coming 2019 from DB Publications). He is the founder/editor/publisher/artist of "*Unnerving*" and "*Unnerving Magazine*," and the host of the "*Unnerving Podcast*." He lives on the Pacific Coast of Canada with his wife and their cat overlords. [See Back cover ad, or visit [www.unnervingmagazine.com](http://www.unnervingmagazine.com) ]

*Story Photo Credit: Chalermchai Thamol*

**INTERVIEW:****GRANT FAULKNER****NanoWriMo and All Things Writing!**

**Grant Faulkner** (photo courtesy [grantfaulkner.com](http://grantfaulkner.com))

**Grant Faulkner** is the Executive Director of National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo), which just completed another round, and also the co-founder of 100 Word Story. He has published a book of essays on creativity, *Pep Talks for Writers: 52 Insights and Actions to Boost Your Creative Mojo*; *Fissures*, a collection of 100-word stories; and *Nothing Short of 100: Selected Tales from 100 Word Story*. His stories have appeared in dozens of literary magazines, including *Tin House*, *The Southwest Review*, and *The Gettysburg Review*, and he has been anthologized in collections such as *Norton's New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction and Best Small Fictions*. His essays on creativity have been published in *The New York Times*, *Poets & Writers*, *Writer's Digest*, and *The Writer*.

*Grant explains: "I joined the board of National Novel Writing Month because I thought it was the most powerful creative nonprofit on the planet. And then Chris Baty stepped down from being executive director and gave me a couple of nudges, and I thought, why not, what*

*more could I do with my life than to help spread the glories of creativity?”*

Here are some noteworthy words of inspiration from Grant on topics ranging from National Novel Writing Month, to writing with brevity, to how writing can change the world. I hope these interview excerpts will inspire you to want to participate in the next National Novel Writing Month in November 2019—lots of time to prepare.

### **ON THE TOPIC OF WRITING WITH BREVITY**

*“I think writers are generally taught to write more rather than less—from the first time a teacher tells a student in elementary school to add detail to a sentence, to include more supporting evidence, etc. That’s good to begin with, but at a certain point, a writer needs to realize how writing less, whether leaving things out or writing more succinctly, serves a story. A writer needs to learn how a story moves best through the whorls of mystery and suspense created by the gaps of a story.*

*“Writers naturally try to prove themselves through their words, through florid descriptions, curlicues of syntax. Our words can sometimes resemble a body builder’s muscles, which cover up the true person inside, so a writer has to find the balance of words and the textures that serve the story.*

### **REGARDING NATIONAL NOVEL WRITING MONTH**

*“National Novel Writing Month is a rollicking rollercoaster ride of creativity that happens every November. By nature it’s excessive and extreme, encouraging people to aim higher, to write more, to accomplish bigger and bigger things. It also encourages people to dare to experiment and break all sorts of boundaries. So it can’t possibly be described in one sentence. At its simplest, though, it’s a challenge to write 50,000 words of a novel in a month.”*

### **ON THE BENEFITS OF WRITING**

*“Writing is thinking. We discover our thoughts in all of their nuances and counterpoints through language. We also open up new pathways and new possibilities—we imagine new worlds—when we allow ourselves to channel language and riff through the concepts and images it delivers.*

*“Stories also connect us with others, and help us see life through others’ viewpoints. Writing heightens your sense of the world around you and within yourself. You’ll notice things, you’ll notice yourself, you’ll seek new experiences, just by writing stories.*

### **ON HOW STORIES CAN CHANGE THE WORLD**

*“I posit that our stories connect us as humans like nothing else. We are all, at the most fundamental level, the stories we tell ourselves. The way we see other people and the world is a story. Every shift in a narrative, whether personal or cultural, changes us and how we interact with others.*

*“I read that one of the things that truly changed our culture’s perception of women was the stories of women on TV shows. Think about the difference between June Cleaver in the 50s and Clare Huxtable in the 80s, and then all of the strong, dynamic, independent women on TV shows now. Those stories weren’t the symptoms, but the agents of cultural change.*

*“Stories existed before societies formed themselves. Stories come soon after our first breath. They’re our first step out of the reptilian brain. I can write a million sentences on this subject, but I guess I’ll just ask how could creative expression not change the world?”*

To learn more about Grant Faulkner, his books: *Pep Talks for Writers* and his two 100-word story collections, *Nothing Short of 100* and *Fissures: One Hundred 100-Word Stories and the Names of All Things*, visit his Website: [www.grantfaulkner.com](http://www.grantfaulkner.com)

Interview conducted/written by Jill Hedgecock, [www.jillhedgecock.com](http://www.jillhedgecock.com)

**SHORT STORY:****MARTIN**

by Luke Orlando

***There's a cold wind** coming in from the North; there's always a cold wind when Martin comes by. I can feel it in the bones of this old Maine house, whittling the warmth of the wood away in gusts and howls. Its brittle joints creak and moan as crevices in the ancient beams let streams of air flow through them. Chilled by the November breeze, I wrap myself in a thin, scratchy blanket my grandmother gave me when I was nine. It used to be sky blue but is now faded and smudged like an old ink stain. I absentmindedly pick the rivulets of cotton and dust that spring up endlessly out of its forty-year-old fibers, and I wonder how much longer I'll be able to keep up this habit before it tears a hole through the blanket and begins letting the air in.*

*A strong gust rattles the loose window and I gasp in surprise which sends me into one of my fits of coughing. Luckily I'm close to the kitchen. Staggering to the sink, I spit yellow mucus away and wash it down, down, down the drain. I watch it spin around, swirling, sinking, spiraling out of control and I can't help but wish to follow it. I wish I could be it. I'm sure being flushed down the drain wouldn't feel much worse than this.*

*The orange paisley rug of the living room itches my feet as I escape the freezing linoleum of the yellowing kitchen floor. Brittle wallpaper flakes off near the door as I lean up against it. The flecks stick in my blanket and I pick them out, carefully dropping them into the trash can.*

*As if it were following me, the wind blows open the windows and I'm forced into combat them. They struggle, I give, they give, and I struggle. It's a never ending battle with the cold...there's always a cold wind coming through when Martin comes by. Finally, with my aching*

*old hands and all, I manage to shut them. I am left with a couple bruises, blue and already showing, but they'll yellow-out in no time and get lost on my skin.*

*It must be soon now. There are still some bits of wallpaper in the blanket so I pick them out. They fall like whirlybirds to the floor where they become forever entrenched in the tough fibers of the carpet. I'm too tired to bring them back to the trashcan. I try to read while curling up on the grey sofa but it's no good. It smells like Travis, my Great Dane, now gone. My breath rattles in my chest, wheezes through my lips and stinks of eggs and toast; I should have brushed my teeth. And now here I am, thinking about Martin again. Forgetting him is like trying to forget an advertising jingle-impossible.*

*The door bell buzzes weakly, but I hear it and adjust the bandana on my bald head before answering. I want to look my best.*

*I open the door and there he is, with eyes so brown they're almost black, skin falling off his old bones just like mine. Okay, maybe not as bad as mine. He has a detached but practiced smile on. It warms most people, but not me.*

*"Hey Martin, how are you?" I ask breathlessly, then cough, wrapping the blanket around me tighter.*

*"Hi Carol, nice day today huh?" he asks despite the biting wind that flings frost into our eyes. His wide and crooked nose is rosy red in the frigid air--he might have a cold.*

*"Not really Martin, no," I have to answer.*

*"Uhm, well yeah, I guess you're right. Anyway, here is your package. More meds?" he guesses by the size and weight. He should know by now; he's been delivering my antibiotics for almost two years. Two years since he fell off that damned roof, hit his head, and forgot all about me. Two years since I walked away from his hospital bed and let him go live a new life, one without a wife.*

*"No, no, these are just some vitamins, keep me strong for the grandkids, you know," I lied, we never had children. We didn't know why we couldn't for a long time of course, but by then it was too late. Now I have to keep him from knowing that I was ever a part of his life. It's not his fault he lost parts of his memory... but why did it have to be memories of me? Like a damned Lifetime movie.*

*“Well, I’ll see you Martin,” I said, slamming the door shut as the wind picks up and forces me inside. I shouldn’t have let him take that job at the post office. I don’t need to have him coming by every day but Sunday to remind me of the worst mistake I ever made.*



*Yet still... I watch him leave the porch and head to the little white truck at the end of the driveway. Even now, even after forgetting everything, he still flicks the lowest branches of the mulberry tree on the way down. I guess some things are never forgotten. I can’t help but notice he looks a little disappointed. I’m disappointed too, and maybe... angry. I can feel the harsh line of my lips pressing tighter on these old teeth till they feel like they’re going to pop. I’ve never watched him walk away this long before—I can’t stand seeing so much of my past go sauntering off unawares. However, today was different. He seemed so... interested, and I shoved him off again. I suppose it’s only fair.*

*The impossible happens. He turns around and looks right at me, right through the cracked window, just like he always used to do before work. And, for a moment, I can see him throwing his bag to the ground and running back to me, remembering everything. I can imagine his embrace, the constant smell of wood chips and gas in his hair, the way he always tickled my neck with his stubble. Oh I remember the nights I spent rubbing his tired ankles, rippled with the long-red imprint of his tube socks stuffed under boots all day. I remember how in the cold Maine nights he would stoke up the fire at two in the morning just to make sure I was comfortable when I woke up.*

*And I remember the bad times too, the way he'd mumble and sulk after hitting his finger with a hammer like the clumsy fool he always was. I could almost, in that moment as he stood there, imagine him hanging his hat on the mulberry branch and whistling for Travis. The pup would come whizzing out from the back yard and tackle poor Martin to the ground!*

*Of course he doesn't do any of this, but he stands there looking back at the house for a long time. Longer even than I'm willing to sit by the window in the jet of wind that sneaks through the crack. I turn away and huddle on Travis's smelly couch. I pick the book back up, trying to distract myself once again but I read the same words over and over. I seem unable advance a chapter, or turn a page, or even finish a line. It's hardly less than a minute before I hear a knock at the door. I don't know what to feel, amazed, horrified, freezing, ecstatic?*

*"Come in! It's unlocked..." I call hoarsely, pulling the blanket up tighter around my shoulders.*

*Sheepishly, Martin enters the door and closes it, stomping his feet on the mat like he used to; left, right, left, left, right.*

*"Hey Carol, I just wanted to let you know. Me and some of the folks down at the office have been worried about you. It's a small town and we know you don't get any post other than medicine, bills, and retirement pay. And I don't want this to sound wrong... I don't know what I want it to sound like at all actually. Sorry, I'm not making much sense." He holds his bag awkwardly, "Well Carol, we want you to come down for Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow."*

*Thanksgiving's tomorrow? I completely forgot, how could I forget? Martin always overcooked the turkey, the potatoes were practically raw and the cranberry sauce was basically a sugar tart but it was our time. It was a day we could wrap ourselves up next to a fire and remember the thing that made life worth living, having each other.*

*"Yes," I finally answer. "Yes, I think I would like that very much. Thank you."*

*"Great!" he says and smiles far too enthusiastically, forcing me to laugh. It wasn't a fake and practiced laugh like I've been giving for two long years and he wasn't smiling a fake and practiced smile like he'd been forced to give for so many deliveries. "I'll pick you up at four, sound okay?"*

*It sounds perfect.*

*“That sounds fine,” I say with as much control as I can muster.*

*“Great,” he says again, then stands by the door, unsure of what to do. He picks at a seam in the wallpaper absentmindedly. I hated the way the contractor covered up my old walls. I probably could have done a better job papering them myself.*

*“Wall paper, huh?” he says.*

*Come on Martin, if you’re going to make idle conversation even the weather is a better topic than wallpaper.*

*“You know; I think these walls would look better in blue. Would match the sky in the hills out there, you know? It’s such a great view from up here.”*

*I sat speechless, and maybe even a little afraid. The walls were blue, back when he and I were... together. And he should know, he painted them himself! Covering up those beautiful blue walls was the first thing I did after the accident, after I said goodbye. I say nothing to him now. I can feel my eyes, as wide as well-caps, staring at him. Water is welling up in them, threatening to burst out in a flood of tears, but thankfully he moves towards the door, breaking my gaze.*

*He turns around one last time in an awkward half circle to tip his dark blue postman’s hat towards me. Rather than turning back, he decides on leaving backwards, smacking his bag loudly on the door frame and chuckling to himself. He says a quick “bye-bye now,” and shuts the door.*

*Ecstatic. Glee! I pick myself up out of the couch and hike up the dark wooden stairs. It takes me two whole minutes to reach my bedroom. I can hear the leaves fluttering against my bedroom window. I’m sweating from the effort of climbing the stairs, so I open the window and let the breeze in as I try on dress after dress, but they’re all too big now. I’ve lost so much weight that I don’t have a thing to wear; a silver lining wrapped in a curse.*

*I remember everything: The way Martin would dress me up like a doll just to go out for dinner, the ridiculous ways I would do my hair, the makeup and hundreds of dollars of jewelry that we couldn’t afford... it was all so wonderful! It had all been locked away in a trunk in the closet. I had forgotten it completely, but now it is out on my bed, unlocked, and the contents strewn about the room like so many leaves.*

*Dress after dress after polyester dress comes flying out of the trunk and onto my feeble bones, and in a moment of pure magic I find myself in the white flower dress I wore on my first date with Martin. Laughing, I look myself up and down in the mirror, twirling about like a school girl as a scarf billows around my head, almost like my hair used to move, in the cold Maine wind.*

## **About The Author**

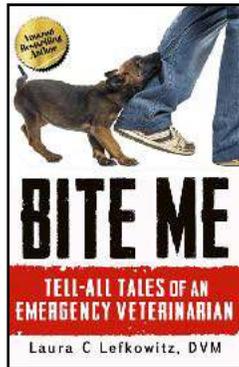


**Luke Orlando** was born and raised in Pennsylvania. He received his bachelors in English from Penn State where he was an active member of the Disciplemakers' Social Committee, Board Game Club and Magic Club. He has been continuing his education at East Stroudsburg University. He is an avid Star Trek fan, D&D player, and creative fiction writer. He is also a camp-fire guitar player who likes to sing Bob Dylan covers when no one is home. Unable to escape the charm of his home state, he now lives in a quiet community in the Pocono Mountains, where he is a high school English teacher and loves absolutely every minute of it.

Story Photo Credit: [Katarzyna Bialasiewicz](#)

**BOOK CHAPTER FROM...****BITE ME: Tell-All Tales of an  
Emergency Veterinarian**

by Laura C. Lefkowitz

***Chapter 19*****BOOBS**

**A loud commotion** at the front reception area caught my attention. The noise came from a group of four teenage girls whose gestures and tone of voice relayed their agitation. The girls were taking turns peering into a box and then alternately talking into a cell phone which was being passed around the group. My triage technician went up to evaluate the contents of the box which turned out to be a three-month-old kitten.

“What happened?” asked my technician.

Guilty glances shot around the circle of girls.

“My boyfriend got mad and threw him into the wall,” I overheard one of the girls mumble.

There was some shuffling and then a series of nervous giggling amongst the group. The group was escorted with the injured kitten, named Peter, into the exam room. When I arrived in the room, the girls were chatting lightly amongst themselves. In the ten minutes that it had taken to check the group into an exam room, the story about what had happened to Peter changed.

“He was accidentally dropped,” girl number three explained to me.

*Liar*, I thought hiding my face, so they would not see my expression. It never fails to amaze me how rapidly stories change when people are trying to protect themselves.

“His arm’s broken,” offered girl number two, “that’s why he’s holding it out in front of him.”

I peered into the box. A beautiful striped tabby kitten lay prone on the bottom of the box. His head was sprawled awkwardly backwards, and his front feet extended stiffly in front of him. Looking closer at his eyes I noticed that his eyelids were swollen, and his pupils were pinpoint. Over his left eye there was a small wound crusted with blood. Intermittently, Peter would make feeble attempts to move, but the best he could manage was pathetic circles as he pushed weakly with his left hind leg...the only functioning leg he had left.

“It’s his left arm below the elbow,” girl number four informed me.

I ignored her and continued my exam of Peter’s head and neck.

“Right there,” chimed in the same girl, insistently pointing to his left elbow.

Apparently, these girls felt that I needed all the assistance I could get in determining what was wrong with their kitten. I went on with my exam. People are always trying to convince me of their own predetermined diagnoses.

“Thanks for your help girls, I’m sure I can figure this out on my own.” Nervous giggling emerged from them.

I finished my examination of his spine and skull which, to me, was the obvious cause of his problems.

These girls badly wanted this to be a problem with Peter’s leg. In their own minds, if it was his leg then it would be repairable. That way, they wouldn’t have to face the fact that the kitten may be permanently

disabled because their friend had violently slammed the tiny, helpless animal into a wall. If it was a broken leg, then it could be mended and girl number three would be able to return to her boyfriend in good conscience. Sadly, it wasn't his leg at all. Peter was suffering from a more permanent problem, one not so easily remedied - head trauma.

I studied them closer. They were four teenage girls with identical hairstyles, tight denim jeans, and all wearing clingy t-shirts with impressively low-cut necklines. These voluptuous teenage girls were determined to display their goods to every young boy in the vicinity. Whichever way I turned in the small room, eight giant breasts with elongated cleavages confronted me at eye level.

"Its head trauma," I told them, taking care to speak clearly and look into their eyes. I guessed that they weren't really going to hear what I had to say.

"He's hemorrhaged into his brain and that's why he's unresponsive and unable to walk. His brain is damaged, which is why he is turning in circles and why his legs are stiffly extended in front of him."

I was trying not to mince my words. They needed to face the reality of Peter's injuries as well as the extreme intentional force that had been used to cause them.

"So, it's not his leg?" numbers two and four gasped incredulously.

"No, I'm sorry it is not. It's a severe injury to his brain"

A group wail began. All four teenage girls' mouths instantaneously turned downwards. Almost in unison, dramatic tears welled out of their eyes. I wasn't quite sure why they needed my clinical assessment to bring out these emotions. The kitten had been twitching and semi-comatose for at least two hours now. Apparently, no one in the group was capable of making an independent assessment without an authoritative figure to direct the course of their emotions. The group bawling became overwhelming and I left the room to give them a chance to compose themselves and to decide how they were going to help their kitten. When the grieving session had subsided, I returned.

"What can we do for him?" asked number three. The group cranial waves were altering towards more productive thoughts.

These girls were collectively ignorant, but I never doubted for a moment that they cared. The money for this office visit, which was

probably taken from their monthly hair and nail fund allotment, was proof of their concern.

“Well ideally, if you are able, we would admit him to the hospital. If you are unable to do that, we can come up with another alternative which is not the ideal care. Hopefully it will work.”

Even in the short time that Peter was here, I could see small signs of renewed consciousness in him. Young animals have an amazing resiliency and an uncanny ability to bounce back from injuries. Peter may not ever be the fully functional cat that he once would have been, but he may still be able to live a relatively normal life. The nice thing about animals with head trauma is that unlike humans they don't need to take an algebra test or thread a needle or write with a pen to succeed in life. Their only requirements are the fulfillment of basic life needs such as eating, drinking and playing.

“What do the fluids placed under his skin cost?” asked number one. She seemed to be the financier of the group.

“Twenty dollars,” I replied

I have given out fluids to numerous animals per gratis in the past, but I wasn't willing to do that for Peter. I wanted these girls to understand that there are consequences in life. This kitten was badly injured and there were emotional, physical and financial consequences to that. I was sad for these girls. Sad that they were associated with such a violent person and that they felt the need to protect him. I wanted to tell them that their friend's behavior was inexcusable. Over and over again, violence to animals has been associated with a propensity for violence to people.

I wanted to shock number three into reality and shout at her, “You might be next girlfriend. What will it be? A shove, a slap, a black eye or, maybe you'll ‘accidentally’ fall and end up in a coma too. Life's too short to hang out with assholes. Keep the good and send the bad right out that door. Bad influences are not helpful in your life.”

Instead, I gave the fluids to Peter, instructed the girls on how to syringe feed him since he was barely swallowing, and sent them home to care for the maimed kitten. I hoped that he would live. I would report the incident to the local animal control officer as we were required to do, but I knew that, since Peter was alive, and since they had pursued medical care, it was unlikely that anything would be done. *I wish you the*

*best young ladies*, I thought, as they departed en-bloc carrying semi-comatose Peter amongst them. *Stay united and take care of each other.* I sent telepathic thoughts after them in the hopes of influencing them to kick that violent friend out of their lives.

I formed a fantasy image of what I hoped would happen when they returned home. I envisioned the girls entering their home and confronting the boyfriend about his unacceptable behavior. They would surround him in a circle and as a group would yell wicked, teenage insults at him. They would then take turns pulling his hair and slapping him with their fake leather purses, while their barely-bound bosoms flopped precariously. And this time they would actually be angry enough to not care that they were messing up their beautifully coiffured hair.

It is not that uncommon for half-dressed people to show up at emergency hospitals. Pajamas, bathrobes, and slippers are attire that we see probably more frequently than any other business. Late one evening I was giving discharge instructions to a client in the lobby when a man rang the front doorbell. He seemed to be alone and I could not see any animals with him. It always worries me when a person shows up in the middle of the night without a visible pet in sight. Veterinary emergency hospitals which are open 24 hours and for previously described reasons are prime businesses to be robbed at gunpoint.

“We have a dog in the car who is bleeding. We can’t stop the bleeding. Can you hurry?” the large man said to me with a disgusted tone that seemed to imply that I had taken too long to open the door.

“Okay,” I said, wondering why this six-foot, two-inch man wanted me, a petite woman, to carry his dog inside for him. Also, if his dog was bleeding that badly, why wasn’t he rushing in with it himself. Reluctantly, I started to follow him. Before I made it outside, a frazzled woman appeared carrying a 60-pound, muscular, brindle-colored pit bull whose leg was stained with blood. The woman collapsed on the floor as soon as she passed the door-well.

“He’s bleeding, he’s bleeding, he’s’ bleeding, Clyde’s bleeding!” she screamed over and over again. “I don’t want to lose him, I don’t want him to die, he is all that I have.”

She was lying on the floor huddled over her dog sobbing and quivering. She was a frail, thin young woman wearing men’s boxer shorts, a low-cut tank without a bra and no shoes. In this position her

breasts were fully exposed under the scanty top. A swollen, pregnant belly stuck out from below the tank top. Her hair was stringy, mascara was dripping from her eyes, and she had numerous scabs all over her face. To complete this bizarre picture, a blood pressure cuff was tightly wrapped around her upper arm and the tubing was hanging down and dancing wildly as she quivered and sobbed. Her sobbing and shaking were so intense that I was worried she might faint.

As an astute director and actor in my imaginary TV series, I knew immediately that it was that time again.

“Honey, honey,” I said, putting my arm on hers trying to interrupt the frenzy of sobs, “let me look. Let me look and see what’s wrong with Clyde.”

She finally relaxed enough that I was able to maneuver poor shaken up Clyde out from under her grip. Soft brown eyes peered up at me worriedly from beneath the broad head as I examined him. Clyde had a small laceration on the bottom of his foot which had probably bled pretty badly at first, but which had now clotted. The arteries on the underside of a paw are quite superficial and are easily lacerated by sharp objects. The extent of his injuries turned out to be a small wound and some dried blood on the bottom of his foot.

“He’s okay,” I told her softly, trying to calm the still sobbing woman.

“It’s a small cut. We can fix it up. Let me bring him into the back, honey, and we’ll make everything better.”

The woman stopped crying, hugged Clyde tightly as if saying her final goodbyes, and then reluctantly let me have him. I was beginning to feel I deserved an Emmy for this role.

While his friend was uncontrollably sobbing on the floor, the man was standing in the corner inspecting the displays of coffee and tea. He was making no attempt to console her or even acknowledge her existence. *What a jerk*, I thought. Something was terribly wrong with this whole picture. The woman’s reaction was way overboard for the situation, and this man’s reactions were callous at best.

“I’m so sorry,” the mascara-smeared, snotty-faced woman said, first looking down at her dangling exposed boobs and then up at me. “I am very emotional. I am pregnant,” she told me, “I’m having twins.”

The woman grabbed her breasts in both hands and lifted them up so that I could visualize them better. It seemed to be an awkward attempt to prove to me that she was properly equipped to handle two babies.

“I have a heart problem,” she offered, pointing at her arm as an explanation for the blood pressure cuff that was dangling from her arm. Her boyfriend continued to examine our Styrofoam coffee cups. I was now trying to understand why this large muscular guy would have allowed his pregnant girlfriend with a heart problem to carry the oversized dog into the hospital. I silently cursed him. *He's a really, really big jerk*, I decided.

A man and his child were checking out at the front desk. The man was trying to shield his child from the escalating peep show unfolding in front of us and the secretary was hurriedly attempting to check them out before anything crazier occurred. I took Clyde into the back of the hospital. Clyde seemed relieved to get away from his hysterical mother and was vigorously pulling me towards the back of the hospital. That was a change, an animal who actually wanted to go to the back of a veterinary hospital. From his perspective, the prep room of a busy ER hospital must be an extremely peaceful place to be, compared to being in the presence of his mother.

“She's tweaking,” said Kim, the front desk receptionist, as I passed her. She was referring to our shared belief that these two must be on some type of drugs.

Fatally hemorrhaging, Clyde was enjoying the attention he was receiving from my technicians in the back and we easily fixed his laceration with a few sutures and a bandage. I returned to the room where Kim had placed his owners. Recognizing the need to remove them from the reception area as quickly as possible, she had moved them into an exam room. Scenes like that in the waiting room are not good for business. The woman seemed calmer now and the boyfriend was actually choosing to answer when I spoke to him.

I noticed that my exam room was now decorated with a large assortment of movie-sized boxes of candy. Ceremoniously spread throughout the room, on the counters, and exam table, were boxes of Reese's pieces, Almond Joys, Malted Milk Balls, and Milky Ways. There were mascara-smear, wet tissues crumpled up and distributed amongst the boxes. The man, who was indulging from each of the boxes,

periodically turned and placed a candy into the mouth of the woman. I tried to ignore the odd feast of chocolate that was ensuing in front of me as I explained the discharge instructions to them.

I dragged the reluctant Clyde back into the room. He didn't want to return to them any more than I did. With a mouth packed full of chocolate, the woman explained how the injury had occurred. "He jumped through the screen window trying to come after me when I left the house. I don't understand why he's such a nervous dog."

"I don't understand either," I replied resignedly, as I stared at this cracked-out woman's swollen belly which contained two unborn children.

Actually, I did understand but I didn't think that sharing my opinion would be helpful. *Clyde is neurotic because you are neurotic. Your neurosis is compounded because you have chosen to solve your problems through the use of drugs and men who are not healthy for you. Not only have you passed on your neuroses and insecurities and failings to your dog, but most likely you will do the same to your beautiful twins that are about to be born.* But I didn't do it. Instead, I shut out my personal thoughts and helped her to the lobby with Clyde.

The couple paid us with a tall stack of crumpled bills that she pulled from her disheveled purse.

"Payday," she explained when she noticed the questioning face of the secretary. "I need to get to the bank to deposit it."

We both reflected on what kind of business would pay in a stack of five- and ten-dollar bills, but once again we silently kept our opinions to ourselves. You learn quickly, as a professional of any vocation, that keeping your opinion to yourself is a more diplomatic approach.

One client brought in his beautiful Brittany Spaniel so I could examine a spot on its belly. "My dog has a tick and I can't get it off. I think its head is buried under the skin."

Many owners are fixated with the belief that a tick's head is still buried under the skin of their dog after they have removed it. Most people have ticks so demonized that they convince themselves that the creature must still be living in their pet long after they have flushed it down the toilet. The medical truth is that when you are trying to pull a tick off of your pet, the tick will hang onto its own head with gusto. They are no more willing to dislocate their head from their body then you or I

are. What people commonly believe is a tick's head, is usually a small inflammatory swelling which is left behind, caused by the injection of the tick's saliva under the skin.

I examined the site in question. There was a bright red, raisin-shaped structure on the dog's belly. Patches was sensitive about the structure and seemed extremely reluctant to let me touch it. I inspected it and looked up at the man a bit incredulously.

"That's not a tick, that's his nipple," I told him. I diplomatically left out that, at this point, it was a very swollen, red and irritated nipple.

"I've been trying to pull it off all morning," he informed me.

"Well stop that," I replied, speaking slowly and with emphasis. "It is not coming off any time soon."

I had a new appreciation for how kind and patient a dog Patches was.

"He doesn't have nipples, he's a male dog," the man continued in defense of himself.

I looked at him again. *That's it, my job as an educator ends here.* I did not have it in me to point out that he was a man and that I was pretty sure that if he looked under his own shirt, he would find that he too had nipples. This one he was going to have to figure out for himself.

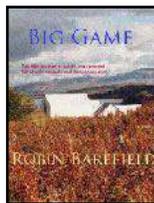
## About The Author



**Laura C. Lefkowitz, DVM.**, a Boise, Idaho author, received her veterinary degree in 1993 from the University of Minnesota, and has spent her career practicing small animal medicine, both as a family veterinarian, as well as an emergency veterinarian. Her book ***Bite Me: Tell-All Tales of an Emergency Veterinarian*** reached bestseller status on Amazon Kindle. ***Bite Me***, also addresses the high rate of depression and mental distress for veterinarians, including the highest suicide rate for any profession. Despite some blunt truths, the book is also filled with many laugh-out-loud moments, endearing stories, and optimism told with obvious commitment and compassion. Learn more from her Website at [www.BiteMeVet.com](http://www.BiteMeVet.com)

**INTERVIEW:****ROBIN BAREFIELD****Wildlife Mysteries**

**Robin Barefield** lives with her husband on the West side of Kodiak in Uyak Bay. They own a lodge which is open in the spring, summer and fall, although they live there year-round. Her neighbors include bears, foxes, eagles, seals, sea otters, sea lions, Sitka black-tailed deer, whales, and other wildlife. As an author, she has written three Alaska wilderness mysteries, her most recent novel, *The Fisherman's Daughter*, was published in November 2017.



Big Game > <https://amzn.to/2KZAnfJ>

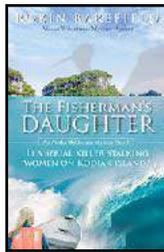
**Q: How did you get into writing and what made you decide to choose writing Alaska Mysteries?**

*A: I live in the wilderness on Kodiak Island, so it is only natural I choose the wilderness as a backdrop for my novels. My husband and I own a remote lodge, and I have lived in the wilderness for 35 years and understand it well. Kodiak Island has one of the most concentrated brown bear populations in the world. The scenery here is spectacular*

*and severe. The North Pacific Ocean often pummels the island with 30 ft waves and 80 mph winds. On a beautiful summer day, though, snow-capped mountains jut nearly straight up from the ocean, and huge fin whales, seals, sea lions, and sea otters frolic in the deep, narrow fjord-like bays. I can't imagine a better setting for a thriller. I write mysteries because I like to read mysteries, and writing is a useful outlet for my hobby of plotting ways to kill people.*

**Q: What is your writing process like? Pen/paper/laptop/ fixed time and place?**

*A: My writing process has evolved, and I now do most of my writing on a laptop. I like to write in the morning when my brain is fresh, but if I am pressed for time, I grab a notebook and jot a few lines here and there, whenever I can. In the summer, I work as a naturalist and fishing guide, and I am on the job seven days a week from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm. As long as I have my notebook handy, though, I manage to write quite a bit during the day.*



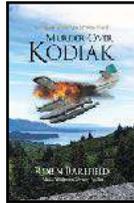
The Fisherman's Daughter > <https://amzn.to/2Qi1V5V>

**Q: Tell us about your webinar?**

*A: My publisher arranged the webinar for me, and I wrote the script and used some spectacular photos and videos from my husband and a friend. The purpose of the webinar is to introduce myself to new readers and to explain how I became an author and why I write Alaska Wilderness Mysteries.*

**Q: I like the offer at the end of the webinar. Could you tell us about that and how the response has been?**

*A: At the end of the webinar, I offer the viewer a free digital copy of my novel, Murder Over Kodiak. The response has been great when people download the book and read it, but many viewers never download the book, and I wonder if they think it's a scam. The free book is a legitimate offer with no strings attached, I assure you. The free book, like the webinar, is a way to introduce my books to new readers.*



Murder Over Kodiak > <https://amzn.to/2PopwwK>

### **Q: What is the worst part of writing for you?**

*A: Having to stop. It takes me a while to climb into my fictional world when I begin to write, but once I'm there, I hate to leave.*

### **Q: Any advice for new writers looking to break in?**

*A: The best advice I read when I first started writing was to write every day. Begin writing ten minutes a day, and before you know it, you will be writing an hour a day. We are all "too busy" to write, so you have to find the time to write, and you will find the time if you want to be a writer and an author.*

Learn more about Robin on her **Website** at [www.RobinBarefield.com](http://www.RobinBarefield.com) and join her monthly mystery newsletter.

**Webinar:** <http://bit.ly/2pcCOo6>

**Amazon Author's Page:** <http://www.amazon.com/Robin-Barefield>

**Facebook Author Page:** <https://www.facebook.com/wildernessauthorrobinbarefield>

**ARTICLE:****URGENT:****You Don't Have to Have a Big Head to Get  
A Decent Headshot or Book Cover!!!**

*by William Gensburger*

As a magazine publisher, one of the **biggest** problems I encounter during layouts is imagery; specifically the fact that **most authors have low-resolution headshots and book cover images**, totally unsuited to any print publication.

**YOUR PRINT IMAGES SHOULD BE AT LEAST 300 DPI  
TO ENSURE A HIGH QUALITY IMAGE.**

Yes, they look great on the computer screen or smartphone or Website, **BUT** these pictures are low resolution, often smaller sized images at 72 dpi. DPI means dots per inch. On a small monitor, 72 dots in the space of one inch is not bad. And images sized to fit on the screen also look fine, unless you try to magnify them.

In a printed book, magazine or newspaper, 72 dpi will result in very blurry, pixelated images that look terrible. Your print images should be at least 300 dpi and sized for 2 inches for a headshot and 4 or 5 inches for other images to be placed in a magazine print page.

While you may be pandering strictly to a digital audience, you should realize that print publications are very much strong forms of exposure for your book, even if you do not offer a print version of the novel. Newspapers and other media (television) may wish to run a story about you, but with low resolution imagery, it is unlikely they will do much.

During most of this year, as layouts were being assembled, I had to search for higher resolution book covers for many of our listings. Sometimes, after checking for an author page with added imagery, or checking with the author, the Internet offered better resolution covers.

Usually though, this was not the case. As a result, even though some Photoshop magic was used to upgrade the poorer images, the end sizes remained small, and still noticeable in our printed edition. In one or two instances, I had to visit my local bookstore in order to take a photograph of the book cover in order to have a better image. That is added time and frustration. Ask yourself how many interviews and articles you may have missed because of this problem?

Below are some examples of images at differing resolutions from our October issue cover. Can you see the difference? The one on the right was a 72 dpi image.



**So what can you do?** Maintain an **image gallery** of both high and low resolution images, available to the public and press. That way you have both handy. Include added imagery, fun images, so that there are differences in the stories run. Include press clippings and other related information that helps someone to write about you and your book(s).

International bestselling crime author, **Peter James** (Books 'N Pieces Magazine, August 2018 issue), has a Website that is set-up to cover all possibilities. In particular he has a **MEDIA** link that offers a **PRESS PACK** that includes everything a reporter, or feature writer, might need to put a story together.

The screenshot shows the homepage of Peter James' website. At the top, the name 'PETER JAMES' is displayed in large white letters on a black background. Below this is a navigation bar with links for 'BOOKS', 'ABOUT', 'APPEARANCES', 'STAGE PLAYS', 'PETERJAMES TV', 'MEDIA', and 'CHARITY', along with social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. The main content area features a large image of the book cover for 'Absolute Proof', which is labeled as a 'NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER' and 'HILL TO GET IN ONE TO KEEP IT'. A red circular badge on the book cover says 'PREORDER NOW!'. To the right of the book cover, the text reads: 'A BREATHLESS RACE TO THE GREAT MYSTERY BESTSELLING AUTHOR PETER JAMES.' Below this, a short description states: 'From the number one bestselling author, Peter James, comes an explosive standalone thriller that will grip you and won't let go until the very last page.' Further down, it says: 'ABSOLUTE PROOF will be available as a hardback, eBook and audiobook in the UK, Canada, Australia, India, South Africa and other Commonwealth countries, with the paperback to follow in 2019, published by Macmillan.' At the bottom right, there is a red button that says 'OUT 4TH OCTOBER 2018' and another red button with the Amazon logo.

You can see from this screenshot that his site is prepped for readers, reviewers and writers alike. You can visit his page at [www.PeterJames.com](http://www.PeterJames.com).

Please make a point of upgrading your available imagery, including headshots and full body shots of yourself. It can make a difference in your promotions.

Publicists and publishers, please also ensure that your clients have this material ready. I know that I will be the first to thank you.

~William Gensburger

*PS: Did you know that **we are accepting advertising** from publicists, publishers and authors? Our global exposure, as well as our à la carte options of advertising in print and digital, Website, social media platforms, and even our newsletter, **reaching thousands of people**, give you a wide range of choices. And our **rates are extremely reasonable**. **EMAIL** me for more information.*

**SHORT STORY:****MOMENT OF RAGE**

by Charles Hitchcock

**It was after four** in the morning when I was suddenly awakened by a banging on my back door. It was a late for someone to come calling on me, even if I was a newspaper editor.

I pulled my trousers on and opened the door. The cold night air spilled into the room, and Leo pushed past me telling me to shut the door. Leo was a red-headed, young man, just barely twenty-four. His eyes searched the room quickly as he asked, "Is anyone here with you?"

"No, just me," I answered. "Why? Whats the matter?"

"I'm in a jam, Herb. I'm in a big jam, and I've got to tell someone what I've done," he said nervously.

"Take it easy, son. I'll make us some coffee and you can tell me all about it," I said as I turned the fire up in the living room. Then I walked to the kitchen and Leo followed. He was still pretty excited and I knew I had to calm him down.

"You've got to give me your word that you won't ever tell anyone what I'm going to tell you, and that you won't ever print it either," he demanded, looking me directly in the eye.

"That's a pretty hard promise for me to make, son, but I guess if you've got to tell someone it may as well be me, so you've got my word."

I could see he felt better now as he sat down. I lit a cigarette and tossed the pack on the table. Leo fired one up, took a deep breath and continued. "I've just killed my wife."

"You what!" I gasped.

"Now wait a minute, wait a minute. I've got to tell you all of it before they catch up with me," he said.

“Yes, but... “

“The police will get me soon enough, just let me tell you.”

“Okay,” I said, and sat down.

“You think you know me pretty well because I've worked for you almost three years, but I'm going to tell you something you don't know. I was born and raised in this town, and went to school here. I know almost everyone in Springville. They all know me as a good kid, a little on the nervous side, and a worrier at times.

“My dad and mom were divorced when I was eight years old because my mom was a tramp. It's hard to say so, but that's just what she was. After dad left she would bring men home and introduce them to me as her nephew or cousin. But I knew, even then I knew. She would put me to bed and I could hear them laughing and carrying on in the next room. Sometimes she threw wild parties and there would still be a drunk lying on the floor the next morning. Thousands of times I swore to myself that if I ever married I wouldn't have any one like her.

“Well, I grew up, or rather brought myself up. I was right out of high school and working for you on the newspaper when I met Frances Jordan. Her family had just moved into town and she was finishing her last year of school here at Springville. She used to come to the newspaper office on her way home from school and take the paper home to her folks.

“One day she stopped by the newspaper office as usual and we were talking about what she was going to do after she finished school, when she changed the subject to the senior prom. She said that some of the girls had decided to ask the boys they wanted to take. Fran told me that she wanted me to take her. I felt weak all over. She was one of the most popular girls in school and I think I was beginning to get a crush on her even then.

“For weeks I had been trying to get up enough nerve to ask her for a date, but I just kept putting it off. Well, I took her. The prom was a big success. The principal of the school complimented us on being the handsomest couple at the prom. I knew I had fallen in love with Fran, and I believed she felt the same way about me. After that we saw a lot of each other. I usually took her to the lake on Sundays. At other times we would go skating, or picnicking, or even to the movies.

“We were planning on getting married when Uncle Sam decided he needed me and there was nothing for me to do but go. We felt we should wait until I came back to get married. After six months in the Army I was shipped to Korea and the front lines. I’ll admit that I’m no hero and was plenty scared at times, but even then I would think of Fran. The way she would laugh and toss her head, her hair was very soft and lovely. It was nearly jet-black, and I remembered how the moon would make it sparkle the times we went to the lake.

“I was in Korea for almost a year and the tide of battle was going from one side to the other. Then one night it happened. Our company was cut off by the Reds. Mortar shells were busting all around us and all of a sudden we found that the enemy had bypassed us, and that we were behind enemy lines. We reorganized our small group and began a campaign of guerrilla warfare. We would strike the enemy at night and hide by day. We destroyed supplies, ammunition, and where, possible we captured food and ammunition for ourselves.

“On one occasion we captured a Chinese colonel, but the Reds were pressing us so we had to kill him to keep him from giving our position away. We must have caused the Reds more trouble than we figured because they began trying very hard to wipe us out. One night the Reds surrounded us. We fought with everything we had, but they were too much for us. I know for certain that I killed at least five before I was brought down by a bayonet. They had killed all but me and two others, and the three of us they took to a P. O.W. camp. There we were questioned, hour by hour, day after day. One of the two died of the wounds he had received, and they took me and the other guy to a hospital where they patched us up. They didn’t want us to die too, not yet anyway. They really didn’t need to patch the other guy up because his mind snapped and he went completely looney. After that he was shot as an enemy spy for propaganda purposes. I think they were getting ready to shoot me when troops from our side made a break through. The Reds completely forgot about me in their rush to retreat. They took off so fast it was more of a rout than a retreat. Anyway when I was found I was rushed to a hospital. I guess I didn’t know what a lousy job of patching the Reds did because emergency surgery was performed. I was told the bayonet wound had left me unable to ever become a father. It all seemed like a dream, but it was real enough. What could I tell Fran? What about

our plans to marry? Of all the rotten breaks. It would have to happen to me. I thought about writing to her, explaining everything. but no, she wouldn't want me like this. What woman would? I decided not to write. I would go see her, explain to her, and call the wedding off. It wouldn't be fair to her."

The coffee on the stove boiled over and I got up and turned the fire out from under it. I poured us a cup and sat the cream and sugar on the table. "No one knows you can't have children do they?"

"No, I've never told anyone but you," Leo answered.

"Not even Frances?" I asked.

"No, not even Fran. I was just going to tell you about that," he said.



"When the army discharged me and sent me home I came straight to you. You knew all the news in town and I wanted to know about Fran. Had she heard about me? Did she know I had been missing in action? Was she going with anyone? Had she waited? I had to know everything.

"You should remember that day when I walked into the office. You were so glad to see me that all of my questions about Fran had to wait. You took me to a restaurant and we really put on the feed bag. It was there you told me all about Fran. Do you remember? You told me Fran had heard that I was missing in action. For a long time she didn't go out with anyone but a person can wait only so long. She began seeing Jerry.

“From what you told me no one knew where or how I had been wounded. They only knew I had been a prisoner of war and that I had earned the Purple Heart and supposedly the Silver Star.”

“Weren't you given the Silver Star for your action while in Korea?” I asked.

“No, people think so, but it was the Bronze Star,” he said as he stirred his coffee. “What a laugh! People don't know one medal from another. I could walk down the street wearing the Good Conduct medal and people would figure me as a hero. No one knows what I actually did to get the Bronze Star. I may as well tell you that while I'm telling you my story. It all ties in together. If I hadn't learned so well how to kill during the war Fran might still be alive.”

“Go on, son,” I said.

Leo sipped his coffee and continued. “You remember the colonel I mentioned earlier? Well I'm the one who had to give it to him. It was the first time that I actually knew for sure I had killed a man. We had just captured food and supplies. Enough to last for about four days, and somehow we managed to grab this Chinese colonel. We slithered back into the mountains and brought the colonel with us. We hoped that from him we could get information as to which part of their lines were the least defended so that we could break through and rejoin our own troops. Well it didn't work that way.

“For hours we questioned the colonel but he refused to co-operate. Then as dawn began to break, we spotted a patrol of about twenty men who had been sent back to search for us and the colonel. The patrol hadn't spotted us yet and we were ordered to bind and gag the colonel and then to move back. Somehow the colonel managed to get himself untied and he made a break for it. I was guarding him, and the second he whirled, my hand snapped for my knife. He ran only about five steps before I tackled him. He was stronger than I thought and he managed to break my grip on the knife. We wrestled for it. I knew it was up to me to get him because the rest of the men had to stay under cover. We rolled into a foxhole and I hoped the patrol hadn't spotted us. As we fell into the foxhole I swung him under me and my knee caught him in the stomach. The breath had been knocked out of him and I hit him. Over and over I hit him with all the strength I had. I must have gone crazy

because when the lieutenant managed to make our foxhole, he yanked me off the colonel and told me that was enough.

“I sat there shaking as the lieutenant examined the body. Then he told me the colonel was dead. I had beat him to death in a moment of rage. I thought we were done for; we were back where we started from. We still didn't know how to get back to our own lines. But I was due for a surprise because the lieutenant told me he was putting me in for the Silver Star if we ever got back.”

Leo looked at his watch and said, “It won't be long before they find her body.” He finished his coffee, and I divided what was left in the coffee pot between the two cups.

“Like I was saying before, you told me Fran had waited for me but finally began going with Jerry. She didn't stop going with him. Then the news reached Springville that I was alive and recuperating in a hospital. Hell, after you told me about Fran I made up my mind not to go see her.

“A couple of days later I was back in the newspaper office working for you. At night I would hit all the joints to forget Fran by drinking. I spent night after night with only a bottle for company. This kind of life went on for about three weeks, then one day Fran came into the office. I felt like running but I couldn't. We just stood there looking at each other for seconds. She asked if I remembered her. Did I remember? She hadn't been out of my mind. I couldn't drive her out of my heart. Fran told me she had broken off with Jerry. He was jealous of what she had once meant to me, and he thought there was still something between us, now that I was back. She said she was sorry and wanted a second chance with me. What could I do? She was the only person in the world I had ever loved. She was the only person who had ever cared anything for me. I needed her love but would it be fair to her. Somehow I had to tell her about me. I would never be able to be a father. Somehow something that had never been important to me before was now the most important thing in the world.

“I told her I would pick her up that night and we could talk about us. With part of the Army money I had left, I made a down payment on a second-hand car, and at eight-thirty that night we were parked down by the lake. She was beautiful. Her hair sparkled in the moonlight just as I remembered it did. Her eyes looked into mine and I felt as if she could see into my soul. All the rotten things in my life seemed to disappear,

and in that brief second I knew I had to have her even if it was only for an hour, a day, or a year. I couldn't take a chance of losing her. I wouldn't tell her. Maybe after we were married. Maybe then it wouldn't matter to her. Then I could tell her. We could always adopt children, even pick out the ones we wanted.

"I pulled her to me and kissed her over and over. Her fingers ran through my hair and I thought that I could make her forget all about Jerry. After that we went everywhere together, just like before. We even began building the house we would live in and picked up pieces of furniture we liked. Everything was rosy again. I had quit drinking and the world was a good place to live after all. There were times when I would even forget that I couldn't have kids." Leo looked at his watch again. "It won't be long before they come after me," he said.

"Do they know where you are?" I asked.

"Not yet, but they will when Frans' mother wakes up and finds the body. I left a note telling the police that I would be here."

I put out my cigarette and said, "Go on with your story, son."

"Well, once just before the house was finished, we had a quarrel. I don't even remember what it was about now but she went back to Jerry. For a week I didn't see her, then one night I went to see her and apologized. She promised not to see Jerry again. We made up and went ahead with our plans to be married. The house was completed and well furnished by winter.

"We had a small wedding. You and a couple of buddies were the only friends that I invited outside of all Fran's family and friends. I didn't invite my mother. I didn't want Fran to meet her. My mother would just have laughed anyway. She thinks everyone is like her. She used to laugh at me when I told her if I ever married it would be to someone decent. Not like her. I can't stand to have her laugh at me.

"I saw her with another boyfriend outside the church, right after the wedding. I saw her point to us and laugh. The boyfriend thought it was funny. I wanted to go break his jaw to see if he would still feel like laughing, but Fran held my arm and I ignored them.

"We spent two weeks on our honeymoon. I still didn't tell Fran about me. It worried me some, but I decided to wait until we were settled, then I would tell her. We went to Niagara falls for our honeymoon. Fran was like a little girl lost in a wonderland. She was

thrilled by everything she saw. We went everywhere, even to a television show.

“The first night was what really worried me. I wondered if she could tell? Would she guess? No, she never knew. Now, she never will. She's dead now; she'll never know. She'll never even know why she died.”

Leo stood up, looked out the window. Dawn was beginning to break. He lit a cigarette and just stood there by the window. I sat there watching him. I didn't say anything. Leo was telling me another side of his life no one else knew. I wondered why. I didn't have to ask.

Leo said, “I'm telling you all this because I know when you make a promise, you keep it. That's more than some people do. I've worked for you a long time and I don't think you ever broke a promise yet. I've never told anyone about me, and if I don't tell someone I'll go crazy.”

He sat down again, looked at his coffee cup. It was empty. He started again. “I'd better get on with my story before the police get here. After the honeymoon Fran and I moved into our house. Things went pretty well until Fran's father passed away. It was then that Fran's mother moved in with us. We had a pretty good-sized house but there isn't a house large enough to hold two families. I hadn't know Fran's mother too well before we were married, but I learned soon enough after she moved in that she had cautioned Fran not to marry me. She had told Fran about my mother and the kind of life I had known.

“From the day Mrs. Jordan moved in she did nothing but cause trouble for me. To start with there were little things like changing the program I was watching on television and cooking things I didn't like for supper. She was a constant nag. Clean the mud off your shoes before you come in the house. Don't drop ashes on the floor. Do this, don't do that. It came to a point where I couldn't take any more. I told Fran that either her mother left or I would.

“The day Fran's mother left she came to me and told me that I was a tramp just like my mother and that someday Frances would leave me and find herself someone decent and respectable. I turned from her and left the house, but I could still hear her voice in my ear. “Someday Frances would leave me. ‘No,’ I told myself. Somehow I would hold on to her. I would still have to wait to tell Fran about me.

“After Fran's mother left things didn't go so well. Fran kept harping at me about how I had thrown her mother out. I couldn't stand Fran

nagging me so I began drinking again. I stayed out later and later. That only made matters worse and gave Fran something else to criticize. I began to feel like I was losing Fran's love so I quit drinking again in a final effort to win her back. I managed to put up with her constant nagging. I wasn't surprised, though, when she said she was going to leave me. She left me and went to stay with her mother.

"I heard rumors she was seeing Jerry again. I didn't see or hear from her for almost three months. When I thought I couldn't stand it anymore, Fran came to see me. She begged me to take her back. She promised never to mention her mother or Jerry to me. She was through with Jerry. I think that was the happiest moment of my life. She never mentioned her mother or Jerry after that. She did everything to please me. I decided to even let her mother come back and stay with us because Fran was so wonderful.

"Mrs. Jordan came back later that week and didn't cause any trouble at all. Well, I guess that brings us up to the present, except for last night.

"There wasn't any argument or noise. We had just gone to our room to go to bed when Fran put her arms around me and pulled me close. She whispered to me that I was going to be a father. A father! My heart raced and my head throbbed and reeled. Did she know what she was saying? It was like a silent confession of what Jerry had done.

"The baby wasn't mine. Not mine. It just couldn't be. I don't remember too well much of what happened after that. I killed Fran in a moment of rage, just like the colonel, you might say. When I calmed down I wrote a note telling the police they would find me here. But don't ever tell anyone why I did it. I couldn't stand to have my mother laugh at me again or to have Fran's mother know that Fran had stepped out when she left me. She would only spit in my face and say it was everything I deserved."

Light was coming in the window now and we heard sirens in the distance. Leo sat down with his head in his hands.

"They'll be here in a minute," I said.

"You won't tell them will you?" he asked again.

"No, son, I won't tell. They'll never know."

Leo got up and walked outside to meet the sheriff. I stood there alone in an empty kitchen looking at an empty coffee pot and a full

ashtray that needed cleaning before I went to work. Now, if only I could find a story that I could actually print.

## About the Author



**Charles (Charlie) Hitchcock** was born in Hooker Oklahoma in 1931. While in the Air Force in 1952, Charlie caught the writing bug, and wrote several short stories to see if he could do as well as his favorite author, Mickey Spillane. Those who read his stories encouraged him to continue, but trying to earn a living took priority. Charlie passed away June 2006. His son, Cliff, has assembled his work for an upcoming book. This is the last of his stories.

*[Editor note: In 2019, a book with all the short stories will be available to buy; all monies paid as royalties will be used as a prize for a writing contest in Charles' name, to be announced by his son, Cliff Hitchcock.]*

*Story Photo Credit: [chrisroll](#)*

**INTERVIEW:****JIM CHRISTINA****A Little Bit of Everything...**

**Jim Christina** was born into an Air Force Family in 1949, living all over the world before finally landing in Del Mar, California. A musician, historian, writer, poet, playwright...all things describing Jim Christina. A graduate of San Diego High School in Encinitas, California, and Old Reliable University in Washington State. Jim spent almost ten years in the US Army before joining his father in the family's paint business.

While managing a territory in Washington and Oregon, Jim began composing music and writing the lyrics. Forming a band in Tacoma, Washington, "Sundown", Jim's music and the melody of Sundown played up and down the state before Jim moved to California.

For years a story character had been rolling around in his mind, and in 2008, the character became *The Hunter* and the series was born. These are stories of an aging, man-hunter and his protégé in Arizona, in the last half of the nineteenth-century.

The stories are gritty, raw and accurate in their depiction of the lives and times of the main characters. "If you are looking for Louis Lamour, you won't find him here; but if you are looking for a walloping good story, turn the pages and start reading."

**Q: You are a renaissance man between writing, composing, and performing your own works, as well as a radio program on writing. How did all that come about, and did you have any difficulty with the range you are covering?**

*A: One always has difficulty when trying to juggle several things at a time, unless you are a magician. I started life as a kid, and generally progressed from there. Learning to write, about the same time I learned I loved to read. Becoming a popular western author came after being in a popular acoustic vocal group and the radio came after everything.*

**Q: The Hunter is a series about an aging man hunter and his protege' in Arizona, set in the latter part of the 19th Century. What was the inspiration, or incentive, for this series, and have you found a difference between the imagined version versus the finished version?**

*A: The inspiration came after reading a lot of older western novels and finding the stories good, but the factual scenarios somewhat lacking. I figured I could meld a good story with facts of the west and still make it a whopping good read but more realistic. **The Hunter** was inspired by some friends and riding buddies I knew that had aged but were still in the saddle and still viable. Consequently a whole new series was spawned and now have grown to over eleven titles in **The Hunter Series**.*

**Q: Please share about your talk radio show The Writers' Block.**

*A: **The Writer's Block** was my brain child that percolated for a few years before ever becoming reality. I wanted to give new writers an opportunity to have their works discussed and to have established authors give hints and advice to new writers. For over three and a half years now we have been bringing authors on the air, some new, some New York Times Best Selling Authors like Craig Johnson, Tosca Lee and John Sandford. Each week my co-hosts and I read, and interview, authors about their works, but we try to maintain a tongue-in-cheek attitude to keep the show fun and lively.*

**Q: As a 10-year army man, from an Air Force family, does your writing/work process follow a strict disciplined formed**

**from your military experiences, or are you less structured?  
What is your process like? (pen/paper, set time and place?)**

*A: Unfortunately, I am not as structured as I would like to be. Being from an Air Force family and having spent ten years on the Army, I did learn discipline, but promptly forgot it when I left. My process is to write when I have something to say, something to add to the story currently in my processor. I generally don't work from an outline but rather, I am a pantsier. When I do sit down to write, it's usually in my office in the mornings. All done on a computer.*

**Q: What's up for 2019?**

*A: Continuing **The Writer's Block** for sure. I also have a new book in the works entitled; *Jefferson's Chance* which should be done and for sale around April or May.*

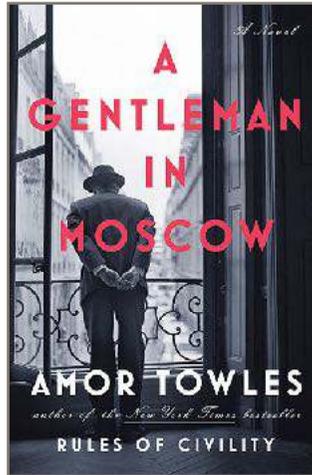
*I also am planning on pulling my works from the Library of Congress, titled, **That's All You Get** and publish it properly with Tuscany Bay Books. I am hoping to get the project started after the first of the year.*

Learn more about **Jim Christina:**

**Website:** [www.jimchristina.net](http://www.jimchristina.net)

**BOOK REVIEW:**

Reviewed by Jill Hedgecock | [www.jillhedgecock.com](http://www.jillhedgecock.com)



## **A GENTLEMAN IN MOSCOW**

*by Amor Towles*

**A secret key, a young girl’s curiosity, and a man under house arrest lead to an unlikely pair sleuthing through the bowels of a Russian hotel.** These elements make **A Gentleman in Moscow** by Amor Towles (2016, Viking, hardcover, 480 pages, \$16.20) an intriguing premise. Towles’ inclusion of Russian history further lay the groundwork for an epic reading experience. It is a lengthy tome spanning three decades and requires readers to pay careful attention. Rest assured, it’s worth the effort. According to Towles, “Bit characters, passing remarks, incidental objects come swirling together and play essential roles in bringing the narrative to its sharply pointed conclusion.”

Count Alexander Rostov is an aristocrat survivor of the bloody aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Although spared death, he must live within the confines of the Metropol Hotel, situated near the

Kremlin. While all the characters in the book are imagined, the Metropol is based on an existing historic hotel located in central Moscow.

In addition to its intriguing setting and main character, Towles infuses the story with a compelling supporting cast. In contrast to the stiff, yet genteel, Rostov, movie star, Anna Urbanova, and her two borzois, bring levity and glamour to lighten the pages. Anna also brings romance into housebound Rostov's life. Equally compelling are Rostov's male friendships from the ne'er-do-well American vending machine salesman to Mishka, Rostov's boyhood chum provide insights into the extent of Rostov's charm.

When young Sophia enters his life, Rostov is jolted from his comfortable routines as he embraces fatherly responsibilities. Of course, no good book is without its villain and the incompetent waiter, Bishop Leplevshy with his antagonistic personality and a penchant for snooping into Rostov's affairs, fills that literary role quite well. Like many accomplished novelists, Towles interweaves elements of other great creative works into his story—in this case, the movie, *Casablanca*. The book also has an inherent quirkiness to its structure. All of the chapter titles begin with the letter "A."

*A Gentleman in Moscow* is a New York Times bestseller and was ranked as one of the best books of 2016 by the Chicago Tribune, the Miami Herald and others. Amor Towles graduated from Yale College and received an MA in English from Stanford University. His first novel, *Rules of Civility*, published in 2011, was a New York Times bestseller and ranked by the Wall Street Journal as one of the best books of 2011. Both of Towles' novels have been translated into over fifteen languages. This hefty read is the perfect book to escape into on a cold, rainy day.

You can buy *A Gentleman in Moscow* at <https://amzn.to/2L3LZOP>

## POETRY

# THE FIRST FOUR BOOKS

by Atar Hadari

The first four books of the Earthsea saga  
Are in print while Ursula Le Guin  
Breathes no more, an extinguished Aga,  
A pen that will no longer lean.

What is a writer when their words are numbered?  
A classic? A certain shelf?  
The first four books of the Earthsea saga  
Sit crisp as a mint. The flesh is dead.

And nobody knows who you are,  
A hole in the ground, a marble.  
Long live the Earthsea saga,  
There will be no other miracle.

### About the Author



*Atar Hadari's "Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of H. N. Bialik" (Syracuse University Press) was a finalist for the American Literary Translators' Association Award, and his debut collection, "Rembrandt's Bible", was published by Indigo Dreams in 2013. His pen translated the award winning "Lives of the Dead: Collected Poems of Hanoah Levin" just out from Arc Publications. He translates a monthly verse, bible column for MOSAIC magazine.*

## SHORT STORY

# HE HATES OPEN WINDOWS

by J.T. Macek

**The window is open** just enough to let in the cool night air. That does not, however, staunch his bleeding or wane our tempers. My fingers splay under his head keeping it off the carpet as his blood seeps into the blue chintz pattern blurring the chrysanthemums. He never liked chrysanthemums. They remind him of China. He hates China.

Someone bangs shut the window. Too late now. The shots didn't come from the window anyway. They know that, I know that. The shots came from behind him. Four fast— Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow!

We train for years, preparing ourselves for something none of us wants to happen. Contact combat, physical protection, evasive auto maneuvers, firearms marksmanship. I hit my target 40 out of 40, that's expert. Now, here, in the East ballroom the one-word description I give to us is—pandemonium.

We're pushing dignitaries down onto the floor, waving our SIG's like flags in a Fourth of July parade. Kwacha's pulling FLOTUS by her elbow towards the exit, shredding her beaded Versace while a Vogue photographer's snapping tomorrow's front page.

Birr's yelling and pointing to a swarthy skinned VIP wearing a floor length white *thobe*, "Him!" Birr can't tell the difference between a *ghutra* head covering and Italian restaurant's red checkered tablecloth. Sterling skitters up next to me, arms straight out, hands clutching his weapon, ready for an invasion. "Communists!" Sterling's living in the '50's. We're like most of the public, blaming the flavor of the month.

That rarely happened except for Booth-Lincoln, Czolgosz-McKinley, Princip-Duke Ferdinand, a whole gang of Bolsheviks-Czar Nicholas. Mostly, they're done in by a crazy or by one of their own -

Garfield, Kennedy, Sadat, both Gandhi's, attempt on Reagan, and multiple failures on Ford.

We're on lockdown. Lights blaze. Doors slam. Alarms screech loud enough to be heard in Afghanistan. Rand and Zloty hold VPOTUS up by his arms, his feet cartoon roadrunner spinning above the floor, then haul him out the side entrance.

I'm big at 6 feet 3 inches and 220 muscled pounds and I press the heel of my palm on one hole in his gut trying to curb the exiting blood. The circle of tuxedos beg me offerings of their fine woolen jackets, "Here! Here!" hoping to be the chosen. I take them all. I twist his torso and we rolled him enough to shove the wads under his back, then pile more onto his chest.

"Why me?" He whispers in my ear which is only inches from his mouth. I smell Johnny Walker. He likes his drink, especially after sex with someone other than his wife. I wonder when he finds the time, or he might be really, really fast.



A curly-haired boy dangling a press pass and wearing his big brother's oversized gray suit kneels next to me. He's breathless, scared, and excited. This will be the most important thing that'll ever happen to him in his entire life. He says to me, "I know CPR."

I growl at him. "He didn't have a heart attack, he's been shot."

He hates the media, says they're stupid. This time, surprisingly, I agree. I motion my head and the kid realizes I want his jacket. The kid obliges. I wrap the loose weave polyester around his head wound. Red

seeps through the gray. My pits are fountains and rivers flow down my forehead and cheeks and I wish someone would open a few of the windows to let in the cold.

All this time, I hear crackling and cackling in my earpiece. Kyat shrieks orders, shouts commands. Kyat's sequestering the house staff and servers for questioning. They're paid two dollars over minimum and vetted more than any cabinet member. None of them did it. This is a diplomatic fiasco. Some of the dignitaries, and their guests, play politics, feigning being insulted as Renminbi removes them to smaller rooms scattered about the first floor to await extraction by their own security detail. Secretly, they're glad they weren't the intended target. He hates most of them, calls them incompetent.

Tonight's guest list didn't include a medical doctor, a rarity and a misfortune. When the ambulance stretcher arrives, his head lolls back and forth and he stares at me with his blank, dull eyes as we lift him onto the wheeled gurney. He has a hold on my hand and whispers, "Will I be okay?" He hates hospitals, calls them parasites on the sick. He doesn't have a choice now.

"Yes, sir," I answer. His hand leaves mine and his entourage scampers after, a few grabbing their soaked jackets from the floor. The day after tomorrow those will be on eBay.

Manat debriefs the team. We go over the four W's and an H for an hour—who, what, when, where, how. We're blind men describing an elephant; each has a different story.

"Go home." Kyat slaps my shoulder, squeezes. My knees ache from kneeling by his side. My sleeves are wet heavy and saturated maroon to the elbow. Round droplets fall onto the already red chrysanthemums. I slug down the hall, my shoes drag, and I wipe blood off my hands onto my pants. I walk out the front door, unchecked.

I don't drive directly home. Instead, I turn onto Constitution, then turn a few lefts and rights to find a dumpster far out of town. I wipe the throwaway Ruger with a bleach-soaked rag, toss it into the dumpster, then I go home. I open my window and inhale the chilly night. I contemplate returning tomorrow, but my scheduled long-awaited vacation also starts tomorrow, and my airline ticket to the Maldives waits for me on my kitchen table.

By the time Kyat watches the video surveillance, simulates the bullet trajectories, reviews forensics, realizes I'm not coming in, I'll be lying under a palm tree on a Southeast Asia tropical island with no extradition agreement.

Sometimes you shoot him because you just plain hate him.

## About the Author



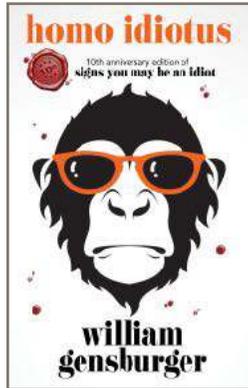
**J.T. Macek** is a professor of political science and history and writer of mystery-thrillers and romance-suspense living in rural Michigan. J.T.'s work appeared in **Splickety Lightning**, **Terror House Magazine**, and **Zodiac Review**. **On Fire!**, a romance-suspense novel was recently published by Burroughs Publishing with the pen name of Savannah Cross.

When not caring for 10 loveable dogs, J.T. enjoys trying new adventures including sky-diving in Arizona, snorkeling the Pacific, white water rafting in Virginia, climbing the temple steps at Chichen Itza, and skateboarding around the neighborhood. Using specific locations and settings are hallmarks in J.T.'s stories and novels. Readers can contact the author at [jtmacek@gmail.com](mailto:jtmacek@gmail.com) or follow on Twitter @Jo\_Macek or on Facebook at J.T. Macek.

*Story Photo Credit: Fernando Gregory Milan*

**BOOKS CHAPTER FROM...****HOMO IDIOTUS**

by William Gensburger

**One Pill-Popping  
National Obsession**

**Whether you need vitamin** supplements or something a little more exotic, you can find a pill to cover any ailment.

I found Horny Goat Weed on the pharmacy shelves. A Chinese herb that reportedly has aphrodisiac qualities, it was discovered when a goat herder noticed increased sexual activity in his flock after they ingested the weed. Interesting!



The mass of supplements out there, along with the ocean of pharmaceutical products that are offered and dispensed like candy for the slightest of ailments, are often used in a trial and error methodology.

Case in point: A friend once had an ongoing upset stomach which was diagnosed by a doctor during a routine physical, as Gastro-Esophageal Reflux Disease (GERD). He was given a prescription to reduce stomach acid production. This medication caused headaches and dizziness, which brought him back only to find his blood pressure was now elevated. For this he received an anti-nausea prescription and a diuretic.

The anti-nausea medication caused itching, and he was feeling a great deal of anxiety. The doctor diagnosed this as panic-attacks, prescribed a selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitor (SSRI) and an anti-itch pill. Two days later, the anxiety had reached extreme proportions. However, the doctor assured him that it was just a common side effect as the medication kicked in. He was prescribed a benzodiazepine to give immediate relief, but warned of the dangers of addiction.



It was when he developed one of the more common side effects of the SSRI—erectile dysfunction—that things took a turn for the worse. Not to worry, there was a prescribed medication for that as well. Viagra. Despite insurance, at \$30 per pill, you must really want to enjoy the

sexual ability it offers. Of course now a generic version is available at \$10 a pill.

Finally my friend saw the light. “I went in for an upset stomach,” he said, “and now I have a pill for just about everything. And I still have an upset stomach.”

Slowly, he stopped all the medications. He went on a diet and lost weight. All his symptoms went away. His anxiety disappeared as he regained control over his life, and this, in turn, lowered his blood pressure. He did not need Horny Goat Weed after all, no matter what the bottle told him.

The problem with medical science is that it gets abused. Often, aches and pains are the signs given by the body to make adjustments in your life. When a road has a pot hole, you do not create a freeway overpass around it; you fill in the hole.

When a medication can create more problems than it cures, it becomes the problem. Watching television advertising for products that are made out to be harmless little miracles, and then listening to the rapid-fire disclaimers of their common side effects, you quickly realize that the pharmaceutical industry has more loopholes than a shady politician in an election year. And, despite their claims, hefty profits. After all, they do not call it a “cure”; rather the business is called “Health Management.”

And doctors love to send you home with little plastic bags loaded with samples, the ones delivered by flight attendant-looking types, wheeling in their sample bags to each doctor office. It’s only when you read the micro-print, tightly folded forty page disclaimer, compressed to the size of a business card that you might worry at the gift and question the motivation of the giver.

Life is marketing and everyone is selling. Vitamins must be good to take because they have names that correspond with the letters of the alphabet. By that same logic, mega-vitamins must be much better than regular vitamins. If 100 mg. of Vitamin C is good, 1,000 mg. must be better.

As a child, I naively believed that if I ate too much sugar, I could offset the effect on my body by eating something salty. Marketers of supplements rely on that same simplistic reasoning. So why isn’t there a pill for stupidity?

While Horny Goat Weed may seem like a great idea, your reaction to it was probably far stronger than your reaction to my friend's tale. Why is that? Could it be that you have blindly accepted what you have been told? Or have you just learned to stop asking the questions?

### **About the Author**

**William Gensburger** has been a writer for most of his life. Having extensively traveled the world at a younger age, he revels in his observations of life, people and the possibilities for the future. In addition to writing and ghostwriting, he is a proficient graphic designer, photographer and magazine publisher (Books 'N Pieces Magazine), offering publishing services and tutorials to authors seeking publication and marketing.

He is also available for lectures and presentations about publishing and self-publishing. You can contact him at [william@Gensburger.com](mailto:william@Gensburger.com)

You can buy ***Homo Idiotus***\* at <https://amzn.to/2UqKsXr>

**INTERVIEW:****C.S. LAKIN****30 Books and Counting**

by Jill Hedgecock

**C. S. Lakin** is a multipublished novelist and writing coach. She works full-time as a copyeditor and critiques about two hundred manuscripts a year. She teaches writing workshops and gives instruction on her award-winning blog **Live Write Thrive**.

**Q: Including your nonfiction, you've written more than 30 books. Do you sleep? But seriously, how long did it take you to write your first book, and how long did it take for your last?**

*A: I don't sleep all that much! I suppose I'm a bit neurotic. I am mindful of how short life is and how many things I still want to do with my creativity and imagination. In the time I have left on this Earth, I want to use every minute in a deliberate way. That also means living a balanced life—exercise, rest, recreation. I've tried to streamline my activities to waste the least amount of time. Which ties in with your question about my writing.*

*Like most new authors, my first novel took a bit of time, probably a year, to write. But I really didn't know what I was doing (and that book will never be published). It was a really good exercise in discipline and experimentation, but after spending years not only writing fiction but studying writing craft books and taking workshops, I learned novel structure and trained myself to write quickly and efficiently.*

*I am now writing my 22nd novel (but who's counting?) and it's hard to say how long it will take. It's required a tremendous amount of research, so it's a bit slow-going compared to other books I've written.*

**Q: Can you give us some highlights from your book: *Writing the Heart of Your Story: The Secret to Crafting an Unforgettable Novel*?**

*A: There are a lot of writing craft books published that teach novel writing, but I've never seen one that teaches writers how to truly get to the heart of what they are writing, which is a lot about the writer herself. At the core of a great novel is a passion the writer has for the premise and themes and characters. In my book, I teach ways that writers can get to the heart of their story and create a novel that is infused with rich characters that are driven by their core need and the things they long for and believe in. This book explores ways writers can infuse meaning into all the components in a novel, including the setting and all the secondary characters.*

**Q: What authors have most influenced your writing?**

*A: For my fantasy, mostly Patricia A. McKillip, who, I feel, is the consummate fairy-tale writer. She is unmatched. Also, Elizabeth George has greatly influenced my contemporary fiction. She is the queen of deep POV and characters. I have a lot of favorite authors, mostly contemporary.*

**Q: You've grown quite a following on Twitter (@livewritethrive and @cslakin). What is your secret to success?**

*A: I don't know if it's success or not. My blog is the hub of my work and presence online. I use social media to direct people to the free content I provide via my blog, which is extensive advice and writing instruction for both fiction and nonfiction writers ([www.livewritethrive.com](http://www.livewritethrive.com)). I promote my posts and encourage discussion on writing-related topics, and I guest blog on top writing*

*blogs. I love helping writers, and my editing clients are all over the world.*

**Q: How important do you think endorsements are?**

*A: I am sure a great endorsement by a super-famous writer would help book sales. Experts say having a lot of great reviews on Amazon or other sites does help sales, and I imagine having some wonderful endorsements by professionals in one's field can only help. That doesn't negate the need, though, to write a terrific book. Better to have the terrific book and no endorsements than a lot of endorsements and a lousy book.*

**Q: In your opinion, what are the most common mistakes new writers make?**

*A: They don't take the time to really learn the craft, whether novel writing or memoir writing or nonfiction. It's good to "just write" and get in the habit of putting thoughts down. But many writers think if they just keep writing, eventually they'll turn out a masterpiece. Kind of like the evolutionary claim that if you put a hundred monkeys behind typewriters, eventually they would accidentally write the **Bible**, or something like that. Learning the craft of writing should be a very deliberate study, just like learning to become a doctor. New writers should subscribe to writing blogs, attend workshops, study books, and then apply what they learn. And the best way to learn to write is to tear apart the books of great writers and see how they construct them.*

*The other big mistake new writers make is they don't get professional help in assessing their writing. Hiring an editor and/or writing coach can save them years of flailing about without knowing what they are doing wrong or need to work on. They often rush to publish without getting this help, and the result is problematic, because once they put out awful books, their reputation will be difficult to repair.*

**Q: If you were to describe yourself as a character in a fairy tale, what or who would it be?**

*A: I have no clue. I am in all my fairy tales in one form or another. I'd probably like to be a unicorn or some magical creature.*

**Q: What is your greatest writing weakness?**

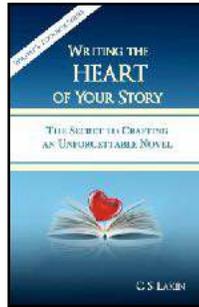
*A: The hardest part about writing novels for me is getting the climax right. Not so much a weakness but the biggest challenge. Sometimes I feel I nail it and it's perfect. But in some of my novels I really struggled, and I feel I could have done better.*

**Q: What inspired you to write fantasy/fairy tales?**

*A: I've read fantasy all my life and was greatly influenced by Ray Bradbury's stories growing up. I always wanted to write in that genre. However, after writing some psychological mysteries, I came across G. K. Chesterton's **Orthodoxy**, and he has a chapter in that book all about fairy tales. That is when I got excited about writing fairy tales specifically, because they have such incredible power through use of metaphor and archetype to reach readers' hearts.*

**Q: Are you a fan of the Game of Thrones series?**

*A: I've read the first three books in the series. Martin is a master at scene structure, and I encourage any writer who wants to really see what great scenes are to study his books. I could teach an entire scene-writing workshop using his scenes as examples.*



**C. S. Lakin** teaches online courses for authors and editors at [cslakin.teachable.com](http://cslakin.teachable.com). You can see her list of published books and audiobooks on her Amazon Author Page. Get free ebooks, including *Writing the Heart of Your Story*, when you join her Novel-Writing Fast Track email list. Sign up at <https://eepurl.com/6UpdP>.

Interview conducted/written by Jill Hedgecock, [www.jillhedgecock.com](http://www.jillhedgecock.com)

**SHORT STORY:****THE STAND IN**

by Jon Wesick

**If you live in Southern California**, you've probably seen my ads:

Take the risk out of online dating. For as little as \$50, Donny's Stand-In Service will make uncomfortable first dates a thing of the past. Don't fake an attack of diarrhea. Call Donny, instead.

My name is Donny Stereotactic. I came up with the idea for the service while online dating, myself.

I corresponded with a woman—let's call her Linda—a few times. We seemed to hit it off and agreed to meet at the San Diego Zoo. I know it's shallow to judge people by their looks, but when I saw Linda, my instinct was to run. The portrait she'd posted Online didn't show her body—which resembled a frozen turkey—and no portrait could have warned me of her voice that sounded like sandpaper on rap music. Maybe she had a beautiful personality, but I shuddered imagining any physical intimacy with her. And yet I couldn't bring myself to hurt her feelings, so I spent the afternoon watching herbivores and ungulates with a woman who looked like she belonged on the other side of the hippo cage, while trying to think up an excuse not to call her again.

That's where my service comes in. To explain how it works I'll describe a typical encounter with a client I'll call Rob. As arranged Rob and I rendezvous outside a coffee shop where he was to meet his date for the first time. Rob was a mellow-looking guy in his late twenties with wavy, brown hair and sympathetic eyes: in other words a SNAG or Sensitive New Age Guy.

“Daisy said she’d be wearing a turquoise scarf.”

“Scarf, huh?” I suspected the worst. Scarves were a bad sign.

“Okay.” Rob took a deep breath and immediately let it out. “Let’s do this.”

We stood the line; it stretched all the way to the door. Rob was too nervous to speak so we stood in silence until we got inside. I liked the place. Rustic wood decorated the interior, and tattooed, counter-culture women worked the counter. I spotted Rob’s date and pointed her out to him. As I’d suspected, she was in her fifties, way too old for him.

“No way, man!” Rob turned toward the door.

“Okay, I got this,” I said as he fled.

Like a wrestler in a tag team, I took over. Once I got my coffee, I carried it to Daisy’s table.

“Are you Daisy? Hi, I’m Rob.” I shook her hand when she stood.

“You don’t look like your picture.”

“Yeah, I took it several years ago. Hope you don’t mind.”

I sat at her table.

Daisy had taken good care of herself. She was thin with salt-and-pepper hair but the skin on her décolletage was wrinkled and creviced like the leather on an old couch. It was nothing she could help. As always I wanted to let her down gently.

The best way was to get her to reject me (I mean Rob). If that didn’t work, I’d have to haul out the big guns and tell her I was entering the priesthood, or exploring my sexual orientation. It’s a delicate balance with the latter because some women exhibit so much sympathy that they make caring for you their mission in life.

“What do you do for a living?” she asked.

Taking an educated guess about her politics, I replied, “I work for Limburger Oil. The fracking boom has really kept me busy.” Here I had to throttle back to avoid becoming a bad boy and hence more attractive. “It’s mostly logistics, getting gear to the drilling sites in North Dakota and mapping right-of-ways for the pipelines. What do you do?”

“I teach film studies.”

“No kidding? Do they grant degrees in that?”

“UC Santa Cruz.”

“Santa Cruz. I was thinking of going there until Rush said it was too liberal.”

We chatted for a few minutes and I worked in phrases like “excessive government regulation,” “right-to-life,” and “free-market” to drive Rob’s right-wing point of view home.

“Can I get you another coffee?” I walked to the counter and returned a few minutes later.

“Could I borrow a few bucks?” I held up my empty wallet. “I’m a little short.”

After we finished our drinks, I walked her to her car and gave her a hug.

“Sorry.” She freed her body from my embrace as I moved in for a kiss. “I left my vagina at home.”

Mission accomplished!



Life was good. I was now pulling down \$80k a year and even thinking of hiring an assistant. Then my world came crashing down. It started innocently enough. A client named Walt was to meet Betsy at the Santa Monica Pier and wanted me to be his anti-wingman. Since this job involved hours of driving, I dressed like a loser to avoid putting in too much time making small talk should Walt reject his date. I chose a torn, olive-drab jacket to wear over my stained, Blink 182 T-shirt and plaid bellbottoms. This coupled with sandals and argyle socks would turn any woman off.

I looked in the mirror and gave my hair a final muss before jumping in my Ford Taurus and motoring north on the I-5 freeway. The Taurus has great styling. I’d intended to buy a Japanese car, but Ford offered me a lifetime supply of donuts to sweeten the deal. I’m no pushover, though. I held out for bagels, instead.

I met Walt on the pier outside Merle's Tilapia Shack. He was a stocky man with a neatly trimmed beard. We entered the crowded lobby and waited in line in front of the hostess stand while scanning the tables for Walt's date.

"No way, man!" Walt pointed to a woman, sipping white wine at a table for two, and practically ran for the exit.

To call her flat-chested would have been unfair. Though small, her breasts were pear-sized and perfectly formed. She wore an unbuttoned shirt over a body-hugging leotard, a diamond stud in her nostril, and her blonde hair was less than two inches long. Her eyes were the color of smokey whiskey, and her lips formed into a perpetual smile as if she shared some private joke with the universe. She was the most adorable woman I'd ever seen in my life.

I hyperventilated in a bathroom stall until I lowered my blood pressure to the point where my head wouldn't explode. Then, standing in front of the mirror, splashed water on my face, combed my hair, and tucked in my T-shirt. There was a change of clothes in my Ford Taurus, but I didn't have time. This was the best I could do. I left and entered the dining room to meet my date.

"Are you Betsy?" I flashed a smile and took her soft, warm hand in mine. "Hi, I'm Walt. Been waiting long?"

"Half an hour."

"Sorry." I pulled up a chair. "Traffic on the I-5 was murder."

"But you said you live in Long Beach."

"Business in Anaheim." I picked up a menu that was stained with old coleslaw. "What's good here?"

"There's tilapia cocktail, tilapia ceviche, tilapia chowder (both Boston and Manhattan), fried tilapia, broiled tilapia, blackened Cajun tilapia, tilapia po' boys, tilapia Newberg, tilapia casserole, tilapia meunière, tilapia and chips, Maryland tilapia cakes, tilapia Thermidor, and for dessert they have a wonderful tilapia cheesecake."

"Such a selection! I don't know where to begin." I set down the menu. "So what do you do for a living?"

"I'm finishing my degree in gender studies."

"You don't say?" My heart sank. With the resources of an entire university department behind her, devoted to thinking up even more

ways for women to reject me, my chances with Betsy weren't looking good.

"Yeah, my thesis is on non-sexist language in the public schools. Did you know they have a gender-neutral pronoun in Sweden?" When she saw my expression, Betsy burst out laughing. "Just kidding! I think it's bullshit, too."

"And they call polar bears ice bears in Denmark." What the hell was I saying? I was so nervous I couldn't count from 125 to 137 in 3s around her.

"Your profile says you're a cultural anthropologist. What's that like?"

My breath caught in my chest as if a canned ham were blocking my windpipe. I couldn't think of a damn thing. Fortunately, the waiter saved me.

"Hello, I'm Chad. I'll be your server, tonight. Can I start you off with a tilapia daiquiri? No? Let me tell you about the chef's specials. We have tilapia Wellington – tender tilapia filets coated with chicken-liver pâté, baked in a puff pastry, and served on a bed of rocket and new potatoes. There's also the tilapia Stroganoff—marinated tilapia strips cooked with sour cream and mushrooms and served with egg noodles."

Chad's interruption gave me time to remember a National Geographic documentary I'd seen. I ordered the Stroganoff and resumed the conversation after he left.

"I study the Yomamma Indians in the Amazon basin."

"You mean the Yanomami?" Betsy asked.

"Well yeah, if you want to use the Anglo term for them!" Drawing on my extensive experience with psychedelics, I elaborated. "My research focuses on Ayahuasca rituals as performed by the shaman Don Bustamante." I laid it on until our meals came.

"How is yours?" I asked.

"Dreadful."

"Here, try some of my Stroganoff." I spooned some on her plate. "There's not much tilapia in it."

"Want to get out of here?" Betsy asked.

Her arm around my waist, our hips bumping, we strolled the pier and got snacks at Crouching Rice Ball, Hidden Sandwich. After eating we sat on a bench while gangbangers walked their Chihuahuas past us.

“Tell me more about the Yomamma people.” Betsy rested a hand on my forearm.

Juiced on testosterone and adrenaline, my mind grasped images from movies and TV to spin a web of bullshit.

“They don’t publicize it much but Don Bustamante told me Ayahuasca opens a doorway in the mind that unleashes psychic powers. He calls it the Aztec Telephone.”

“But the Aztecs were in Mexico, not Brazil.”

“Exactly! That’s how powerful it is.” I leaned close and kissed her soft lips. “In any case, a German pharmaceutical company—I won’t say which—got wind of this and started buying up all the surrounding land. Do you know how the tribe saved the rainforest?”

Betsy shook her head.

“Dancing! See, tribal women entrusted the chief’s daughter with dance moves that could only be done in private. With the Yomamma’s future at stake, she made them public for the first time at a dance contest in Rio. You know how Brazilians love dancing. She, being an Indian princess and all, won first place and used the prize money to pay for the tribe’s lawyers.”

The hard light of skepticism glinted in Betsy’s eyes. I feared I’d stretched the truth too far, but providence saved me again. A Chihuahua broke free from its owner and barreled straight for Betsy. The dog collapsed at her feet and whined as if it had found a long-lost friend.

“You’re such a good puppy.” Betsy scratched the Chihuahua’s belly and the dog twitched its back leg.

“Sorry, she’s never done that before.” A man with a shaved head and tattoos on his neck took hold of the dog’s leash and led it off. “Let’s go, Trixie.”

“Don’t the Yomamma women go topless?” Betsy asked.

“Why yes, yes they do.”

“That’s good.” She leaned against my shoulder. “I think that’s much more natural. Don’t you?”

Before leaving, I got Betsy Emphatic’s phone number and e-mail address because contacting her through the real Walt’s online dating account would have been awkward, if not impossible.

I was in over my head. Sure, I'd have to come clean about my real identity eventually but couldn't risk losing Betsy by doing it too soon. Besides, everyone puts up a false front when dating. I was doing the same just to a greater degree.

To facilitate contact, I set up a new e-mail address for AnthroWalt69. Don't ask me where the 69 came from. It was a spur-of-the-moment choice. Okay?

The program for our second date was to put her doubts about my anthropology credentials to rest. We met at the Natural History Museum and proceeded to the anthropology wing where we browsed exhibits of baskets, dugout canoes, beads, and blow-guns used for hunting. With my words, I painted a picture of the Yomamma as a peaceful community living in a natural paradise. Then Betsy stopped in front of a display of war clubs.

"It says here the Yanomami are violent."

"Racism!" I threw my hands in wild gestures while pacing back and forth. "I thought they'd gotten rid of all this stuff. I mean, I spent an entire career trying to debunk these lies and this is what I get for it." I pointed at the display. "I'm sorry you have to see me this way. This is really upsetting me. Can we please go someplace else?"

"Let's get some food at the Armenian place down the street," Betsy said.

"I've never had Armenian food."

"It's like Greek food cooked by Slovaks."

She told me about growing up in Phnom Penh and South Dakota over dinner, and we took in a movie called *The Bourne Redundancy*. At the end of the night she placed my hand over her breast when I kissed her in my Ford Taurus.

"I love the idea of the Aztec Telephone." She opened the door. "Just think of how close we'd be if we could hear each other's thoughts when you're inside me." She kissed me on the lips and got out.

It's a commonly held belief that sex should happen on the third date. In preparation for my victory I selected silk boxers, a pair of dark slacks along with a black shirt and white dinner jacket. Then there was the small matter of the Aztec Telephone. Since Ayahuasca was hard to come by in Southern California, I had to come up with a convincing substitute.

I brewed gunpowder tea with edible seaweed, tossed in a few ground tablets of X, and poured my concoction into a bottle of Arizona Iced Tea. Then I arrived at a quandary. Everyone knows Ayahuasca makes you throw up but puking your guts out makes a poor start for an evening of intimacy. Realism or romance? I didn't know which to choose. In the end I compromised by adding a single drop of Ipecac to my mixture. Hopefully, this would capture the effect without making us sick.

To enter the paradise between Betsy's thighs, I first had to pass through the gauntlet of her department party. I estimated my chances of making it through the evening were about the same as surviving a game of Russian roulette played with a semiautomatic pistol, but maybe I was wrong. After all, Betsy had been through the gender-studies program and she was pretty great. I stuffed three condoms into my wallet, took the bottle of ersatz Ayahuasca from the kitchen counter, and headed out the door.

The party took place in a four-bedroom, stucco house in Brentwood, the department head's home or something like that. Even if I hadn't known the address, the columns of cars parallel parked nearby would have made it easy to find. I parked behind a pickup truck with a bumper sticker that read, I have PMS and a gun. I mean really, who would want to date someone like that? I shook my head as I walked to the house. A middle-aged woman in a loose, silk blouse met me at the door.

"Hi, I'm Evelyn. Come on in. Beer's in the kitchen. Help yourself to appetizers."

A female body builder was talking to a woman in a headscarf by the table. Juggling the fake Ayahuasca in one hand, I loaded a plate with nachos and scanned the crowd. Three quarters were women. The rest were men, give or take a transsexual or two. Betsy had not yet arrived.

I support a woman's right to control her body and do whatever work she wants but found making conversation with the attendees awkward. The professors used words like praxis, semiotics, and deconstruction. I didn't have a clue what they were talking about and suspected they didn't either. An Indian woman in a shawl saved me by talking about changing roles of women in Bollywood films. We had a great discussion about movies and directors and I left with many suggestions to add to my Netflix list. I almost regretted Betsy's arrival.

“Sorry, I’m late.” She kissed me on the cheek and introduced me to her friend. “This is Fernanda. She worked with the Yanomami in Brazil. Excuse me, the Yomamma.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Fernanda shifted the plate she was holding and shook my hand. “I prepared a traditional Yanomami dish. I know it’s an acquired taste but you surely must have eaten Yanomami food during your field work.”

“Are you kidding? I love the stuff! All natural. No preservatives. It’s great!”

“Enjoy.” Fernanda handed me the plate and went to get a drink.

I removed the tin foil and found two dozen roasted bugs. Betsy looked queasy.

“You’re not going to eat that. Are you?”

“Great source of protein!” Knowing my credibility was at stake, I popped one of the critters in my mouth and bit down. Foul-tasting guts squirted from its crushed exoskeleton, and tiny legs got caught between my teeth. I felt like retching. “So good.” I ate another.

Someone put music on the stereo and a dozen women began dancing in the living room. Before I knew it, Fernanda was back.

“Come on, Mr. Anthropologist. Show me your forbidden, Yanomami dance moves.”

I left the bugs and fake Ayahuasca on the table and followed her. Try as I might, I couldn’t think of how a Yomamma would dance so I tried to cover up my clumsiness with conversation.

“How long have you known Betsy?”

“Since high school.” Fernanda shimmied her breasts. “We were on the fencing team and she always beat me.”

“What were you doing in Brazil?”

“Working with divorce lawyers. Come on! Loosen up!” Fernanda bent forward and jutted her behind into my crotch.

While Fernanda freak-danced, I saw Evelyn open the bottle of fake Ayahuasca and lift it to her lips. I moved to stop her but Fernanda pressed her body into mine and placed my hands on her ass.

“I know you’re a fake,” she whispered. “Make love to me and I won’t rat you out.”

I’d like to think I would have resisted if the circumstances had been different. I’d like to think I would have come clean with Betsy instead of

betraying her, but the guest who walked in the door changed all that. It was Daisy, who knew me as her obnoxious, blind date Rob.

“Let’s go.” I led Fernanda upstairs.

Gender students showed their dedication by practicing their “homework” in every bedroom. Straight, gay, transsexual, or threesomes all shouted, “Do you mind?” when Fernanda and I opened the doors. We ended up waiting outside a bathroom until two flushed lesbians exited holding hands.

Once inside Fernanda stripped off her top, placed my hands on her breasts, and grabbed at my crotch. Maybe it was the karma for all my lies, guilt over Betsy, or the fear of discovery. Whatever the cause, my manhood was as limp as a stalk of celery that had been left unwrapped in the refrigerator. When she touched my deflated member, Fernanda reached for the door.

“You are so busted!”

“Wait!” I held the door closed. “I can pay you.” I emptied my wallet and handed her eighty dollars.

“Not enough!” She pushed me aside and rushed out.

“Wait!” I dashed after her. “It isn’t you. It’s me. I can find a cash machine.”

The sound of a man in a loincloth belting out the intro from the Lion King’s “Circle of Life” in the living room froze Fernanda at the top of the stairs. With a bowl haircut, feather through his pierced nose, and much body paint Reginald Mountebank, the actor I’d hired, had done a great job impersonating a Yomamma Indian. No matter what Fernanda said, I was in the clear. Meanwhile Evelyn staggered from man to man and eventually fell into Reginald’s arms.

“Oooh!” Evelyn ran her hand over his biceps. “I want your ...!” She turned and vomited on the appetizers.

“What’s that right-wing asshole doing here?” Daisy screamed.

I tried to sneak upstairs.

“You!” Daisy pointed at me. “I’m talking to you, Rob!”

Betsy looked at Daisy and then at me. I expected the maximum Hiroshima but she simply burst into tears and ran out the door.

I spent the next few weeks too depressed to do anything, but after self-examination I returned to work. It’s like I always say. When life

hands you a shit sandwich, make lemonade. Some people think what I do is dishonest, but the course of love is difficult. Anything I can do to help it along is a positive action.

A month after the party, a client, who I thought I'd never hear from again, hired me for a job in Beverly Hills. I met Walt outside the Siam I Am Restaurant. After some small talk, we went inside. There standing in the lobby was Betsy. A rosy glow came from her skin and her eyes shone like two big screen TVs.

"Looks like this one's for you." Walt patted me on the shoulder and with a smile turned away.

And then Betsy was in my arms! I buried my face in her hair. It smelled of birthday parties and Fourth of July picnics. For once, I didn't know what to say.

## About the Author



Jon Wesick is a regional editor of the San Diego Poetry Annual. He's published hundreds of poems and stories in journals such as **The Atlanta Review**, **Berkeley Fiction Review**, **Metal Scratches**, **Pearl**, **Slipstream**, **Space and Time**, **Tales of the Talisman**, and **Zahir**. Jon is the author of the poetry collection **Words of Power**, **Dances of Freedom** as well as several novels, and most recently the short-story collection **The Alchemist's Grandson Changes His Name**.

Learn more at his Website: <http://jonwesick.com>

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**COLUMN:**

by Jeri Walker

## Pairing Words with Wine

Just like carefully crafted prose, wine has the power to conjure powerful sensory images. Sipping a favorite varietal can certainly add to the ambiance of the reading experience. Purposely pairing a book with a wine that enhances a genre's primary characteristics can add even more layers.

As with food and wine pairings, the goal of pairing words with wine is to ensure complementary flavors that will be either similar or contrasting. To that end, consider matching flavor intensity on both ends, and keep in mind that the wine should be more acidic, sweeter, etc. than the words on the page.

When it comes to a romance, the best wine pairing will depend on the story's speed. A chilled white wine like a sweet Riesling or a fruity Moscato would make a good accompaniment beachside or poolside for flirty stories. Rosé or a *demi-sec* Champagne will also do. A more intense romance could pair well with a robust Cabernet or perhaps a spicy and jammy Zinfandel.

A suspenseful mystery or thriller deserves to be enjoyed with a complex and buttery white wine like Chardonnay or *Vouvray* with their lovely honeyed characters from the interplay of oak and fruit notes. An Argentine Malbec full of dark, lush berries and its purple-red opaqueness can also conjure up an enigmatic atmosphere to ponder in the glass and on the page.

A taste of the otherworldly seems fitting for science fiction and fantasy. A bold and dry *Semillon* or Viognier are whites worth a swirl in

this realm. These have what can be described as a waxy or oily taste. As for reds, consider a blended table wine like one of the ***Locations*** offerings from Dave Phinney. Depending on your sense of adventure, you could concoct your own mashup blend to suit the world on the page.

When it comes to memoir, the possibilities are limitless. If described in the manuscript or elsewhere, why not try imbibing a varietal loved by the author? Just like the human condition is often precarious, perhaps it should be paired with the most delicate of grapes. Pinot Noir's pale translucence and subtle flavors make it a great match for the multitude of experiences life can throw at a person.

Approach new wines and books as an adventure. Don't take the task so seriously as to bleed any vestige of joy out of it. Both wining and writing should always be considered a labor of love and discovery.

### About Jeri Walker



**Jeri Walker** provides manuscript critiques and copyedits for authors who value the intersection of the literary and the commercial. She also forges nonfiction ghostwriting partnerships where her expertise results in prose reflective of the client's voice, experience, and authority. Authenticity is her core guiding value.

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**SHORT STORY:****SITTING UNDER A CRESCENT MOON  
ON THE EDGE OF THE BACK SEAT  
OF THE BUS OF FOREVER**

by Mario Lowther

**Just a few hours ago** I was a successfully married man. Then the horn blew, and I abandoned my wife in the lovely house with maroon walls, plied her with pills, stuck plugs in her ears and flowers on her eyes, stole her car and drove it, lights out, back one hundred miles to the Bus of Forever, where I sit, as still as stone beneath a glowing crescent moon, the Pentaprism of Love outside writhing on his back with his feet in the air, and the Answer to All Known Life just beyond my fingertips; squeezed, in fact, under a red cushion which I can't reach because the barrel of a Mossberg 935 Magnum Turkey is tracking a bead of cold sweat trickling down my forehead.

This is no ordinary pickle. I'm terrified. And excited. In a dying-too-early kind of way.

But there it is. Bad time to feel like a new person.

***One A.M. at the Corner of Highway 3A and the Road to Nowhere***

I told myself I could follow the treetops, and I did. Down a highway at night pale as old worn jeans, lit by the askance smirk of a dazzling crescent moon. A dirt road glowing dull gray reaches out midway round an s-curve and beckons into black wilderness. Shannie's blue Tercel rattles over the neglected surface as I swerve in and brake to a hard stop.

I get out for a look and to check my courage, just as a transport truck flies by, the biggest I've ever seen, all lit up like a movie set with lights and backdrops, riff rock blaring, and folks in outrageous clothes and funny hats hanging over handrails and swilling champagne bottles, racing off the way I came, down this highway bent like a string pulled tight at both ends then released.

I get back in. I'm about to go over the roller coaster, and this time I think I'll stand.

### ***Seven A.M. and Days Earlier in the Hall of Things That Don't Yell At Me***

"Hold on, just a minute," my mother calls as I descend to the basement, each ancient step groaning. "And don't look at my mess, please!" Brightly, she adds, "But I've made a dent in it!"

One faint hope at a time. I look around, sickened, while overhead floorboards creak as Shannie cases the house back to front, sees to windows and doors, calls cats, flushes the toilet, stacks bags and knapsacks in the living room, and swings open the den closet to fetch her coat.

My mom shuffles out, shouldering aside overlaid wardrobe hangers. Back in my teens, I vowed to live heroically fancy-free and unfettered; I'm not so much neat as possession-specific, but Mom is a pack rat. Crevices interconnect her bedroom, bathroom, living room, kitchen and the washer/dryer area, the equity too unbearable to part with: clothing and purses, nicknacks and gadgets, and mementos that recall the touch of her parents who died early, the husband who tried to kill her, the boyfriend her kids drove away, the two kids who left violently, and her youngest who finally returned to decelerate her decrepitude and to finance a chance to make his own luck.

Nothing of mine or of me is apparent—I erased myself as best I could—but there must be a cache around here still, buried like a jewel in a drawer, a cupboard, a box beneath boxes, of the unsullied me; the sweeter, non-defensive, non-contemptuous me; of the boyhood me, the lost me.

Mom grins like a starlet. Her dental work cost ten grand. She could've toured Europe on that. Instead, she's eighty-three, gray-haired and hunchbacked, and she's shrinking; my mother will be a shelf

ornament soon. She was a post-war nonconformist; I recall one of many shopping bags toppling over, a photo album yawning open, exhaling sepia snapshots of a peacenik with an Ava Gardner smile. Her fidelities and passions became ours. As a family, we love impregnably.

She opens her arms and we hug. Me, one-handed, and awkwardly because my wife and I resent how she lives. She, both-handed, and tenderly because in spite of that we're inseparable.

"You be careful," she says.

### ***Shortly Before Eleven P.M. in the Lovely House With Maroon Walls***

Shannie opts for a sleeping pill and a drink of water. I emerge from the bathroom holding a blue ceramic mug, a cartoon of a bug-eyed black cat with a white face and chest painted on the side. She leans on one elbow, her long, wheat-blond hair in a pigtail, and guzzles the nightcap down. "Thank you, dear," she sighs, and welcomes relief after a busy travel day. She hands me the mug back, cat side out, cooing, "Awww, just like Jem."

We miss our cats, Jem and his sister, Scout. Born feral. They're affectionate in their own way. Probably hiding under the bed and in the closet, my mother rummaging for them, driven to convince herself she hasn't lost them, they're inside the house, haven't run off; terrorizing them. "Our host provided the cup," I smile. Our host, the gruff man with the log cabin who forgot our reservation and stone-facedly welcomed us inside like Riff-Raff from Rocky Horror.

Shannie smacks her big white fluffy pillow until a satisfying shape is created that'll last for a minute until she readjusts and smacks it around again. She's a light sleeper; perfect pillow placement matters. Ditto comforter arrangement. After some final shifting she floats back, grins, and dreamily admires the cedar beams and maroon walls of the Rose Room. "Isn't this lovely?"

It's Queen Victoria meets Grizzly Adams. It's kitschy but quaint. Shannie grins. Early on, we tried for a child, gave the clinic a shot, got pregnant for two nerve-wracking weeks. Until.... In retrospect I joke that given our lifestyle we'd have been better off conceiving a nineteen year-old ready to move out. Sometimes at night I wonder that we're such a pair, why Shannie loves me, why she wants me, why anyone does

because sterling mediocrity is all I ever see in the mirror. Now, swaddled in bedding, she blinks at me with her pink face, and a blonde hair out of place that I nudge back. After years of looking, her stylist found one gray strand. The rest are on me.

She yawns, glances at the night table, sags dramatically. “Nuts, I forgot my ear plugs.”

Her backpack is across the room. “Good one. You'll want your eye shades too.”

“Um... actually, yes please. If my wonderful hubby doesn't mind.”

In a tiny way, he does. “You know it means you won't hear or see yourself snore.”

“My eyes are achy enough.” Shannie yawns bigger. “How dare you say I snore.”

She snores sniffly, lilting wind chime rhapsodies. I'll lie still, listening enduringly until sleep overcomes. Me, I'm told I'm basso profundo and rattle glass. Thus the ear plugs. I hand them over. Offered to insert them once. Just trying to help. Not a husbandly duty, it seems.

Shannie yawns, lioness-wide now. “I'm really tired,” she marvels. “Hey, are you okay?”

We kiss. I lift her head and gently slip the strap of her flowered eye pads behind her ears, the flaps standing erect on her brow like twin awnings. “Been an eventful day,” I murmur. Her plugged ears can't hear. I cup her cheek in my palm, stroke her arm, and whisper, “Goodnight, dear.” She lip-reads that, bids goodnight back. Her eyes close with the grace of a child and her breathing becomes heavy. I watch her while she sleeps, thinking pained thoughts: thank you for coming into my life and for not making me confess that I can't surmise why I love you. Careful not to disturb her, I ease her flaps down. She wheedles a little night music: sniff sniff wee ehnn....

Shannie's a light sleeper and sometimes wakes herself. If she's edgy, she'll take one pill to help her rest; if she's wired and afraid she'll awaken and not fall back to sleep she'll take two. Tonight she asked for one. In the bathroom I mixed her two and a half. She'll sleep deeply and untroubled, and rely on me to stay up and read for awhile or review the pictures we took today.

But not tonight. The Tercel is parked downhill, and at this hour I can roll away unheard. I kiss Shannie's sweet pink forehead, shrug my

explanation, toss on my shoes and coat and grab the keys to the car. My life has become unsettled, and there's some place I have to go.

### ***One-Thirty A.M. at the Door to the Bus of Forever***

He slams the rifle butt against the bus doors, metal bashing on metal, manic, determined. The folding two-leaf doors swing apart an inch, then rebound closed. He throws his body into it, pounds away in a fury, the doors giving, giving more, until surrendering and springing open. Up the steps he clammers, a formless shadow in the pale radiance of the crescent moon filtering into the bus, and blusters down the aisle, rifle out like a bayonet, barrel leveled, ready to make hell.

Me, I'm in the back of the bus, pure fear and wonder, hands protecting my face, almost laughing, it's unbelievable. This is a bad dream, a black joke—guffaw, I get it. How can this be happening? I'm going to die here? Now? My penultimate thoughts are of Shannie: Dear, I'm so sorry I've done this to you... why didn't I leave you a note... make sure you cope without me...

He pulls up, a hulking, anamorphic shape, heaving and wheezing, his craggy, life-beaten face a photo negative in the moonlight. The rifle is aimed square for my chest, and he utters the last words I ever expect to hear, punctuated for maximum emphasis:

“This...Is... a... Mossberg Nine-Thirty-Five. Magnum. Turkey...”

These aren't the last words I expect to hear. Despite myself, I make a desultory noise.

He rears back as if he's caught spittle. “What the fuck? You think I'm kidding!”

With that, he fires. The whole bus shakes with the blast of the discharge, and the window beside my cheek explodes, showering me with glass as I throw my hands in front of my eyes.

“You fuck!” he bellows, re-aiming. “What are you doing in my fucking bus?”

### ***Somewhat Past Noon and Several Miles Up the Road to Nowhere***

Our vacation road map and the notes I made for our trip are organized on Shannie's lap. She traces her fingernail along a snaky line toward a black dot and the name SANDON. They hit silver there over a

hundred years ago. Half a dozen operating mines. Fifty other unproven claims. Twenty–three hotels and saloons. Two servicing railways. Like locusts they swarmed in and fed. And after they left, Nature wept and covered their tracks. Not well enough, though.

“A real live ghost town,” Shannie enthuses. “Shouldn’t be much farther.”

We don’t fly places; we hop in the car and drive. I reef the wheel left and right, dancing down a pothole road blasted through what God had surmised would be unassailable forest.

Shannie rubs my shoulder. “You’re pretty quiet. You okay?”

I’ve been stewing for miles. She’d sensed immediately, giving me my time and space, not firefighting until prudent. “Yeah,” I frown, “it’s just that thing that happened.”

“What thing?”

“That thing back there.”

“That’s still bothering you? There’ll be other horns.” Shannie’s smile thinks I’m cute for getting moody over a small deal. She tugs at the belt ring in my jeans. “I love you,” she reminds me. Tough words for us. Words we avoid degrading with overuse. Words saved for a meaningful moment, such as now, although she has to yank her wrist out of the way so I can shift into low because we’ve rounded a bend and we’re suddenly bounding over an old plank bridge.

I can't imagine why, but my life began with Shannie. And there will be no other horns.

### ***Early Morning Interlude Aboard A Monument In Another Town***

The brochure says the S.S. Moyie is the world’s oldest intact passenger sternwheeler and a National Historic Site. It goes on to describe the leaded glass windows in the dining room and the parquet floor on the Saloon deck, how she began with the Klondike and ended with Sputnik, and daily plied the four shores of Kootenay Lake toting goods and commoners and royalty alike.

Great, but for me it’s too cool there’s a 1919 Model TT Ford truck stowed on the freight deck, and a communications room festooned with knobs and levers to pull and press, and cozy little passenger staterooms

like luxury tree houses with bunks to bang your heels against. Even better, there's a Pilot House up a dizzying staircase and a Ship's Wheel spoked with thick oak handles like something black-eyed Ahab would've spun about to chase the white whale down.

The wheel is locked. Fear not! In my grip Kootenay Lake transforms into an endless high sea and all the cluttered basements and potholed roads of my world become spray and hurricane, fanfare and gunfire. For a minute, there's an open road ahead and I've my entire life to live over.

Shannie points to a sign on a charity box that states with a contribution of five bucks you can blow the ship's horn. I just bought breakfast, so I know I've spent all my small bills. Excited, Shannie checks her wallet, finds a ten. Full speed ahead! I pull the handle and the Moyie's piping horn startles the town, its familiar hoot resonating off the mountains surrounding the lake. She carefully slides the money into the charity box, and I pull the handle and the vessel sings again.

Shannie is stunned, and gapes at me. "Dear, you blew the horn! That was my turn!"

### ***One P.M. In the Place Where Hope Shrugged***

There wasn't enough room in the floor of the canyon so they built Main Street right over the creek. Two thousand enterprising madmen fought, sweated and slaved here. All that remains are a trio of pine cabins with shingle roofs, a pink shack housing the still-operating hydro-electric substation, a museum in what once was the grand olde Mercantile; and an emporium cum second hand store in the city hall, a three-story box with irregularly-placed windows that leans and looks as if it was made up as it went along. The sign on the door says Closed, but the door is open and there's nobody around. The lady volunteer in the museum is polite when approached; otherwise she smiles wanly and seems unmoved to get into a chat with visitors. Miles of rusted chain and steel cable lie coiled amongst the trees on the slope that rises from Main Street, and old boards from boomtown buildings jut out of the rushing creek like testaments to failed prosperity.

And one other thing--there are busses.

Seven derelict city trolley busses are parked one after another alongside Main Street on a patch of grass that climbs from the emporium to the museum. There's an ancient blue bus with a white

stripe and roof; the others are all-white with orange striping. Six are in an extreme state of disrepair: dented, paint cracking, tires flat. The other, apart from the rest, nearest the emporium, and the only one with trolleys, has been renovated, dents pounded out, windows cleaned, with a fresh coat of paint. There appears to be no earthly requirement for a fleet of city busses in this isolated, nature-reclaimed place, yet all are parked so perfectly they might release their brakes and pull out to begin their routes. It's like someone is trying to say 'We mined for silver and we took the bus.'

Each bus displays a number and route name on an overhead banner, once rotated by hand, now frozen in time. There's the "4 POWELL," the "7 NANAIMO," the "19 SLOCAN TO KINGSWAY," and the renovated bus: the "11 STANLEY PARK."



### ***One Twenty-Five A.M. Without and Within the Bus of Forever***

Crescent moonlight outlines a pale path up Main Street, past the emporium to the door of the Number 11. It acts as my tightrope; I leg it double time on tiptoes, outstretched arms parting the shadows, so keyed up I left the Tercel down by the plank bridge and finished the trek on foot.

The bus sits manifest in the darkness like a ghost ship on a black ocean: bone white body, trolleys raised, unit number 2201 etched above

sightless headlamps, four vertical glass planes on twin folding doors like a pair of number four dice. They feel solid to my hesitant touch, the glass thick; how things used to be made. I half imagine alarms should go off; just the creek whooshes along unseen in the gloom. The doors give a little to a push. I wedge my fingers between them and pull hard. They stick, they defy. But I won't be denied. With a snap, they fly open. I'm in.

The air smells like the world forgot to open the windows. I can't see the rust spots on the steel poles and frames, the cracks in the original vinyl seats, the damp on the rubber floor runner, but oh man are they there. Strange, there's a hint of warmth; it's not as cold as one might expect.

No matter, I haven't come to critique the progress of the renovation. I'm destined for the back of the bus, where my long dormant man-childness has been aroused and I have to face what by. Two steps I take down the runner, and promptly trip over something sticking out in the aisle. As I miss the seats to either side and fall face first to the floor, I realize that the object was a leg.

There's a yelp of surprise and a form leaps up from the seat like a stag from underbrush. In the moonlight I glimpse a frenzy of limbs, and a rifle barrel waving, before the person, nature undetermined, aims, and in the same second stumbles off the top stair of the bus and goes head over arse out the folding doors still armed, the doors banging shut tight behind him.

### ***One Minute Later***

He's as distinct as a snowy TV image, this moonlit apparition brandishing a rifle at me from outside the bus. Appears to be early twenty-something, wears a gangland overcoat and his baseball cap on sideways. Sports half a face of prime time idol good looks. The other half is disfigured, the skin stretched, a permanent perturbed expression dragging back over his ear.

"Udduh fffuh!" he hollers. "Wuh drewing? Wuh wutter you drewing? Doing?"

I'm frozen to the spot with a chest-pounding heartbeat that rather hinders the explanation I'd like to quickly offer. Then again, what are the odds an armed nutbar shouting gibberish at me would understand? So, instead, I stay put and pray for the bad light to swallow me up into the

blackness of the bus and Fate to ease off on the trigger of a rifle big enough to clock an elephant.

My companion brightens, as if suddenly struck by an essence to our encounter. In his best tour guide voice, he hails me: “Ow er you oo-day? I am ood.” He nods that I should comprehend, his smile angling back of his cheek like a check mark. He motions the rifle at the bus. “Mmmm buh.” He motions the rifle again at the bus, insistently. “Mmmm myyy. My buhhh buhhh.”

Then he turns, fires, and blows the side mirror off.

I hit the floor, blurting omigods and scrambling on all fours, stopping when I clang head-first into the metal frame that signals I've reached the back seat of the bus.

At which point, from the distance, there comes a shout. Somebody is displeased.

I drop down behind the back seat and squint out through the big front window of the bus. The darkness is on the move. A black-on-black shape storms down the hill from the direction of the one barely-illuminated, shingle-roofed pine cabin of the three I noticed earlier that overlook Main Street. It limps badly, as if trying not to somersault; still, it makes marvelous progress. An unbroken stream of raging invectives intensifies as it approaches, indicating this volcanic bulk's absolutely, positively last final fuse has been irrevocably lit.

This has a severe effect on the gangster with the gun. He backtracks a couple of fearful steps and goes into a crouch, thrusting out the gun as though to fire, hugging it back in the next beat. His hips shake. His shoulders rock from side to side. He starts to perform a lateral dance.

And with perfect pitch, he sings: “Geh yer eyes onna roh, yer anns uh-on uh wee-ul...”

There's a flurry of action. The gangster, once alone, now no longer is. He stiffens. He, and presumably the other, consider the blown-off side mirror. The gangster gestures with the rifle. At the bus. At me. A beastly hand, white in the moonlight, descends on the weapon, rips it from the gangster's grasp. The rifle butt lashes out, flat against the gangster's cheekbone, dropping him.

Then the folding doors of the bus are struck. They creak. Another strike, then an angry, hard push. The doors don't release. They're stuck.

The window next to me, can I open it, I hope. When the rifle butt does a missile shot on the door, I attack the window, elbowing the glass.

Which is unfortunate, because I can see it.

I can see the Answer to All Known Life.

It's right there, right between the seats, right in front of me.

### ***Intermission: Contemplations Upon a Crescent Moon***

The moon used to scare me because some nights there was less of it. What have you got to cry about, my mother, single with three kids and weary after a lifeless day of medical steno, would demand. Give it back, I'd wail, it's not theirs to take, whoever's doing it. How can it hurt you, Mom would ask. Because, I'd sniffle. If the moon's different, I'll be different.

That it would go away, then come back each time, proved someone was messing with me. And I was different, a little more between every falling and rising crescent moon. Don't be silly, Mom would tell me, sometimes in exasperation, sometimes tenderly, you're supposed to change, it means you're growing up. You want to grow up, don't you?

I still don't know the answer to that question.

All I really learned is people change like skies change, and the Moon comes home. Year after changing year it returns, a glass quarter full or three quarters empty, and always the closest connection in a dark night sky. And the Moon takes me back. It's not only a glass - it's a bridge.

### ***Almost One Thirty-Five A.M. Within the Bus of Forever***

"You fuck!" he bellows, re-aiming. "What are you doing in my fucking bus?"

My head's in my hands, side window glass pelting like stones. I'm rigid with terror. This man has pointed a gun at me and actually fired. There's no guessing how far such a man will go and I've few ideas how to persuade him to lower his weapon. Begging him to take it easy, could set him off. Apologizing and promising never to return if he lets me go, isn't telling him what he wants to know. There's always the truth: sir, ignore that I'm awol and off the map, I busted into your fucking bus to find the Answer to All Known Life, and it's right here, so this won't take a

minute. And oh yeah, I'm fessing up because, after a self-protective childhood, and re-inventing myself twice to become this supposedly mature, un-lost me, it's my privilege not to plead for my life. So, if fade I must, if finish me you must, let me go out, reconstituted dignity intact, okay?

Right, I'll opt for the truth. Have to. And if I wind up in some nameless hole, I only hope my wife, my mother and anyone who values me assume no responsibility for my disappearance.

Something knocks on the window frame beside me. My breath seizes. Another knock, sharper, insistent. I steel myself, thinking this is it. Slowly I lower my hands, and turn to look.

The gangster is outside, his disfigurement pressed to the window. He points at me. Points at the desperado sharing a bus with me. Grins like a ghoul and waves at us. Extends his thumbs, makes vees of his fingers, and retreats almost against the next bus.

Then he rocks his shoulders two beats at a time, and in a thick voice he goes into a rap: "Pennuh prison, aye ma pennuh prison, aye ma pennuh prison uh luh." He adds a headbang. He gyrates on the downbeat. "Pennuh prison, aye ma pennuh prison, aye ma pennuh prison uh luh." He executes a perfect Michael Jackson moonwalk, right there in full view with the moon shining down on him like a spotlight. "Pennuh prison, aye ma pennuh prison, aye ma pennuh prison uh luh." He flings himself onto his back, his hips shaking, his thick boots up and punching the night.

It's dead quiet inside the bus. A simmering, loathsome, half mad kind of dead quiet.

"Pen a prison of love," I repeat, venturing to sound sympathetic.

The rifle barrel chastises my forehead and the silence menacingly corrects, "Pentaprism," adding: "A five-sided prism with two silvered surfaces giving a constant deviation of all rays of light through ninety degrees. Used chiefly in the view-finders of single-lens reflex cameras."

My solitary selfish side wholly gets it and finds this first-time intimacy with a Magnum Turkey every bit as thrilling as going over the roller coaster standing. And just as I'm processing that, an old skin molts off me and a New Me, a living, pulsing Me emerges. I awaken as if from a series of long, overlapping delusions. I know where I am and why, how I feel and why; crucially what I was just hoping and why. This

is my first-ever epiphany. It's stunning and disconcerting, mystifying and wonderful. Because I never dreamed such thoughts, such feelings, were in me.

"I memorized that," the silence says. "You wondering what it means?"

Well no, I'm thinking about something completely else, but I nod anyway.

"It means when he threw the fucking dictionary after the first week of rehab, that's the page it fell open to. Now, last fucking time. What..."

Sharp and cold, the rifle barrel taps my forehead.

"...are you doing..."

Tap again.

"...in my fucking bus?"

And push. Hard.

### ***Late Afternoon Interlude Sailing Away Upon A Hot Pool Noodle***

I'm suspended, weightless, legs splayed, arms draped over three pool noodles I've made into a raft, my head back, raindrops falling on my face, afloat in a hot spring that crowns a tree-covered mountaintop. Steam rises in white clouds and dissipates into a gray mist that cloaks the treetops and inches closer like an oncoming ceiling. Soothing piped-in New Age keyboard music rides the air. It's been a long day, and I'm going for a cruise before dinner in the town site below.

I'm surrounded by unsmiling seniors clinging to the edge of the crater-shaped pool. They glower at a young couple who nuzzle, submerged to their necks, down at the far end. And at two teenage girls dangling their calves over the concrete deck whose pouts complain they wish more kids were here. And they glower at me. I neither pout nor nuzzle. I have usurped all of their pool noodles. I'm the one adrift in the middle of their retirement. I feel like a carrot in a bowl of soup.

Shannie, who's had her dip and gone hiking around the hilltop with a bounce in her step and bear bells in her hand, has long since forgiven me for my horn self-interest. I haven't. She's not dwelling on an occasional juvenile gaff, but I am and I'm perturbed why. I dwell on that too. What I know for sure is there will be no other horns. And what I've come to realize, while a-sail in apparent bliss on three hot pool noodles, music in

my ears, rain on my face, haunted seniors glaring, is that I have to leave Shannie. The horn only started it. I have to go back and finish it.

### ***One P.M. In the Place Where Hope Shrugged***

Shannie and I consider the refurbished 11 STANLEY PARK bus, parked here on this grassy swath alongside a roaring creek on the floor of a remote canyon in a ghost town, with identical expressions of bemusement. Same faces we wore when we stood before Stonehenge.

Touch the old, re-painted frame: it's real. Press the double folding doors: they give a bit. Peer through the glass: three steps rise to the driver's seat, the cushion looks uncomfortable and thin. There's the fare box with a glass panel and a tumbling coin path like a poor boy's pinball machine, and a brass change maker like a pan flute for quarters, nickels and dimes. All polished clean and shiny with loving care. The grand old rubber steering wheel aches for turning.

A gust of waking wind jolts up the canyon, through the trees, en route to nowhere. I pogo the length of the bus, glimpsing red-fabric benches, chrome frames and poles, a pull cord forever drooping. There should be traffic noise, car horns, laughter, conversation, the Who and Zeppelin on transistor radios, the ping of the next stop. Only the turbulent creek fills my ears. I jump up to get a view of the back seat, then grasp the window, wedge the toe of my boot into the wheel rim, and raise myself to take a closer look. This becomes an unexpected, long and quizzical stare.

"Dear, come down, you shouldn't do that," Shannie frets. "It's not your bus."

### ***Almost One Forty-Five A.M. At the Back of the Bus of Forever***

The mouth of the Mossberg 935 Magnum Turkey forces my neck back and presses into the lines of my forehead,.

"Answer me," warns the silence.

It's truly life or death what I say next.

I lick my lips, which are drier than deserts, and swallow. My Adam's Apple bobs.

My response is succinct: "What. Is. Your. Fucking. Bus. Doing here?"

The guy's eyes fly open, wider than Munsch's scream, wider than Goya's Saturn, wider even than big-screen zombies. His mussy-haired, bushy-bearded, caved-cheeked, Easter-Island-chinned face twists up with raging indignation, and in the crescent moonlight he's a nightmare squeezing his rifle like he'll soon be able to wring my blood from it. "Fucking hell," he seethes, "life isn't sad enough, some invading dickhead's gotta challenge me on shit in my own space."

A bead of cold sweat trickles down my forehead, in time to the movements of the creek rushing outside. Water from nowhere, within and without, similar by description, dissimilar by execution; the notion almost makes me laugh, sitting there rigidly with a rifle to my head. Some kind of black-humored torture to go out scared, wet-faced, blinking uncontrollably, just when the boyhood Me, the lost Me, becomes the found Me. Can't abide that. The bead trickles down, onto the mouth of the rifle, then pools as if to continue down my nose. Geez, anything but. I make a taut face, holding on. A craggy expression of something akin to youthful awe hovers above me. Our gazes meet, and widen in wonder. Then I don't feel the bead anymore. He follows my eyes. The bead is gone and we realize what happened. It went down the barrel of the Magnum Turkey.

The silence loses it. There's a split second warning of an anguished scream and I duck as the rifle fires, the bullet ruffling my hair which stands on end. The rear window disintegrates into splinters of moon-gleamed glass. I slam my hands over my ears, deafened by the discharge.

Muffled, I hear a rant. Places the silence used to go on the bus. Stanley Park, all the time, every day in summer, to Second Beach for chips and fries, to Third Beach with his transistor and a towel to tan and listen to Jolly John on LG-FM all afternoon. Downtown to Pacific Centre just to hang out, to Seymour Street to roam Record Row...

The gangster appears at the side window, wild-eyed, waving his arms in panic. "Pennuh prison," I hear him cry, "aye ma..." He dematerializes as the silence turns and blows away what's left of the side window frame, the jagged remains sucked off into the crescent moonlight.

...or to Movie Row on Granville Street. To the old bookstore on West Pender Street with the creaky wooden floor. To Woodward's, and the fifth floor toy floor or the supermarket in the basement, or through the walkway over Cordova Street into the Coggerly to get concert tickets...

The gangster, probably still wild-eyed and waving his arms in panic, pops up at the rear window. "Pennuh prison," he cries behind me, "aye ma..." And again he probably dematerializes as I drive my nose to my knees and whatever clings to the rear window frame shatters in a clang of glass and metal.

...or to Gastown, and Blood Alley at midnight, or early morning after an all-night drunk when a dawn mist hung on the cobblestones, or to that English chick at Tiffany's who cut your hair and shared her smokes with her nose bandaged after getting into another bar fight...

"...this bus was my fucking way out!" the silence roars with climactic fury, shoving my head down with the rifle barrel.

"Mine, too!" I plead, my voice weak, shaky. "Mine, too.... mine, too..."

And I confess everything. This bus, this fucking bus, took me to Stanley Park too. To the zoo, when there still was one; and to the Aquarium, and to Granville Street, to the hippie theatre, remember the hippie theatre, the Retinal Circus, bad foreign films and worse popcorn. Gastown, what about the wax museum, that guy dressed in a cloak in the Chamber of Horrors would jump out, scare the girls and tourists, I'd go every week. The English chick, her name was Suzette. The bookstore was Ainsworth's, after comic books it's where I became interested in the classics...

Venting gives my voice encouragement. I catch my breath, wipe my nose, and look up in hope. "...it's where I bought... my first Sherlock Holmes..."

"Kerouac." I think it's what the man slowly lowering the Mossberg 935 Magnum Turkey mutters. He blinks at the destruction of the back of the bus like Pollock detoxifying, then checks around in sudden fear. His eyes close, he sighs and does a shoulder sag as the gangster reappears, framed in the side window, a family portrait, flashing his macabre smile and nodding sheepishly.

I could tell them my life story; he could tell me theirs. I could relate I grew up ugly, poor, weak, disabled and bullied, with a family laboring to trust that there was love deep down because none could forgive another to show it up close, and that when I reached my inevitable crossroads I chose the path that would lurch me through self-destruction to Shannie, without whom I'd have never survived to immaturity. He could perhaps

fabulize he'd squandered his dream of escaping poverty and disillusionment on drugs and drink, ending up disabled, pensioned and isolated from humanity, with his nephew, his sole remaining brain-damaged relation, to care for, and a fleet of derelicts, acquired from an advertisement in return for free transport, his life's project to restore.

Or other amazing stories. But what happens is he gives out a huge, soul-weary sigh and waves the gangster away. Pleased, it seems, to have met me, the gangster salutes and says, "Av-uh ood ay. Be seen seeing, seeing, seeing you, dude." Weakly, I salute back. He grins with pride and dissolves into the incorporeal moonlight. I watch him leave, like a Rorschach striding up the hill toward the lone lit shingle shack. I'll never know when, where and what was his catastrophe, or how he perceives his future. Saddens me, as I expect we may have faced similar crossroads.

The silence monitors him until the shack door opens and closes, light burning within. Then he turns and frowns at me, the rifle lowered. "So what, you came here to reminisce?"

I shake my head. "To find the Answer to All Known Life. But then I had an epiphany."

It strikes me such an answer might make him raise the rifle again. His scowl agrees. "You had an epiphany. In my bus. An epiphany about the Answer to All Known Life. Really."

"Actually, the epiphany came later. I saw the Answer to All Known Life this afternoon, when I jumped up and looked into this back seat. See? It's here. Been right here, all this time."

I point. Squinty-eyed and cautious, the silence edges forward in the moonlight and peers over the seat in front of me. Down at the dog-eared corner of a manila envelope poking out from under the seat cushion. His head snaps up, he shows me a fierce face, he looks again harder as if there has to be something else. Me, I'm elated. It's suffered over the years, got a big crease in it, a couple small tears, a long wrinkle where it pushes up against the cushion, and a smudge, maybe the fingerprint of whoever stuffed it in there. But that's it alright. Just a knuckle's width beyond my reach. It's the Answer to All Known Life.

Before I'm shot in self defense, I explain. That when I was a kid, I was just ten years-old, the first year the Canucks were in the NHL, I sent them a fan letter. Said how excited I was, and could I have Andre

Boudrias' autograph. Never did anything like that before. And instead of an autograph, what I got back was they got a sheet of paper and the whole team signed. Everyone, I counted them, I had the autographs of the entire original team. What an heirloom that would be now! But then? Understand: I had nothing of value in my life, or to call my own. Except that. So

I put it in an envelope with my name and address in the return sender corner, and hid it away for safekeeping. Or I thought I did, because years later I searched for it and couldn't find it. It'd got lost somewhere in my mother's basement. My mother the pack rat who hoards memories, won't part with anything, it would be like giving up a remaining minute. Rather than look for it or let me look for it, or help me look for it, she denied ever seeing it, denied I ever owned it. Turning her place upside down would kill her, so I gave in. But I believed she had it, knew exactly where it was and wouldn't give it up because it was her memory now, her keepsake of the boyhood me. Then this afternoon I find the same bus I rode as a kid, and a corner of the same kind of envelope sticking out from under the back seat cushion, and I think what are the chances? Maybe Mom is right after all. Maybe, just maybe I left it here on the seat. Someone stuck it here for safekeeping, trusting I would find it again. We talk about karma. Wouldn't that be karma, all these years later?

"How can you tell?" The silence nudges the Answer to All Known Life with the Magnum Turkey, making me flinch and move my knee away. "What makes you so sure? Nothing's written there. You gotta pull out the corner to see. Could be any old damn envelope."

His voice sizzles. Bitterness and jealousy seem to make him come alive. That shocks me. This bus would've taken him away, then returned him once his escape timed out, to the hammer-smack of his gray-skied, future-light life, till the next provocation. Only a future-less case would resort to restoring it, try to ride it back across the bridge of the crescent moon, to the kid forever trapped on the other side, the Answer to All Known Life clutched to his little pale chest, waving frantically, shouting get out for pity's sake, turn back, grow up, once and for all and for good.

This is a mistake, a tragedy. I feel strange. I feel sick. "Maybe I'm not so sure. I..."

“Fuck that. You gotta be sure. You have to look, don’t you? Means you still have hope. That’s so fucking sweet.” The silence sucks in a long breath, and spits something livid on the floor. “Go ahead then, damn you.”

“Yes... right... I came back to look... That’s all. Just to look...”

No choice now. I reach out, fearful as a child, and touch the envelope. The paper is cold, dry and brittle, it’s ancient parchment. Been here a long while, abandoned, resigned, waiting. If this is truly the Answer to All Known Life, I’ll heave the biggest sigh of relief ever. If not, it’s still in my mother’s basement, where I’ll find it, I suppose inevitably. When I do, I won’t blame Mom for denying its existence. I mean, what can I say really, she’s my mom, she did her best, we both have... right? Long as we’re still joined in our way, that’s what matters in the end. I envision her now. Living every day, alone and fragile in her basement crammed with lifetimes, while I’m upstairs living a shiny life with my soul mate and her patient, tactful, intelligent daughter-in-law.

Yet when it was time for us to go, she was the one telling me to be careful.

Neither that, or anything else, struck the first dent in me until that blessed horn blew.

But now it hits me. And I realize, now I really know, what my mother actually meant.

Right there in front of me, like the Answer to All Known Life. Long sigh. Oh, man....

### ***Two A.M. Sitting Under a Crescent Moon On the Edge of the Back Seat of the Bus of Forever***

I frown up at the barrel of the Magnum Turkey and the man still apparently entertaining the possibility of blowing off some part of my extremities.

“You’re really gonna hate me,” I tell him, “but I’m having another epiphany in your bus.”

I pull back and lay my hand in my lap, bow my head, and sit there, facing the envelope, breathing gently. Even the creek that was roaring outside the blasted-out back window a second ago seems to shut off to hear what’ll happen next. Who’d have thought the world could be dead silent, yet look and sound so alive in the moonlight? This is what being

at peace means. This is how everything coming together, and finally making sense, feels. In the end, the New Me, the Found Me, not about me at all. So ironic; bewilder me for ever missing it. Saccharine, but true.

So what I want more than anything else is to get up this very moment and ring the bell to get off the bus. Along with clarity, an epiphany, it seems, gives one a case of the sillies, a floating on air-ness, never to come down from, where anything from curing cancer to achieving universal brotherhood feels do-able. And next to ringing the bell, I want my fellow bus rider to have one of these soul-altering experiences for himself, because my pithy but simple conclusion is: positivity kinda really beats otherwise, and I figure he's due, and why not have your world open up again? After blowing Shannie's horn, and leaping up and finding what could be the long-lost Answer to All Known Life peeking out from the back of a seat in a crosstown bus parked alongside a raging creek in the bottom of a lonely canyon, it's happened to me. Selfish actions that felt unmotivated and wrong, tremors of a coming quake. Now I'm overjoyed, I'm supercharged and bullet-proof, I want to share, I want to open up to the guy gaping down at me with the howitzer, explain about life and the whole thing, in case believing got beat out of him at some point, that in fact there are no Answers to All Known Life, but if you keep your dreams true and just follow your needs, then you might be lucky enough to experience the big reality about the limited power of one. Problem being, wonderful as all that sounds, given the context of our situation this is honestly the worst time to prattle on like a self-help disc, so the best I can do is resolve to look him plain in the face and declare to him that - same as my mom in her basement - I've just made a dent in my mess.

He had the rifle on me; during my reverie he's taken a step back, he's unsure, ready and watchful, now has it pointed crossways. Everything about him shrieks dead-end horror; second-hand, third-hand, hand-me-down sadness; last gasp, loser at life; radiating desperation, the ghosts of his failures moaning over his shoulders. The disbelief on his face asks how can I have possibly decided not to reclaim what might be my long-missing treasure. This isn't a doorway he's sitting in, disheveled, hand out, saying you've had your revelation, mister, that's fine, so can you spare some change. He wants an answer. He deserves an answer. To a lot of things. Great, so let's try to say something about hope that isn't

condescending. Something believable, something that works. Such as what. Such as nothing. My adrenalin withers, I throw up my hands, haven't the temerity to moralize on chance to the unblessed. He points toward the front of the bus with the Mossberg, motions again sadly when I don't react. I shake my head: what. Then I get it. He doesn't want me around anymore, he's disgusted I had a notion of anything real for him, he's saying do you want to go, okay then, go if you want to, go ahead, you lucky, epiphanic bastard, just get up, get out.

In his tired eyes I see all the way back to the first time his old man slapped him around. There's something of my mother in his gaze. What was this long-missing treasure I came here for—a past hope, a personal token, a trivia answer. Like a tourist with opened eyes, if I'm to beat my drum about my Brand New Answer to All Known Life, then my audience must be the answer.

I stand as ordered, grasping the seat rail awkwardly. It comforts me that the silence and I are the same height. He looks at me, waiting for me to leave. I look at him, waiting for him to blink. "I'm not leaving," I announce, "till we talk this over and you tell me how I can help you."

He makes a pained face in the crescent moonlight, arches his spiky, unkempt eyebrows, bemused by some meaningful futility, and nods to say that sharing my providential gift is a fine idea. Then he turns the Mossberg on me, sticks it in my gut so hard I jerk backward, and fires.

And the creek, that a minute ago stopped roaring outside the blasted-out back window of the bus, roars right back to life, making my ears thrum. For a moment, every notion I have is laid open, every nerve in my body sounds an alarm, and the world I've been dulled to all my life hails me, touches me electrically, is fragrant with thrilling nature and painted with vibrant, vivid color. And this is how it feels, I realize, this is what it is: the transition isn't through a bright, beckoning light, or a glittering miasma leading to a radiant, cloud-carpeted uber-reality—it's consciousness, it's an awakening, it's a final relieved, deserved step before gliding across a moonlit bridge from the regular world to a mirrored world of eternal magic, wonder and peace: Been here all along...

It's a beautiful moment. It's the beautiful moment before the next moment when I realize I'm still alive, that getting shot didn't hurt, that the silence stands in the middle of the aisle of our childhood bus, his face

twisted by a mad half grin and a whaddaya-think-now smirk, hands apart for emphasis, in one the Magnum Turkey, in the other the last remaining Magnum Turkey shell.

He could only have removed it while I was in reverie. We wouldn't have reckoned on this causing an even more beautiful moment for us both. Just thinking of the possibilities ahead starts me trembling and repeating "Oh my God" under my breath, like I'm having a once in a lifetime experience slated for people who win lotteries or discover Egyptian tombs. The silence loads the shell back into the rifle, and gazes at me firmly, defiantly. Then he chuckles as though surprised, delighted and buoyed by the consequence of following me into a dark alley I had to explore. We exchange a knowing look. Together, we've just learned something we couldn't have apart.

He steps forward, seizes my hand and pumps it, his skin rough and hard, like embracing a cheese grater, yet a powerful grip, full of life. Laughing now, and shaking his head, he turns and lurches off the bus. Halfway down he stumbles into a seat rail, glances back embarrassed, I wasn't supposed to see that. As he disembarks I charge after him: I want to thank him, I want to know his name, and tell him mine. But he limps away with incredible agility and speed, over the crescent moonlight and up the hill toward his warmly lit cabin, and in agreement I head the other way, soaking in the fresh night air, and finding the ground wonderful to feel beneath my feet.

### ***Three A.M. at the Corner of Highway 3A and the Road to Nowhere***

I tell myself I can drive the return trip with the lights on, and I do. The dirt road that leads from nowhere is bent like a string pulled tight at both ends then released, and I dodge potholes as best as I can. But they can't all be avoided, and I'm not really for slowing down to try, and some of them, well, to hell with it - suck it up, brother, speed up, the blow won't kill the Tercel or me.

The highway in the moonlight is blue like a river and ribbons into the night as if it has somewhere to go. I stop and get out to take a look at the currents of fluorescence in the asphalt, just as a transport truck flies by, the biggest I've ever seen, all lit up like a movie set with lights and backdrops, riff rock blaring, and folks in outrageous clothes and funny

hats hanging over handrails and swilling champagne bottles, racing off in the opposite direction that I'm heading, unthinking of an end to the highway and unfeeling of the forks in the road.

I get back in. I'm about to go over the roller coaster, and this time I'll hold onto my hat.

### ***Morning***

The lacy white of a new sky rises on the horizon, and the crescent moon sets behind the tree-covered mountaintop a hot spring crowns. Because everything feels different, because I feel like a child without the vocabulary to express or explain, against my better judgement and a vow to actually behave responsibly I cut the Tercel's engine and switch off the headlights and coast in neutral up to the lovely house with maroon walls. In the stillness, I park quietly and tiptoe inside.

Our room is dark. I stand rooted for a minute, accustoming my eyes. In setting the front door and room keys on the chest of drawers of course I drop them on the floor and they make a sound like a thousand windows shattering. But our surly host isn't roused from his bed, doesn't thunder down the hall, cell in hand to report an emergency. And from the vicinity of the pillows and comforter a soft, sweet melody comes unbroken: sniff sniff wee ehnn... sniff sniff wee ehnn...

It's a big world, Shannie, and it appears there's just you and I to handle it, and I'm ready to handle it for us both now, whenever I need to. And I'm glad you're never too young to realize you don't become a better person for yourself; meanwhile I'll work on improving my vocabulary, and I'll get undressed and slide under the covers where it's warm and at day's end my privilege is to sleep beside a girl who improves the best of me, and lets the rest of me be me.

Shannie jolts awake, lifts her head, looks around in alarm, and only then realizes her flaps are down. She raises them, and finds me frozen in the act of stretching and getting comfy. She's beautiful when getting her bearings. Just me, I smile, and I snuggle next to her. She pats me as though to say she hopes I had a nice trip to the bathroom, then removes her eye shades and ear plugs, places them on the night table, and lays back down and wraps my arm around her.

"I've had the strangest dream," she murmurs.

I nod. "Tell me all about it," I say, and I draw her near.

## ***About the Author***



**Mario Lowther's** short literary and genre fiction has appeared in ***Necrotic Tissue, Imaginarium, The Lorelei Signal, Mystic Signals, Remarkable Doorways, Scarlet Leaf Review, Corner Bar Magazine, Abstract Jam, and Polar Borealis***; and has been long-listed for a ***Glimmer Train New Writers*** award.

He is a university drop-out, a two-time life drop-out, was a small-time rock star and smaller-time film producer, defiantly has no internet presence, and while advancing into old age is still compelled to try to figure out what to say and how to say it without unnecessarily pissing off anybody.

Mario lives amongst tall trees on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast, with a dog, Boo, and two cats, Jem and Scout, and his goodly wife, Sharlyne, who just wants to be sure that when he's upstairs in his attic office he's not goofing off. He sometimes is.

*Story Photo Credit: [Anna Berdnik](#)*

**INTERVIEW:****BILL COLOUMBE****Kinetic, Y-Comics and Taking Flight**

**Y Comics** is an independently owned and operated comic book publisher and seller based out of Seattle, Washington. **Bill Coulombe** is a comic book enthusiast that turned it into a full time job. He has always had a passion for comics even as a child, with years planning, writing, and preparing he is now growing own company, Y-Comics. Inspired by such artist as Alan Moore, Stan Lee, Grant Morrison, and many more.

**Q: What made you decide to start a comic series, and what were your experiences before Kinetic?**

*A: I had always dabbled in comic writing. In the mid-2000s I had written a few comic scripts, but nothing had ever come of them. A few years ago I decided that I was going to seriously pursue a career as a writer. I wrote a miniseries for a small online comic publisher (as of my knowledge, it has not been published). **Kinetic** was one of those thoughts I jotted down in a notebook years ago; I always thought it would be a good name for a superhero. Next thing you know I had a script written and was hiring an artist!*



**Q: What were some of the challenges you had to overcome getting this far?**

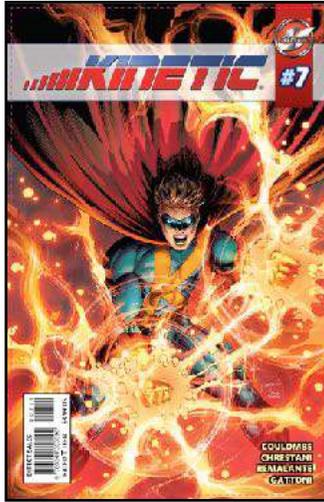
*A: I have two main challenges in my career so far: distribution and staying motivated to work. For those who don't know, national comic book distribution is done by a single company. They have never responded to my inquiries. Though I've had success getting into local stores, it's disheartening as an independent creator.*

*The second challenge I think all creators face. With so much entertainment available to me at any given moment, it is tough to sit down and write without any distractions. I almost have to remind myself when I sit down to write to turn off the TV and leave the smartphone in the other room.*

**Q: How do you form a collaboration with someone? You don't do the drawings, correct?**

*A: Correct, I am no artist! As cliché as it sounds, the internet has truly changed the world. Most of my collaborators I work with I have found online, but my cover artist I actually met at comic conventions. Usually I hire an artist to do concept work with a deadline to see if they can 1) hit deadlines and 2) see what working with them is like. After that, then I will approach them with the assignment. It's very*

*important to me that artists are collaborators in the process. I always preface my scripts with a note to them. If I write a page with 4 panels, A-B-C-D and they feel it's better for the story to have the panels A-C-B-D, they have full ability to change that. It's about trusting your collaborators.*



**Q: What is your process and how are storylines developed?**

*A: I start with a brainstorming session for the property I'm working on, spitballing ideas I think of. After that, I start storyboarding the comic as if I am drawing it myself. In my notebook I will split the page into four sections, each representing a page. This lets me visualize the action, and also I can get a better idea of the big picture, and see if individual scenes are too short or dragging on too long. Then I translate my horrible drawings to a script.*

*I truly believe that the real magic is in the editing and revising. This is where a bad idea can become good and an already good idea can become great.*

**Q: I know you have been attending lots of comic conventions; how has the response been to *Kinetic*?**

**A:** Response for **Kinetic** has been amazing. I get so many compliments on the professional look of the series. Now I'm getting to the point where I have done a few repeat appearances, and I've seen many people who picked up the first few issues coming back to get the next installments. As of this writing, we are at over 4,500 books sold.



**Q:** What are your hopes for the future, and what would you like our readers to know?

**A:** As of this writing, **Kinetic** 7 and 8 have been sent to the printer. This completes the story arc. I always have said if all I finish are these, with a solid beginning, middle, and end, I'd be happy.

There are plans to do **Kinetic** 9-16, but I need to make sure the series is popular enough first! I am, however, launching a new series, and really hope I can follow that up with more **Kinetic**. I had been in a little funk writing other ideas, so I took a break and wrote some new **Kinetic** and it just felt right.

Follow **Bill Coloumbe** and **Y-Comics** at:

**Website:** [www.YComics.net](http://www.YComics.net)

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# BookStore 'N Pieces

Here are some book selections for you to consider reading. Please be sure to leave a review for the book, regardless how short.

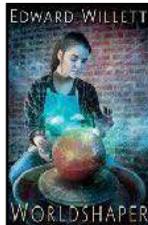
Authors need your feedback.

## *Jenna Greene: HERITAGE*



**Synopsis:** As Becky tries to adjust to life back on Earth, in Oren, Prince Eston suffers under the deadly effects of broxide poisoning. While Cristox Savu joins with an unlikely friend as he attempts to save his people from extinction, Leda and Jamee, two of the three Naturals, those born with magic, struggle to defend the sanctuary of the Painter's Valley. And, even as they finally face the feelings they have for each other, Kat and Ino must evade the Coalition's clutches as they journey to discover what is affecting magic across Oren--before it is too late and magic, and an even deadlier enemy, destroys Oren and everyone Kat cares about. **LEARN MORE:** <https://amzn.to/2SEjfiX>

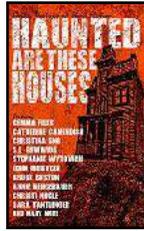
## *Edward Willett: WORLDSHAPER*



**Synopsis:** For Shawna Keys, the world is almost perfect. She's just opened a pottery studio in a beautiful city. She's in love with a wonderful man. She has good friends. But one shattering moment of violence changes everything. Mysterious attackers kill her best friend. They're about to kill Shawna. She can't believe it's happening--and just like that, it isn't. It hasn't. No one else remembers the attack, or her friend. To everyone else, Shawna's friend never existed... Everyone, that is, except the mysterious stranger who shows up in Shawna's shop. She cannot save her world, he says, but she might be able to save others--if she will follow him from world to world, learning their secrets and carrying them to Ygrair, the mysterious Lady at the Labyrinth's heart. **LEARN MORE:** <https://amzn.to/2EkgWhj>

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**Eddie Generous: *HAUNTED ARE THESE HOUSES***

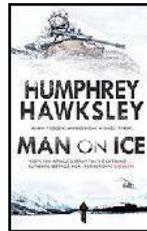


**Synopsis:** Haunted are These Houses explores the gothic sub-genre through poetry and fiction: from castle and lighthouses to suburbia to laundromats. It features 22 poems and 12 short stories sure to rattle bones and send shadows dancing about the walls.

LEARN MORE: <https://amzn.to/2Un4BoJ>

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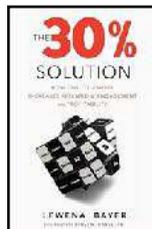
**Humphrey Hawksley: *MAN ON ICE***



**Synopsis:** Special agent Rake Ozenna watches as a fleet of Russian military helicopters head straight for his home. His tiny Alaskan island, with a population of just 80. What he doesn't know yet is why. Russia is playing a dangerous political game, reclaiming Rake's island as their own, even if it antagonizes the US. Caught in the crosshairs of saber-rattling big powers, Rake is determined to save his people and his island, even if it costs him his life. LEARN MORE: <https://amzn.to/2PruVTq>

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**Lewena Bayer: *30% SOLUTION***

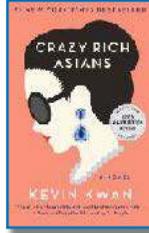


**Synopsis:** How Civility at Work Increases Retention, Engagement and Profitability, provides essential information, facts, insights from the field, and practical tips related to the business of civility. The book represents a ready-to-use tool kit with practical applications for: Business consultants Performance and productivity analysts Workplace trainers Social and communication training facilitators Customer service experts

Business owners, managers, supervisors, and individuals who want to build a better workplace. LEARN MORE: <https://amzn.to/2Pp36v3>

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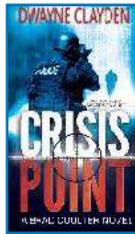
***Kevin Kwan: CRAZY RICH ASIANS***



**Synopsis:** When New Yorker Rachel Chu agrees to spend the summer in Singapore with her boyfriend, Nicholas Young, she envisions a humble family home and quality time with the man she hopes to marry. But Nick has failed to give his girlfriend a few key details, that he grew up riding in more private planes than cars; and three, that he just happens to be the country's most eligible bachelor. LEARN MORE: <https://amzn.to/2povvXK>

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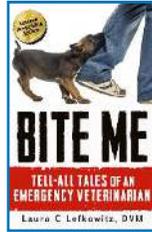
***Dwayne Clayden: CRISIS POINT  
(A BRAD COULTER NOVEL, BOOK 1)***



**Synopsis:** 1976. Life couldn't be better for Brad Coulter, a Calgary cop. Partnered with his best friend, paid to keep the streets safe from the riff raff. Until a gun battle after an armed robbery leaves him without his partner and grappling with the sudden burst of criminal activity in his otherwise quiet city. Cops are losing their lives, and Coulter is determined to catch the thugs. LEARN MORE: <https://amzn.to/2plHKnZ>

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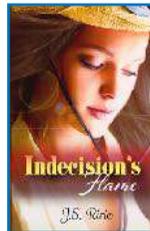
***Laura C. Lefkowitz: BITE ME:  
TELL-ALL TALES OF AN EMERGENCY VETERINARIAN***



**Synopsis:** A reality based, uncensored look at the world of modern veterinary medicine. Follow one veterinarian's story through the course of her career and experience the dramas, the traumas and the comedies that regularly take place in a veterinary emergency room. **Bite Me** gives a rare insider's view of the frustrations, the joys and the heartbreak that veterinarians experience on a daily basis and exposes the reasons why the veterinary profession is currently facing some dire and frightening challenges. A must-read for any pet owner, any person aspiring to be a veterinarian, any veterinary student, and any person who has an interest in the welfare of both animals and people. LEARN MORE: <https://amzn.to/2UjotSs>

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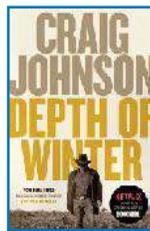
***JS Ririe: INDECISION'S FLAME: BOOK 1***



**Synopsis:** Brylee Hawkins was going home, but it wasn't for a happy reunion. She was there to confront her father so she could return to the man of her dreams and get married. But the Australian Outback wasn't the place she remembered, and the truth behind her mother's unexpected death wasn't the only reality that would toss her into a quagmire of doubt, suspicion and self-doubt. Will she be strong enough to fight the demons alone, or will she sink into a dark abyss and lose everything, including her soul? LEARN MORE: <https://amzn.to/2QoW8ff>

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***Craig Johnson: DEPTH OF WINTER: A LONGMIRE MYSTERY***



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