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BOOKS & PIECES WRITING MAGAZINE

SUMMER 2023 EDITION (GIANT ISSUE)

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Books & Pieces Writing Magazine is a forum for READERS and WRITERS, as well as artists in other categories, to showcase their work.

We cover Short Stories | Novellas | Poetry | Artworks (sketches, digital art, paintings, sculptures etc.) | Songs & Songwriters | Screenplays and more.

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From the Editor

Welcome to the SUMMER 2023 GIANT EDITION of Books & Pieces Writing Magazine.

We've expanded our offerings beyond just short stories and interviews. We now welcome poetry, artwork, music, screenwriting, non-fiction articles, and more. We want a publication for READERS and WRITERS.

We've also changed the layout from a magazine style with multiple columns, to this easier to read (especially on a mobile device) format.

Books & Pieces now means Books and other things that are creatively related to reading and writing. There are so many great things out there and so many talented people, it seemed a shame to just limit it to short stories.

That said, we have lots of short stories in this issue to keep you busy reading.

Most links, book covers and items mentioned are hyperlinked. If you are reading digitally, you can click items to buy or learn more.

Do join our mailing list. We won't spam you, but you will receive our newsletter and links to the e-magazine when it comes out. You can unsubscribe at any time from any of the emails. To join, click [HERE](#).

Enjoy this issue, and do let me know what you think. You can reach me at: editor@BooksNPieces.com

Regards,



William Gensburger

Fearless

A poem by Gina Carrillo

*Now I do not fear the dark-side
For it already has consumed me
Chewed me up
Spit me out
Around the world I walk about
Dancing in shadows
Playing with relics of pain
Jumping in bloody puddles
Liking the feeling of past lives slain
Hello darkness my old friend
I'm ready if you come for me again
Whispering love songs in my ear
Flirting with death
Trying to drown out my cheer
Evil had touched me
Broken emptiness
Tried to flush me
Down to the the floor
My life deteriorated in a fast decay*

*Who would ever want me now
Torn and tattered bruised and battered
Left with pieces shattered
Putting myself back together
Bearing through the hurt
I've rebuilt my walls
Still staying on high alert
Remaining Fearless of it all
No one needed to catch me when I fall
Trusting my wings
They fly me so high
Breaking through the glass ceilings
Of the cloudy sky*

-Black Widow



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

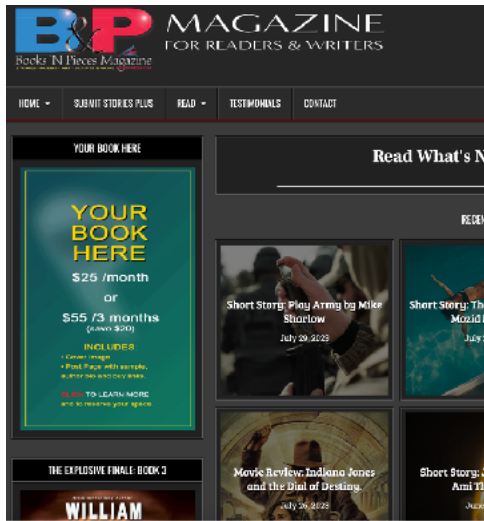
Gina Carrillo, originally from Flint, MI, moved to Franklin, TN in 1989. Some of her interests have included both drawing and painting, as well as poetry. Her art is colorful, bright, expressive and unique. Some of her work has been displayed at a few popular restaurants in Downtown Franklin. Her poems also show the same passionate depth of emotions. Some of the well-known poets who have influenced her style, are Edgar Allan Poe, Chaucer, as well as Shakespeare.

Find her on:

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'Contentment.' Drawn by Jill Hedgecock. The picture of her son-in-law and his niece, and was selected to be featured at the Ekphrasis reception at the Orinda Library, in Orinda, California. Jill Hedgecock is the author of the Shadow trilogy novels: *Between Shadow's Eyes*, *From Shadow's Perspective*, and soon to be released *In Shadow's Reflection*. She is an avid animal lover with a special love of all things canine. www.jillhedgecock.com .

Cards And Humanity

A short story by Toni Livakovic

Summary: Cards and Humanity is an abstract fiction piece in which seven diverse characters engage in a thought-provoking poker game that means more than merely an ordinary game exploring life's most profound questions.

“The goods are secured, losers.” Hayden rattles open the nearly unhinged door that separates the cramped pantry from the break room in the auto body shop.

“You’re to the left of JP. Sucks to be you.” Derrick nods to the one open seat at the table, a crusty chair unconfidently tasked with sustaining Hayden from collapse. The cards are already dealt, and the six other men are all sunk back into their chairs, still in their dark blue coverall work attire.

Hayden taps the knuckle of his index finger against the lightbulb, which delicately hangs from the ceiling, unsettled by each striking tick of the nearby wall clock.

“This still isn’t fixed?” he groans, shifting into his seat. The bulb barely shines enough light for the men to see each other and the cards in front of them. It made it harder to play, for sure, but it would be stupid – or unnatural, at least – *not* to play because of it. They were already at the table, after all.

“You want to go get us a new one?” Derrick scoffs, motioning to the shop’s exit door, which remains barricaded with furniture. Pounding the door with debris, the gusts of humid wind from outside threatened to make an unwelcome entrance.

Niall, a tall man with dark, styled hair and a grandiose mustache, shrugs from across the table. “Maybe you should, Hayden. We don’t got a clue what’s really going on outside of here.”

“Too scary. Can’t we call the big man?”

JP smirks, knowing how often the men lazily want the shop owner to fix everything. “We’ve told you, we can never reach him.” The men had tried texting, calling, and mailing letters to the owner whenever there was a concern, but had learned to never expect an answer.

“We can try telepathy, as if that’ll work,” Niall chuckles. A sense of dry sarcasm was one of the few things his father left him before ditching their family of three.

JP, Sidney, Derrick, and Marcus exchange a few laughs at the foolishness of the idea, accompanied by an uncomfortable smile from Pete.

“Alright, I guess we’re stuck in here with what we got. Don’t worry, these’ll make it all better.” With his eager toothy grin, Hayden passes around the beer bottles he had just fetched.

“Thank Jesus,” Niall exhales as he gets his. “As pathetic as it is, these poker nights with you idiots are the only much-needed distraction I get from everything. New week, same pointless BS.”

Upon catching his beer, Sidney promptly slides it back across the table. “I appreciate it, Hayden, but you know I do not have that. No beer for me.”

JP beams warmly at Sidney. “I respect your strong will, pal. You’re really sticking to that diet.”

Pete takes a sip of his cold beer to somewhat offset the room’s palpable taste of sweat. “With all the calories you’re saving for the rest of the world, you could feed all of Africa.”

The men at the table chuckle, but not even a wry smile comes from Pete. He could be making a joke or an earnest political statement and deliver it the same.

“Pete, you’d just love to brag about your little service trip to Kenya again. We know Sidney would rather feed his people back home in India,” Hayden jokes.

Often dismissed by Americans for his slight accent, Sidney was indeed raised in India, but it was commonly forgotten that he spent most of his adolescence in China.

“The diet can be tough,” Sidney continues, unbothered by the playful crudeness. “Here and there, I cannot stop thinking about the delightful food the chef of my family used to make back at home. But it is not the diet why I do not like to drink. Drinking makes me feel...distracted. That is not the way I want to be, especially in a game as important as the poker.”

“Buddy, I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” Hayden howls derisively, infamously pronouncing the word “talking” as “*tawkkkin*” like the proud New Yorker he was. “As one of my good pals used to say when he was around, beer is like women – more is better.”

On that note, he downs the remaining half of his bottle. He fumbles for another one from the case by his leg, his American flag hat almost falling off his head in the process.

Sidney shakes his head vigorously, his long earlobes wiggling as he does so. “And then how do you get enough? Do you hopelessly keep drinking again and again, passing out before you can get as drunk as you would like to be?”

“Yeah. I just drink more each time,” Hayden retorts wryly.

“Hey, you gotta keep yourself busy somehow,” Niall laughs.

Sidney takes a deep breath and doesn’t say anything. It is best to avoid resistance, he thinks.

The men finally begin the betting, sitting with their legs tightly crossed and their cards closely guarded against their chests. Derrick shoots an untrusting glare at the light, which flickers seemingly every time a new hand is dealt.

In the first few pots, JP makes a couple of calculated moves, while Hayden bets heavily and tirelessly. Niall affords only sporadic concentration, and Sidney folds immediately for the fourth consecutive time.

JP peers up at Sidney. “My friend, you’re capable of winning this game.”

“If I bet into this pot, I am playing against six other people. I am getting invested into something I am going to lose. And let us say I do win. Great, then I go home and end up disappointed that I could have won more.”

“Are you crazy?” Hayden’s mouth hangs in disbelief. “How’s it disappointing if you win?”

“Yes, for a bit, the feeling is great,” Sidney concedes. “But then the money or the thrill you had get lost, and you go chasing for more. Instead of doing that, I am purely here to experience each hand for what it is.”

“That’s right. You have to take it one hand at a time,” Marcus adds. “Too many poker players try to plan out their strategy for the whole game when they don’t even know how many hands are left.”

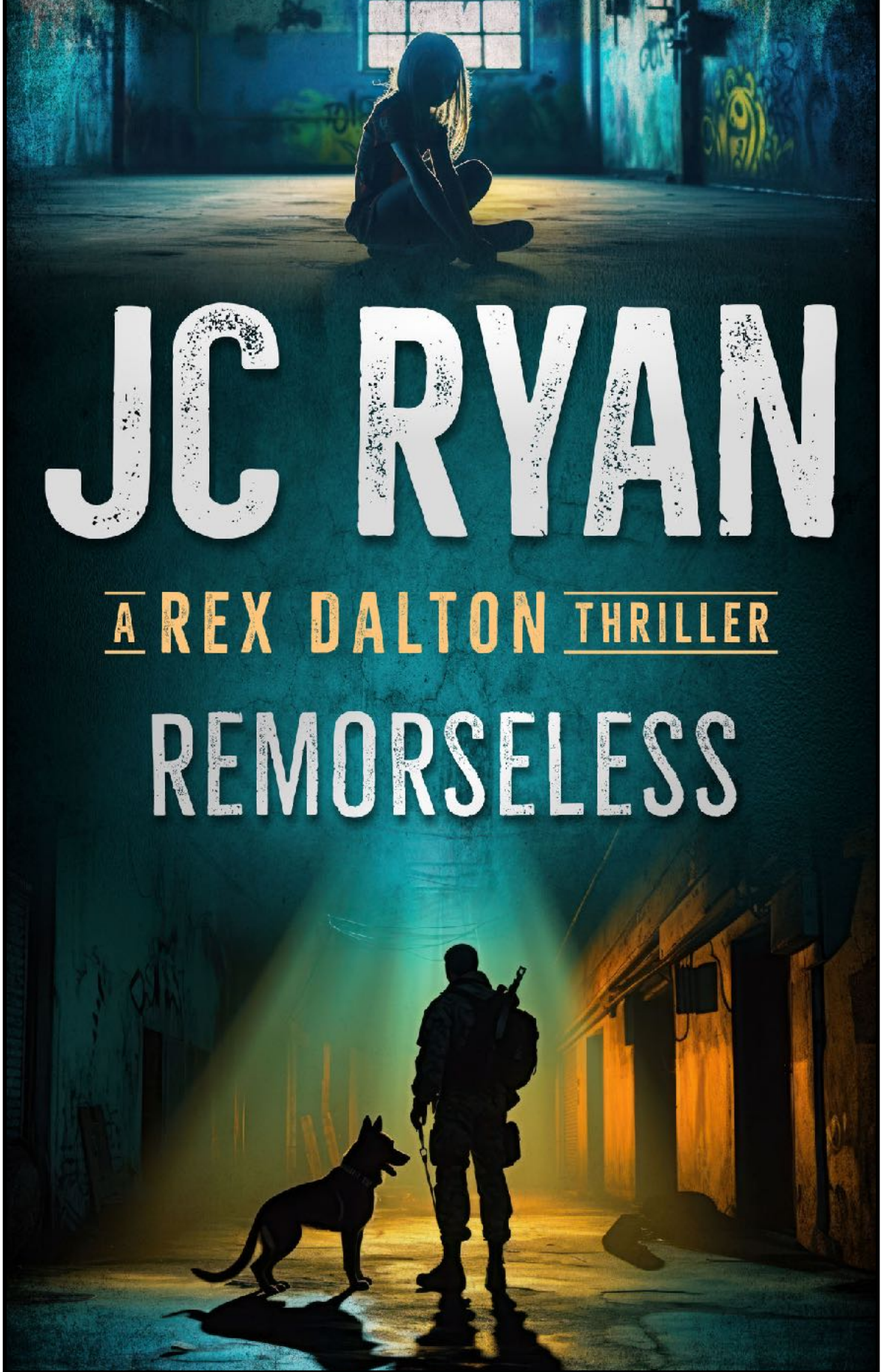
Hayden shakes his head. “Forget about it, Sidney. I’m here to win as much as I can. If I win some big pots and got more bills in my pocket, I’m a happy man.”

“You’re a happy man because it feels good when you win big pots, or because you’re richer when you got more bills in your pocket?” Derrick prompts.

“I don’t know. It’s one and the same, isn’t it?”

The table is hushed contemplatively.

“You guys are overthinking a game where there’s nothing to be thought about,” Niall chimes in.



When Rex's college sweetheart reaches out to him after years of no contact, Rex has no idea that the trajectory of his life is about to change forever. Not only is she dying of cancer, she also has twins. Rex's twins. One of the kids, his daughter Courtney, has been abducted by a child sex ring, and the police are making no headway in locating her. Though rattled by these revelations, Rex vows to find Courtney and bring her back to her mother before the cancer kills her. 362 4.8 star reviews. Read more and [BUY HERE](#).

“I don’t think so. I agree with Sidney,” Marcus counters. “You can win a pot or even win on the night, but it’s fleeting. Plus, the money you make or the unjustified sense of success you get aren’t important. The thing is, Sidney, if you always fold, why do you play poker? Do you even like it?”

“I think it is not possible for anyone to like it if they play it the traditional way. It will always be filled with dissatisfaction.”

“I mean, if you really think that, you could...” Marcus’ words begin to draw off. “You could always quit playing and leave,” he finally finishes with a wince.

Sidney’s reflective eyes shine with understanding rather than insult. “I could. But I am here, and for that I am grateful. If I continue to fold, I still get to experience the game while not feeling bother. Then I leave when the right time comes.”

Motivated to hone his poker ability, Marcus continues to play by throwing chips into the pot. Despite doing so, he locks eyes with Sidney and sincerely nods in agreement.

Each of the seven players gets dealt a new hand, where Sidney, Marcus, and Niall fold promptly. As Derrick gets a promising flush draw, he battles to contain his amateur excitement and tosses in a heavy cluster of chips. Pete folds, and Hayden and JP both meet Derrick’s bet.

After the next card disappoints, Derrick declines to raise the stakes himself but reluctantly matches Hayden. The final reveal drops to no avail. Derrick groans audibly, defeatedly thrusting his cards at the table as JP’s pair of jacks beats Hayden’s bluff and Derrick’s fold.

“Had a flush draw on that one from the start. I swear, man, I get unlucky every time we play this dumb game,” Derrick complains.

JP, whose head barely stretches above the table, pushes his thick glasses higher upon his wrinkled nose. “Poker is not a game of luck, my friend,” he says, having played the longest out of the group.

“What do you mean? I had a good chance at winning with my hand. I did the right thing by betting a lot, and the community cards I needed didn’t come up. I got totally screwed.”

“It doesn’t matter which cards you get or whether the cards you want show up. That’s the biggest misconception about poker. It only matters that you play your cards well.”

“I did play them well. But I got unlucky.” Derrick drops into a slouch in his seat before continuing. “And you know what sucks the most? From the start, I

was going to lose. No matter what I did, those two cards were always going to pop up and I wasn't going to have a flush."

"Look, you can't choose how the cards get dealt. The thing is, you can always win with any hand because the cards are as valuable as you make them. You missed your flush draw, but if you wanted to risk it to win at all costs, you could've bluffed me into folding."

"Quit reading fairy tales, JP. You can win with any hand? You're saying, oh, it doesn't matter if you get a 2 and a 7 versus pocket aces, they're all the same?"

JP puffs his cigar for a few seconds. "Maybe not. But they're your cards. You have to play them, and you can play them well enough to win, or you can play them badly and lose."

Derrick's face lights up. "That's the thing, man. The cards aren't all worth the same. Soon as you sit down, specific cards are bound to show up and affect all the plays that come after. It's dumb as hell to say that throughout the whole game, everybody's got an equal chance of winning."

"Just because it might be harder with your cards doesn't mean that's the reason you lose. The onus is on you to win with them."

"No, no, no. The cards affect your decision-making. The cards *are* your decision-making. If I get screwed that play, it's not my responsibility." Derrick points to JP's abundance of chips. "And you're giving yourself way too much credit, saying it's all about playing smart."

"You know I'm not saying that to brag," JP contends, offended at what he feels is a cheap jab by his comrade.

"I know you're not. But why do you think you're skilled, JP? You started playing poker as a teenager because you actually had the bucks for it. You're the only one here who got to go to college and learn math and stuff that we don't know. You —"

"Woah, I earned my gambling money and my college degree. That's what you're forgetting."

"You think I didn't want to earn those things? You think I wanted to drop out at 16? When my parents split, Jalen and Darius were still kids. My momma couldn't support them alone."

JP motions for Derrick to calm down. "Listen, you know I sympathize with you. But just because I started playing at a younger age or went to college or whatever, doesn't mean you can discredit my hard work into getting good at this game."

"For sure I can. Where did your hard work come from?"

“I don’t know. My own choice to work hard, my own drive to be good at something.” “You’re overrating your impact on the game and on yourself, man. Even if you and I got the same cards, you were always better set up to play them.” Derrick sighs. “You won at poker before you even started playing.”

He collects the pot to marginally boost his small sum of chips.

Hayden rolls his eyes. “Alright already, youse guys are getting way too... philosophical over here. All that matters is that you win, yeah?” Before anyone has the chance to utter a sound, he scoops the cards and deals a new hand.

“Pocket sevens now,” Derrick immediately groans, unknowingly breaking the etiquette of keeping one’s cards to himself, even after a fold. “Clearly it would be too much to ask for an ace or a king here and there, like everybody else is getting.”

Half of the men – generally the older ones – simply puff their cigars, accustomed to players behaving this way. The other half is stunned into stillness.

“Why would you fold pocket sevens? That’s a good hand,” JP eventually asks amicably.

Derrick shakes his head. “Like I said, there are aces and kings out there. How can I say I got a good hand when there are better cards that’ll beat me?”

“It’s all relative, my friend. You have six other people at this table. You probably have a better-starting hand than five of them, but you’re only thinking about the one hand that is maybe better.” JP sips his beer. “And sure, someone might have an ace or a king, but what if those never show up in the community cards? What if a seven shows up and helps you?”

“That’s a lot of ifs. No way I can be confident about pocket sevens if a high card might come up, or if a seven might never show up.”

Marcus bets a few chips, chuckling at Derrick’s ignorance of one of the most obvious yet neglected elements of poker. “Well, of course, you can’t. Poker is a game where nothing is certain and nothing is permanent. You can have a ‘great hand’ get wiped out into nothing at any time, whether you see it coming or not.”

Derrick motions his hand towards Marcus as if to confirm that Marcus’ point is backing his own argument. “Exactly. So how can I got any confidence in being happy about this hand until I know that it’s good?”

Marcus waves off the idea. “You sound like my son. You’ll never have that certainty you’re looking for, no matter which cards come and go. That’s how the game is, and you have to play by the game’s rules.”

“Alright, alright, I got you. Still, pair of sevens is straight up just not a good hand.”

JP abstains from reiterating his stance on the relative unimportance of the cards. “This is the problem with fellas like you.” He proceeds gently and pitifully, fixated on Derrick’s styled, non-graying hair and his uneasy twiddling with his restless smartphone. “You all complain you get dealt bad cards. The thing is, when you do get good cards, you never recognize them for what they are.”

“Are you now starting to understand why I play it in this way?” Sidney prods the table. “Every player wants the thing that is impossible – to have a better hand, not just one time, but every time.”

“I mean, Derrick’s got a point,” Hayden advocates. “Sometimes the cards you get simply suck. You gotta see it for what it is.”

A few murmurs of reluctant agreement are scattered across the table, while Marcus delivers a defiant eye roll.

JP resists, “We all get some cards that might be considered bad. In fact, I know plenty of folks that say most poker hands are bad. I’ll tell you what, though. You don’t see us getting those hands because we fold them, and you’re letting your hands that you don’t like stick out to you more.”

Derrick hunts for a middle ground in the dispute. “Maybe we’re all meant to perceive the cards differently. We each got different poker experiences, after all. There’s nothing with that.”

Sidney shifts in his seat and rubs his ears uncomfortably, internally disagreeing with Derrick yet not wanting to spark more debate.

Almost immediately after becoming the dealer, Niall stumbles over a leg of the table and the cards free fall out of his grasp. He gazes at the mess in front of him.

“Your arguments are all pointless,” he snickers, despite usually being distant from these discussions. “This is a nonsense game. Think about it – these cards are just a bunch of random colors and numbers and stupid-looking faces. But then we come up with these silly little interpretations and throw money in based on things we don’t even freaking know. *Nonsense.*”

While the rest of the men exchange restrained grimaces of disagreement, JP shoots to the edge of his seat.

“Yeah, the cards are just a bunch of random colors and numbers and, granted, some stupid-looking faces,” he laughs. He adjusts his glasses as he starts to pick up the cards from the floor, remembering that Niall can’t because of the alleged “back problem” he has had since childhood. “Yet when we’re able to look at all these cards and think about them, we can freely create a game for ourselves, and the game we choose is poker.”

“Oh, of course. It’s so wonderfully simple, you guys, we can create any game we want!” Niall mocks, twirling the curls of his mustache. “These cards can’t mean different things to different players, JP. If you can’t find one right way to use them – which, spoiler alert, you can’t – then all the games you come up with are equally nonsense.”

“There is no ‘right way’ to use them. If you think poker, or blackjack or rummy or whatever it might be, is the best way for you to personally play, then great. You’ve figured it all out.”

“No, you *think* you got it figured out. We don’t know squat about what we want in our game, about the cards, about anything. And how can we? We’re honestly lying to ourselves by making up some game to play.”

“You’re right that there’s a lot we don’t know. That doesn’t mean we don’t know anything.” JP’s comment is countered with a silent, doubtful eyebrow raise from Niall. “Niall, we have to make our best individual judgment on how we should play with the cards. It can take time for us to figure out which game is best for us, but eventually, we get there.”

“Well, then who’s to say that poker is any better than some mind-numbing game like war or go fish? These are not all equally good choices. They can’t all be the right choice.”

“You might not think war or go fish are worthy games, although they can be to someone else. It’s totally subjective.” With a shrug of his shoulders, JP continues, “Even if we never find the best way to spend our time at the table, the search is a worthwhile process we can embrace.”

Niall rubs his hands against his face. “You don’t get it, genius. It’s a process towards nothingness. We can make up these fun, happy games that make us feel good, but they’re meaningless ways of wasting our time. There’s no real use to these cards, JP.”

Suddenly, a gust of wind thrusts itself against a break room window, cracking the glass like a spider web as it seeps its way through.

Silently hopeful, Marcus sees his king and ten of diamonds become a flush draw as Niall deals two diamonds to the community cards. His unwavering facial expression, largely aided by his robust, curly beard, guards any entranceways into his inner emotions. Following his usual style, Marcus controls the play with an aggressive opening bet, which a couple of the other men match. By the time the final community card lands, he successfully hits his flush. He pushes half of his bountiful stack of chips into the middle and peers up at Derrick, the final opponent still left in the hand.

“I call.” Derrick flips over his cards to reveal a very unlikely ace flush – the only possible hand that could beat Marcus’.

Quickly subduing an emotional reaction, Marcus shrugs his broad, commanding shoulders. “It is what it is. Nothing I could do there.”

Derrick smiles, gleaming with confidence. “I’ve been telling y’all the whole time, it’s the cards that decide the game. You got wrecked by them, Marcus, the same way I have been all night.”

“Plays like that, they are unfortunately always going to happen at times,” Sidney contemplates, sipping increasingly lukewarm water. “Accepting them for what they are is what you must do. Once you realize that you will eventually lose chips, you suddenly stop being so overly concerned about them.”

With his scarred left hand, Marcus wipes a few beads of sweat off his wrinkled brow and tips his military cap toward Sidney. “We may be from different sides of the world, Sid, but we sure have some things in common.”

“But doesn’t this make you angry?” Derrick interrupts. “The fact that you did all the right things and *you* happened to be the one who lost a ton of chips from the unlucky odd chance?”

“No, sir,” Marcus responds coolly. “It only matters if I let it matter. Before I even placed my bet, I came to terms with the possibility of an ace flush beating me. Anything can happen in poker, so nothing should come as a surprise.”

“Yeah, true. Anything can happen. I guess that’s what makes this such a cruel game.”

“I don’t think it’s cruel. It’s a zero-sum game. For all the money that’s lost, money is gained elsewhere. That’s just the cycle of how the game flows. And hey, if you think it’s cruel, it’ll end eventually.”

“Well, until the next one,” Sidney revises.

Marcus chuckles dismissively.

Pete protectively thrusts his hand onto Derrick’s shoulder. “No offense, Marcus, but I’m happy to see Derrick get those chips from you if you weren’t going to do the noble thing and give him some. He barely had any before that play.”

“No offense taken, although the chips don’t matter. Everyone is so focused on getting chips like that’s what determines who’s a good poker player. People don’t even do it to try to please themselves anymore. It feels like they do it to prove that they’re better than everyone else at the table.”

“Isn’t the whole point of the game to get a lotta chips?” Hayden challenges. “How else would you even decide how good someone is?”

“No, the winnings don’t mean anything because they’re mostly down to the cards we get handed to us.” Marcus turns to Derrick. “Only part of the game is decided by the cards, but that part doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is what we control, which is making the right decisions.”

Derrick bites his lip in thought. “I don’t know, man. Even if you’re right that we got control over our decisions, it seems really...idealistic to not be fazed by everything that happens in the game. All the cards that come up and the wins or losses they cause naturally make us feel good or bad. I don’t know how you can say those things don’t matter just because you didn’t cause them.”

Sidney replies, “You are no longer affected by the cards and the results once you build up a strong poker mentality. It is something that takes much time and practice.”

Marcus nods. “You can’t play poker freely until you surrender yourself as a hostage to the cards.”

“Alright Marcus, if your focus should only be on your own moves, how do you know which ones are good ones?” Derrick inquires.

“All it takes is some rational thinking and bang, you have your uncompromisable principles on how to play. And because I know you gentlemen are curious, I’ll tell you one of mine – avoid bluffing.”

Mumbles of agreement buzz across the table.

“If you try to bluff your opponents, you’ll usually end up bluffing yourself even worse,” JP validates. “Only when you play authentically can you truly play the game your own way.”

Hayden’s glare darts across the table, failing to find anyone sharing his level of confusion. “Am I missin’ something here? Everybody bluffs in poker. Isn’t that one of the most basic parts of the game?”

“It does feel like everyone bluffs, especially in the modern poker,” Sidney admits. “I cannot figure out why. I feel like it is much better to play with the cards as they are.”

The men meditate on the idea for a moment.

“I think it’s because players chase the chips too aggressively. If they realized how many chips they were actually losing by playing that way, I don’t think they would do it,” JP suggests.

Hayden stretches his forearms out onto the table and hunches over to rest his chin on his arms. “Well, nobody wants to be seen as the clown with the dinkiest stack of chips.”

After a few more hands of reckless betting, Hayden's collection of chips fades into nothingness. Conscious of Marcus' earlier points, Hayden combats the urge to sneak a handful from Marcus' nearby pile and reaches under the table for the chipset.

The lightbulb suddenly shuts down for about three seconds, imposing an awkward standstill of complete silence and darkness in the room before it revives itself.

"You won't always get that lucky," JP warns. "If you keep playing the way you do, you might not always get a chance to buy back in."

Unconcerned, Hayden licks his lips and rubs the palms of his hands together before counting the additional chips he is buying. "It's time for the king to win his money back."

"There's no such thing as winning money back," Marcus asserts in his deep, gruff voice. "The money you lost was in the past, and it's gone forever now. Any money you make now is new money, a completely separate entity."

Hayden fiddles with his glistening, incessantly ticking watch – a late birthday gift from his banker father. "If I make up for my screw-ups, though, they don't matter anymore, no?"

"I disagree, they do matter. For starters, instead of 'making up' for them, you could very well keep losing money. Even if you do regain the amount of money you lost, your losses are still there. There will always be a hole in your pocket compared to where you could've been."

Hayden heaves out a sigh. "Well, that's depressing. What am I supposed to do then? Just feel lousy about it?"

"Feeling bad about it isn't the point. It's about confronting the fact that whatever happened, happened." Marcus looks at Derrick, remembering his failed flush draw, and adds, "Even when it's not your fault."

Marcus catches Hayden staring blankly at the floor.

"Listen, it goes the other way too," he consoles. "All the good plays that you make can't be undone, either. And while you can lose the money you make, you can't lose the time you spent enjoying those earnings. Instead of focusing on the past plays, though, you should simply keep playing one hand at a time and use the lessons you learned to prevent mistakes."

"I guess the only thing that's permanent is the past," Hayden mumbles.

"Roger that. And no matter how much you struggle, the only direction you can move in is forward," Marcus comments, smiling sympathetically to confirm Hayden's point.

Several hands later, Pete loses the rest of his chips as well. His opponents had squeezed a large sum of money out of him after he continued to frequently and generously call their bets.

“Well, that’s it for me, gang. I’ll hang around, but I played it how I wanted to play it, so I’m not going to buy back in,” Pete declares. He boasts a rich, euphonious voice and an enduringly fit body of tall stature, byproducts of his recent all-state choir and lifeguarding days in high school.

“Why not?” Hayden prods mischievously. “We’ll be here for a good while, you can still make your money back.”

Pete shakes his head. “I don’t really care about making the money back for myself. I actually get the most pleasure from seeing you all win, you know?”

“You serious?” Hayden grills. “If someone else wins money, sure, that’s good for them. You don’t get to feel or experience that yourself, though. There’s nothin’ wrong with trying to win for yourself when that’s what feels the most real to you.”

“Don’t you think it’s the right thing to do to help someone build a good amount of chips for themselves? Especially if they’ve been playing well but got handed bad cards.”

“I think it’s a nice thing to do, Pete. I don’t think it’s the ‘right’ thing to do. Everybody at this table chose their own moves and got random cards just like I did. It’s not my responsibility to make up for either of those things going wrong.”

“Our sets of cards both might’ve been random,” Derrick interjects, “but yours were sure different than mine.”

“Yup,” Pete confirms. “It’s easy for you to say what you said, Hayden. I saw how many good hands you got and how many chips you blew through. You clearly have the money to buy yourself back in after your recklessness, and you won’t support someone who needs it more.”

“Again, it’s not my responsibility! For real, do I gotta pick up the slack for everybody who’s got a bad poker night?”

“I’m not saying you’re supposed to be the solution for everyone. I’m saying you’re supposed to play your part for the greater good of other people when the cost isn’t much to you.”

“Alright,” Hayden smiles snidely. “Do it yourself then. I’m sure you got some cash in your wallet, make somebody a handsome little donation.”

Frozen in his chair, Pete dodges the intrigued stares of the men at the table. He stuffs his hand into his pocket to silence his buzzing phone, most likely the weekly text message his younger brother sends to detail the progress of his therapy.

“Uhh...I mean, I really worked hard this week, I mean, most of my cash is tips from –”

Hayden lifts his hand to cut Pete off. “Listen, I’m not trying to say you’re purposely a hypocrite. But I’m sick of hearing people say that they play poker to help others win or because they like seeing others win. You might not be ticked off about your chips going to us, but every move you made was to build up your own stack.”

“You’re wrong,” Pete proclaims defiantly. He immediately begins to hesitate with his next words. “I didn’t want to tell you guys this, but throughout the game, I thought about who had fewer chips or faced bad luck, and I would sneak some of my chips into your stacks.”

“Hats off to you for doing a good thing,” Marcus compliments.

“Hold up there, pal,” Hayden demands. “Pete, even if you did that, you didn’t share the extra cash in your wallet. If your entire reason for playing poker is really about looking out for other players, you would’ve gone the full mile.”

Pete scratches his full head of hair and fidgets with his foot. “Fine. I’m not perfect. With that being said, my goal is more than just having a good time, racking up wins, and leaving. There must be something more, some sort of genuine fulfillment. And I honestly think there’s real pleasure in seeing someone with fewer chips build their way up, especially if you helped that happen.”

“That’s really cute,” Niall mocks, seemingly carefree about almost choking on his beer as he laughs.

Hayden challenges, “Listen to what you said, though. ‘There’s real pleasure.’ That’s the problem. It doesn’t matter if you try to get more chips for yourself or for somebody else. They both got the same selfish end goal of making yourself feel good.”


“You think I do it to make myself feel good?” Pete bellows before regaining his composure. “Sure, it’s a nice little perk, but it’s not the purpose. The fulfillment I get myself isn’t bigger than the value of the chips I sacrifice for others.”

“It has to be, even if you don’t realize it. The only thing that’s real and understandable to your game, big guy, is what you feel, not what anybody else feels. So be my guest – go ahead and help out the other guys, but it’s because it makes *you* feel good.”

Sidney shakes his head. “There is not a difference between your feelings and the feelings of somebody else. We are all part of the same interconnected poker game.”

“That’s right, you can’t stay narrow-minded like that, Hayden,” Pete validates. “Even if I do benefit from helping other players, I don’t think that

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matters. They still get the same results from the chips I'm slipping them."

"Course it matters. It's all about intention, not results. It doesn't make you a good person if helping yourself is the goal, and hoopty-doo, helping others is conveniently the side effect."

"It still would make you a good person." Pete's clear diction starts to stumble into an unconfident stutter. "You said that the things that matter are the ones that are real and tangible to us. Well, the chips that other players get from my help are real. The reasoning doesn't affect anyone, so it doesn't matter."

Hayden leans back in his chair and starts to puff at his cigar. "You can keep telling yourself whatever you want to hear."

Pete clenches his fists and his face begins to flush. "You know, you talk a lot of trash about my integrity for a guy whose only goal here is to make a ton of money."

Setting the comment aside, Hayden bets a sizable chunk of chips. JP, who is the only other one still in the hand, matches the bet, falsely thinking it is a bluff.

As Hayden finishes scooping his winnings, he turns back to Pete. "Youse have all been reading me wrong this whole time. Poker is about having the most enjoyable experience you can. Making cash, enjoying the game, winning for the sake of winning – they're all part of that. I'm sick and tired of being seen as the bad guy for playing that way when all of youse listening are probably the same as me deep down."

"Not any of the things that you said are going to bring you the happiness you think they will. You are leading yourself down a path with no reachable destination," Sidney advises.

"Yeah," Pete agrees. "Anyway, don't you think it's selfish to shoot for the best poker night for yourself if other people are losing out from it?"

"No, it's 100% natural. The whole point of poker is to make the most for yourself. It doesn't make any sense to try and change the fundamental roots of the game. That's like pushing a boulder up a hill over and over again when it'll keep falling right back down."

"That's only because we as players decide to play that way. We don't have to play in a self-maximizing way just because most people do."

"Pete, there's a reason why everybody plays for themselves. It's –"

"Not everybody," Pete interrupts.

Hayden continues his original thought. "It's not because we purposely choose to or because we got some sorta pressure to follow everybody else. It's because that's the way poker is naturally made for us to play."

Pete grumbles. “If that’s the case, then maybe there’s something seriously wrong with this game.”

The lightbulb begins to flicker at a steady rate every three seconds or so. Hayden glares directly at it. “Guys, it’s doing that thing again.”

In his head, he begins to time each persisting flash. Every three seconds... no, is it every two seconds now? His heart begins to wrestle its way out of his chest at the realization.

“Guys,” he repeats to no avail. “Guys! Jesus Christ, is anybody freakin’ listening to me?” he screams, slamming both of his hands against the table and rattling the nearby chips and cards.

Every single head at the table turns to Hayden in complete unison, and they then follow his gaze upwards as Hayden’s anger molds into fear.

“This is nothing new,” Marcus contends after a few seconds of scratching his beard. “I’ve always said it’s a frail light. That should be obvious to anyone.”

“You don’t get it, Marcus,” Hayden snaps. “It’s happening soon.”

All the men dishearteningly return their fixation on the lightbulb as the loud silence of the room creeps upon them.

Suddenly, JP shoots out of his seat. “He’s right.” He reaches out to the bulb and starts rattling it, tapping it, mindlessly trying to stimulate it any way he can. “Oh, dear. We might’ve thought we were prepared because we recognized that this would eventually happen, but now that it’s really coming...oh, dear.”

Hayden looks down at his pathetic stack of chips. “No, this can’t be happening. I’m going out to get us another lightbulb, boys.”

He begins to dismantle the barricade of furniture by the shop’s exit before an abrupt thrust of wind unhinges the door and hurls Hayden backward.

“Are you crazy? The heat’s making my face feel on fire, shut it back up!” JP shrieks.

“Then look for a bulb in here, dammit!” Hayden shouts back, somewhat reassembling the shop’s protective barrier to hold up the door.

Pete and JP hurry to opposite ends of the room. Surprisingly, their search is accompanied by Derrick, who shakes his head profusely, and Niall, who trudges around sluggishly to begrudgingly help.

They look through the break room’s file cabinets – nothing. Inside a few cupboards and shelves – nothing. Under tables and chairs, in the adjacent pantry, even inside their own pockets – absolutely nothing.

“There has to be one somewhere,” JP pants. “I just, I just don’t know where it is. But there has to be one somewhere.” A few beads of sweat begin to race down his face.

“Call the owner of the shop! He’s the only one that can come fix the light!” Pete cries, an evident crack in his ordinarily dulcet voice.

“He won’t pick up anyone’s call, Pete,” Niall replies blankly, now retreating to his seat.

“Just try!”

“There is no owner of the shop,” Niall declares slowly and adamantly. “He doesn’t exist. You guys never believed he did. Why can’t you come to terms with that now?”

Overcome with anxiety and fatigue, Pete slumps back against the wall. Derrick, Hayden, and JP continue to search the room, albeit with drained levels of enthusiasm.

“Friends,” Pete says optimistically. “I know that none of us, including me, really believed in him before, and I know that we can’t contact him. Yet maybe he simply has to exist. There’s no way that the game can just end like this.”

“Sure it can.” Despite the occasional fidget, Marcus is still the most composed of any of the men, having stayed put in his seat alongside Sidney the entire time. “You’re saying this because you’re now facing how uncomfortable the situation is. Don’t lose your rationality, believing in the owner is only a vain attempt to comfort yourself.”

“No, I’m trying to see it from the other perspective. Anyway, how does it make sense for our shop to not have an owner? We’re in this building that was made purely for us, we have all the tools we need right at our fingertips, and we have a ton of mind-blowing machinery around us that was made somehow – you guys are saying everything got here without any reason? We’re not working for anybody or for any purpose?”

“We all realize it doesn’t ‘make perfect sense,’ but the cold hard truth is that none of this does,” Niall retorts. “That’s the whole point.”

“Well, even if we haven’t gotten in touch with the owner, nobody can tell us for sure that he doesn’t exist. Maybe it’s equally crazy to say that we know he doesn’t exist as it is to say that we know he does.”

“Then why hasn’t he helped us?” Derrick snarls, stomping his way back to his chair. “This piece of garbage lightbulb has been dim ever since we started playing, and soon it’s going to stop working completely.”

“It’s a tough question to answer,” Pete admits. “You know, poker is a game about smart and righteous decision-making. Maybe it’s supposed to be hard,

especially under dim light, so that people can truly earn the rewards they get if they play well.”

Derrick sighs. “This game doesn’t gotta be difficult, though. Look how cruel these conditions are, man. How can the owner seriously claim that this is the best way for us to play?”

“If it wasn’t difficult, it wouldn’t be worthwhile. A poker game where you’re winning every hand in a beautiful, shining room wouldn’t mean anything to you.”

Derrick looks at his chips and scoffs, unable to see how losing most of his buy-in would be any better than winning every pot.

“I think that an enriching game, it must have a balance of everything, both good and bad,” Sidney suggests.

“The bad doesn’t happen for any greater good or purpose,” Niall contests. “Why do people think everything has to have a reason or a meaning? Some things just *are*.”

Hayden gulps yet another swig of beer. “We also can’t forget that this ‘super kind’ owner sets us up to play something that’s naturally selfish.”

Pete scratches his head. “Maybe those selfish choices are a necessary part of our power to choose what we do each hand. Isn’t our full freedom of decision-making the most wonderful thing about poker?”

Derrick groans in fiery disagreement.

“Yeah, it’s great that we can make our own choices,” JP responds. “But I worry that if we believed in the owner, we’d avoid taking responsibility for ourselves because we’d simply count on him to fix the light and the game.”

Pete starts to feel the heat from the group debating against him. “Guys, like I said, I personally don’t believe there’s an owner to this shop. That doesn’t mean we have to be closed-minded about it. This whole time, I’m not telling you all what to think – I’m just trying to get you to think for yourselves.”

With that, the men realize that even if the owner is out there somewhere, he will not come to save the light. Nor will they find another bulb on their own. In defeat, Pete, Hayden, and JP quietly march back to the table. Too prideful to admit it, the men all tremble in their seats, having never felt so pathetically small in a room so large.

The light will go out. There will be no more poker game. There will be no more joyous celebrations, no more heartbreaking losses, no more laughs, no more outbursts. There will be nothing left ahead, and soon nothing left behind. There will only be dark, inescapable, eternal *nothingness*.

At this very moment, the lightbulb begins to beam, almost blindingly bright. It's still flickering, with unwavering certainty about its eventual end, and now shining more vibrantly than it ever had before.

The colors of the room start to come to life. The faces around the table now feel more human, and the game in front of them feels more like a real experience than an unconscious passing of time. The room is comfortably warm and peaceful.

"Man, it's funny," Derrick chuckles. "I always thought the walls to this room were black. Well, now I see they're simply...gray. It's kinda nice."

The others join him in light, communal laughter.

"Do you guys get what I've been saying now?" Marcus asks with a gentle smile. "Everything throughout the game that made you sad or worried – the bad cards, losing a lot of chips, a smart bet not working out – suddenly, it's not so bad anymore."

Niall nods.

Hayden stares down at the table contemplatively. "This whole time, I was sure that there was some level of winnings that would finally make me happy, that would finally make everything feel complete. Well, there's no such thing."

Everyone goes quiet for a few moments, with moist, reflective eyes unabashedly exposed.

"I know nobody wants this to happen," Marcus finally says with a sigh. "But it's really the best way it can be. The only reason our poker game means anything is because we keep in mind that it'll end at any random time."

"But this...this doesn't emotionally hurt you, Marcus?" Hayden inquires.

"I think it hurts us all," he responds. "It's not the game ending that's necessarily beautiful. It's the fact that the game will end."

Pete struggles to force a smile. "Don't you care about leaving a legacy, though? Being remembered for your influence on the game?"

Marcus shrugs, once more showing the strength of his shoulders. "When this ends, it's over and out for me. I'm not going to uselessly try and make a finite game into an infinite one. That defies the whole point of accepting it for what it is."

Sidney notices Pete's discomfort and pats him on the back. "Your poker experience will end, but other people will continue to play, even when they have forgotten about you. The poker will always continue – which is a wonderful thing."

"Does it even matter if our game ends then?" Niall probes. "I mean, this one game of ours is really no different than the boatload of other ones that people have played and will continue to play."

“You’re not wrong, Niall.” Marcus puffs at his cigar deeply, taking in each speck of tobacco one at a time. “This is just the way it is. The end will catch you, so you might as well stop running away and confront it face to face. Once you do that, you will truly experience the beauty of this game.”

Together, the men had come to a beautiful insight – if only they could have done so before so much time had escaped them.

“Wow, fellas. This game really is short,” JP ruminates with a sigh.

“Is it?” Marcus disputes. “Or do we just waste most of the game by not actually focusing on it? I don’t think we’d treat it any differently if it was half as long or twice as long.”

“You could be right. Either way, I think we should take this chance to reflect on how we played.”

Niall shakes his head. “There’s no point. Soon it’ll all be said and done. Plus, how would we even know if we played well? Any way we evaluate good and bad is completely unfounded.”

“There’s no way in hell we’re doing this. I mean...” Hayden’s mouth hangs open for a few seconds. “What if we don’t like what we find?”

“We can’t be scared about looking back at our game because some plays didn’t go to plan,” JP says. “Part of the experience is being able to truthfully see things for what they are. Otherwise, how can you get any peace?”

“Right, we need to review our game to get that peace,” Pete affirms. “I want to be able to recognize that I did the right things, that this was all worthwhile.”

Hayden starts to tremble and breathe heavier. “No! We’re not doing this!” He wipes away a tear instantly after it shoots out of his eye. “Don’t you see that we only got *one* poker game? There’s only *one* game, *one* chance to do everything to experience this to the very max. And by the time you realize what you did wrong or didn’t do at all, it’s too late.”

“Hayden, I know you’re upset –” Marcus attempts to console.

“I don’t want to hear it. Is this stack all I got to show for myself? I’ll do better this time, just please, please let me go back a few turns!”

“Come on, trooper, we talked about this. You know we can’t do that.”

Hayden rummages through his assortment of beer bottles and chugs the only one still half-full. He then succumbs to a mournful sob, the flood of long-held-back tears stinging his pale, aged face.

The men offer Hayden a few pats on the back. Sometimes it is hard to tell if a viewpoint is lacking much-needed perspective, or if it is merely being seen through the painful lens of reality.

Sidney radiates a warm smile. “I think the peace comes from knowing that it is OK to not have done all the right things.”

Marcus agrees. “Yeah. You have to accept the way the game went. Everything you learn about yourself, the other players, and the cards is learned from mistakes. You can’t expect to have all the answers from the start.”

“Marcus, doesn’t it trouble you that your screw-ups hold you back from your one chance at what could’ve been?” Hayden counters.

“Not when you realize that simply getting to play is an opportunity none of us are entitled to.”

Hayden’s weeping starts to simmer down.

“Honestly, there’s no way you can do some sorta ‘final review’ that gives you some ultimate peace with the game,” Derrick objects. “You usually either leave the table suddenly, or you get so drunk that your brain can’t think straight by the end. If it’s neither of those, you’re still probably judging the game more by the latest plays, not by the whole picture.”

“Yeah, the ending is overrated,” Niall replies. “I don’t know why people who think they can judge a poker game almost exclusively look at the end when all the other parts are equally real.”

“The both of you are right. This is why you cannot wait for the peace to fully come together at the end,” Sidney supplements. “You must maintain it on a moment-by-moment basis.”

“Then regardless of how much time we have left,” JP prods, “let’s each reflect as we keep playing one hand at a time. No pity, no judgment. Only listening.”

The men vocalize their agreement and deal another hand.

“I will do this first,” Sidney announces, taking a deep, shaky breath. “To this moment, I feel like the right strategy was held by me to stay content and in control rather than get carried away with a desire to pursue chips. It just worries me, perhaps folding each hand might have made the experience less meaningful. Then again, unlike you all, I believe there are infinitely more games ahead of me, so that gives me some comforting.”

The attentive men nod with compassion.

“I’ll get mine over with,” Hayden mumbles, beginning to slur his words. “I’m not a dummy, I knew I wasn’t going to play forever. So I thought, I thought I gotta make myself feel the best I could by having the most fun, and, and getting the most chips. But...I-I don’t know. Maybe there’s somethin’ more to this than chasing good old pleasure.”

Choosing to go next, Derrick laughs uncomfortably. “Man, I wish I didn’t see poker as a game outside of our control. The thing is, I can’t just decide to change what I truly believe in.” He goes quiet for a few seconds. “With that being said, I do wish I more gracefully gave up control to the game and appreciated more of the good stuff that happened.”

“Hmm. Derrick, it could be that the truth is somewhere between our views,” JP ponders. “I might’ve given myself too much credit for my wins and been a little ignorant of how much was out of my hands. At the same time, I’m glad I took responsibility for my moves and played with a strategy I decided for myself.”

The other players smile at the positivity of JP’s self-reflection.

Marcus clears his scratchy throat. “For me, I always found it most important to play poker in a fair, righteous way. I think I followed that well. I also think I played wisely and did a good job of fully accepting whatever happened outside of my control. I’ll admit, maybe I was too idealistic. I thought that whatever happened with the cards wasn’t inherently good or bad and simply came down to interpretation.”

Pete smiles. “I guess I’ll give my two cents, too. Honestly, sometimes I ask myself if I helped other players for their good or for my own. At the end of the day, though, I genuinely made a difference, and that gives me more fulfillment than anything else possibly could. The unfortunate part is that I lost every single one of my chips. I might have tried so hard to save everyone else, that I didn’t end up saving myself.”

As Pete concludes, the wind commences an utter onslaught against the building. Fragments of the barricade begin to topple, while the heat crawls its way through gaps in the unhinged door that feebly separates the break room from the beyond. The wall clock, unbothered, continues to tick.

Amid the now spastic flashes of light, JP speaks up. “Alright, you’re up, Niall. Before you go, though...” He begins to pant desperately. “I mean, I think this might be it.”

“It’s OK,” Marcus whispers, patting JP on the back. He manages a half-smile. “This is what happens. Just let go.”

JP nods delicately. “Alright. Go ahead, Niall, and then we’re...well, finished.”

Niall stares into the abyss of his emptied beer bottle. “I want to say that none of this matters,” he croaks, lifting his head slightly to peek at his partners. “And yet, this is all I have ever known to matter.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Toni Livakovic currently resides in New York City, where he works in the field of business. He is a graduate of Rutgers University – New Brunswick in his home state of New Jersey. Outside of writing, his passions include sports, playing guitar, traveling, and spending time with others.

“Cards and Humanity” is Toni’s debut work.



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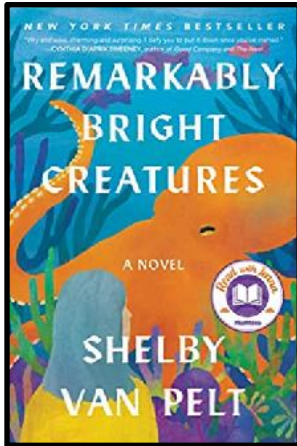
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BOOK REVIEW: Remarkably Bright Creatures

By Shelly Van Pelt

Book Review by Jill Hedgecock



Marcellus, who provides his own narrative in the novel, counts down his passing days based on his time living in captivity. He is painfully aware he has reached the end of his life span. The octopus has taken a special interest in Tova and plots a way to help the older woman understand something important about her son's death before he passes. Marcellus is incredibly intuitive and smart, is a crafty escape artist, and often provides comedic relief. Tova, a seventy-something widow, is only making the motions of living. She has never recovered from the unsolved mystery surrounding her only child's death. She "found something to do" as a night shift cleaning lady at the aquarium after her husband passed. When she is not working, Tova spends time with the "Knit-Wits, her long-term woman's group, but she feels left out as the women discuss their children and grandchildren. She has a special platonic friendship with the local grocer, Ethan, who is definitely interested in pursuing her. Cameron is struggling to find his way. His deadbeat mother pawned him off on her sister and he has never known his father's name. When he discovers an old photo of his mother with a real estate mogul living in Washington State, he jumps to the conclusion that the man is his father. His money woes lead him to travel across the country as he concocts a plan to extract back child support. Things do not pan out and Cameron must get a job to pay back a loan from his aunt. When he lands a job at the aquarium, he sets a new trajectory for his life that he could not have predicted.

“Remarkably Bright Creatures” is part mystery, part love story, and one hundred percent enjoyable. It instantly became one of my favorite reads of 2023. Fans of “A Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared” by Jonas Jonasson, “A Man Called Ove” by Fredrik Backman, and “The Art of Racing in the Rain” by Garth Stein should put this novel on their “must read” pile.

“Remarkably Bright Creatures” was an instant New York Times bestseller, a Read with Jenna Today Show Book Club Pick, and an Amazon Best Book of 2022. Chicago Tribune and USA Today named it a Best Book of the 2022 Summer.

When Shelby Van Pelt is not indulging in her flash-fiction addiction, she is wrangling her cats and children. “Remarkably Bright Creatures” is her debut novel. She was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, but now calls the suburbs of Chicago home. Find out more at www.shelbyvanpelt.com.

Buy ‘Remarkably Bright Creatures’ [HERE](#).



Jill Hedgecock is an award-winning and internationally-published author. She is a regular contributor to *The Diablo Gazette* and her freelance articles have been featured on the front cover multiple times. Her short stories, personal essays and nonfiction pieces have appeared in multiple anthologies, newspapers, and magazines. *Rhino in the Room*, her debut novel, received a New Apple Literary Indie Book Award. Her Doberman-inspired novels are sure to please dog lovers.

Jill served as the Program Coordinator Mount Diablo branch of the California Writers Club (CWC) for 8 years and was honored to receive the Distinguished Service Award for a second time in 2018. She has judged the Young Writer’s contest sponsored by CWC for over ten years and for the National Scholastic Art and Writing Awards for multiple years.

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A Firm Hand

A short story by Ariel Kay

“You can’t talk to customers like that. Yelling, giving ‘em attitude—never okay.”

Frank leans in toward Katie, aiming for a gentle but firm in his tone. She’s a good kid and usually a good employee too, so he doesn’t want to tear her a new one. It’s a learning opportunity for her, and, down the road, she’ll thank him for it.

The backroom is a mess of ripped plastic cases half-filled with Gatorade and Arizona Iced Tea taking up space on the floor. There’s not enough room on the metal shelves, full of the rest of the drink stock, huge cans of tomatoes, boxes full of pappardelle and linguini, and spaghetti. After he’s finished talking to Katie, he’s going to ask her to take a beat and clean this room up.

It’s not the most private place to talk. Still, the only alternatives are Frank’s makeshift office next to the produce section where he’s got a table, a chair, and a notepad full of gift basket orders—or the non-air-conditioned office space upstairs, but the assistant manager’s up there printing out the new schedules. So Frank pulled two metal folding chairs out into the break room-slash-stockroom to have this discussion in semi-private.

Katie sits ramrod straight, back pressed against her chair like it’s magnetized her spine. With her scowl and her store-mandated ponytail pulled too tight, she looks severe. It’s a damn shame because she’s got a great smile and usually wears her hair a little looser, friendlier.

“I know,” Katie says, staring down at her hands, balled into tight fists in her lap. “I didn’t mean to yell. Everything happened so fast.”

“I get that.” He reaches out to touch her arm, ignoring her as it stiffens beneath him. Poor girl must be having a bad day. Normally she’s one of his best at the store’s register—sassy and bubbly, ready with a thousand-watt smile.

She only just turned sixteen a couple of weeks back. He remembers because he’d asked Connor why she wasn’t working her usual Saturday shift. It was her birthday and she had special plans with her boyfriend, Connor said, raising his eyebrows so Frank got the picture. They were tight here, always in each other’s business.

“Thing is,” Frank starts, hand still resting on Katie’s arm. Her soft skin is cold to the touch, and he slides his hand up and down to create some warmth, to show her she’s okay. Katie’s eyes track the movement, but she otherwise remains still. “You gotta stay cool in situations like that. When you need backup, you page me to the front, and I got you covered. If I could hear you all the way back here, other customers could too. They want service with a smile, not service with screaming, you know what I’m saying?” He winks at her, but she doesn’t crack a smile.

“He was touching me,” Katie says, a defiant lift to her chin. There’s a dangerous spark in her eyes. Her breathing is fast, a quick rise and fall of her chest, but her tone is still even. “I couldn’t reach for the phone because he had his hand on my wrist. He kept saying my bracelet looked pretty or something. I don’t know. It freaked me out. I don’t know when I was supposed to reach for the phone.”

Frank nods. He’s got some sympathy for how hard it can be to keep cool in the moment. Hell, there have been plenty of times he’s imagined decking rude customers. Or on really bad days, throwing his apron and store keys on the ground and walking out on the job, saying screw this and heading straight for the driving range. Katie doesn’t even know the half of it, really. Make her manager for a day and then she’d probably feel really silly for overreacting today.

“We’ve all been there, Katie. Next time, you stay firm but polite,” he tells her. “Sir, please remove your hand. I need to finish ringing you up, and I have a question for my manager.”

There’s a blankness in her expression as he talks. Teenagers have this way of looking at you where you can never be sure if they’re taking in what you’re saying or not.

“You understand, sweetheart?” he presses, inclining his head towards her so he can catch her eye. “Next time, you stay calm, get someone else up front, and then we all win. We’re a small operation; we can’t afford to lose customers because they’re uncomfortable coming in.”

“Yeah, I understand.” She still looks upset, jaw clenched, blinking fast like she’s trying to hold back tears. At least she’s not raising her voice, knows enough not to take frustration out on her boss. “I should get back to work,” she says. “Conner’s up front by himself.”

Her eyes flick down to Frank’s hand before she stands. Frank’s hand hovers suspended briefly in mid-air; he hadn’t realized he’d left it resting on her arm.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ariel Kay is an American writer living in London with ADHD, her husband, and two cheeky rabbits. She enjoys exploring themes of love, longing, and loss in her stories. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Reflex Fiction, NUNUM, and Indie It Press.

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Hong Kong 2023: A Travel Adventure

Free Hong Kong? The Locals Might Disagree

by William Gensburger



1895年的中環
Central, 1895

From a swampy, mosquito-infested island, Hong Kong rapidly grew into one of the world's major cities. *Photo Courtesy Hong Kong Monetary Authority Information office display*



The Hong Kong waterfront, 2023.

If you asked a Hong Kong person, whether a local or a Gwai-Lo (foreign devil, as they used to be called,) you find that the subject of Hong Kong freedom is far from that described by the foreign media, especially in America. Despite the global headlines screaming out to 'Free Hong Kong,' most residents here consider the hype to be fodder for media ad sales, rather than reality.

The reality is that under Chinese rule since the British handover in 1997, with the agreed 'One country, two systems' rule for fifty years, Hong Kong has, for the most part, remained ordered, clean, and safe.

Sure there were riots and protests a few years back, the ones that made global news as students demanded democracy and were arrested, disbanded, and silenced, but locally most people above the age of the students will tell you that it was folly, unnecessary, and even that foreign actors had been paying money to the leaders of the protest movement. Whether true or not, remains unclear. The facts are simply that Hong Kong under British rule, with the harsh British penal system for offenders, and Hong Kong under Chinese rule, with an equally harsh punishment for offenders, just don't seem to be that far apart.



Street markets can be found down the many side streets and lanes throughout Wanchai.

Yes, the governing body of Hong Kong went from elected leadership to CCP-placed leadership and yes, China despises criticism and actively silences those who publicly do so, but compared to the current American system of censorship of anything critical to the Biden administration, or 'fact checkers' as they like to be called, the differences can be noted only by the state of each place.

Crime is low in Hong Kong. There are gangs, or triads, that occupy some parts, but generally, like a scene from a Batman movie, this happens in the depths of darkness and unnoticed unless you happen to live in those neighborhoods.

I was born in Hong Kong in the late 1950s, when the tallest buildings of this former swampy fishing village, were less than 12 floors high. Before that, in 1841 when Great Britain obtained Hong Kong along with four other trading ports as the

spoils from the Opium War with China, it was considered unimportant, a swampland riddled with mosquitos that many considered useless. Hong Kong, which translates to 'Fragrant Harbor,' had just that, a spectacular harbor insulated from the wrath of the seasonal typhoons, that would make it a world-famous port for exports, and later imports, for the rest of the world.

Hong Kong is divided into three parts: Hong Kong Island, just over 30 square miles, the Kowloon Peninsula on the other side of the harbor, just over 18 square miles, and the New Territories, 368 square miles, north of the Kowloon Ranges and south of the Sham Chun River, as well as the Outlying Islands, leading right to the border with China. Together over 7 million people live here, mostly in the former two locations, a dense urban sprawl crammed with endless high-rise buildings reaching for the sky and glowing like a geode at night, the lights producing a constant glow off the clouds.



The elderly are revered in Chinese culture.

“What is freedom?” a man identified only as Lau asked me. Middle-aged, born

in Hong Kong, he drives a Tesla Model 3 as an Uber driver, deftly weaving and braking in the insane Hong Kong traffic. It can only be described as organized chaos, with cars jutting in and out against each other with the trams, the cabs, the mini-vans, the busses, the ride-shares. I note that locals walk the same way they drive, almost on instinct, meandering around the others like an odd dance of sorts, generally avoiding collisions.

“No freedom in America,” Lau tells me. “Only pretend.” It turns out he has relatives in San Francisco, a popular destination for Chinese to move to, and he tells me what they share with him: dirty streets, endless homeless tents, and expensive cost of living. And taxes. No shortage of taxes. They are also afraid to speak out for fear of retribution.

“What do I have to protest about?” asks Evelyn Talbot, a former Shanghai resident who moved to Hong Kong in 1949. “It’s a life that’s been good to me. Hong Kong is an exciting, vibrant city with very little crime.”

“What about the poor people forced to live in cages?” a passenger next to me on the flight in asked. “It’s criminal.”

And while true that cage apartments exist, usually small apartments subdivided to allow many people to live there, which given the exorbitant rents, are hardly imprisonment; rather it allows the occupants to secure their few



Public transportation, such as the tramways are inexpensive and in abundance.

belongings against theft. The only other alternative for many would be living on the street, which for Hong Kong means sleeping in walkways that pass beneath busy streets, or in the city parks where areas are

designated for shelter. Unlike America, most city parks have many bathrooms that are always attended to and include showers. They close around 11 pm and open again at dawn.

Rent for a 600-square-foot apartment in the mid-levels goes for US\$15,000 per month. Companies bringing employees to work in Hong Kong need to pay for their housing or the whole reason for coming would not be economical.

The Chinese are also a family-oriented culture, often living together with aging parents who are revered, not discarded. Ancestor worship is also common, with rituals that include leaving food and paper goods for the deceased at the cemeteries.

The other class of people seldom mentioned in the foreign media are the many wealthy Chinese. Hong Kong has almost 130,000 millionaires 290 centi-millionaires (those with a net worth of more than US\$100 million) and 32 billionaires*. China has 43 billionaires, by comparison, ironic if you consider it a communist country.

Wealthy Chinese families often send their children (usually sons) to study in America and England at the best universities, making contacts and securing their financial futures.

You also find a high number of expensive automobiles. Rolls-Royce used to hold the title as the highest per capita vehicle. These days the cars include McLarens, Maserati, Lamborghini, and more, slightly amusing since it is almost



The iconic Star Ferries that continually cross the (formerly 1-mile) harbor, offer fantastic ocean views of the skyline.

impossible for high-speed driving in the cities—you'd have to go to the New Territories for any sort of speed. If you've watched the Academy Award-Winning film "Crazy Rich Asians" you'd understand that it wasn't just a movie.

You really do not need a car here. The license fees are high, the price of gasoline (petrol) much higher than what Americans recently experienced, and only those living up the island's mountainous region, mid-levels and above, The Peak, where the affluent live, might require the convenience, one they certainly could afford.

For everyone else, there is an abundance of public transportation, taxis, and Ubers. Trams that run from one end of the island to the other, always available without much waiting, cost US\$0.70 for an adult, and less for children and seniors. A taxi ride would cost under US\$10 from one side to The Peak, a fifteen to twenty-minute ride depending on traffic.



Hong Kong has a strong police presence, although not militaristic as is often portrayed. Most officers are helpful and polite.

The Airport Express, a luxury BART-like train from the airport on neighboring Lantau Island to Central Hong Kong, takes twenty-five minutes and costs around US\$15. The distance is akin to SFO to Concord.

If you had to describe the city in a word it would be 'efficiency.' An example of this is when the old Kai Tak Airport in Kowloon was closed one evening at midnight, and all computers were trucked to the new airport at Chek Lap Kok, for a 7 am start, the only malfunction was a

brief problem with the baggage system. To appreciate this you need to know that they built the massive 500-plus gate new airport after reclaiming the land from the water, built the tunnel for the Airport Express, and three large bridges joining Lantau to Hong Kong, including the necessary roadways in under 7 years.

By comparison, the eastern span of the Bay Bridge took almost 13 years of discussions and a ridiculous amount of time and money to complete and it still had problems. And while many Americans discount the manufacturing of buildings and the like as substandard and shoddy, the simple truth is that in its life only one skyscraper ever had an issue after a major typhoon eroded the land



Western influences are everywhere from business names to designer brands.



A street vendor offering newspapers, magazine, cigarettes and more located under a freeway overpass in Wanchai.

beneath it. One of over 653 skyscrapers over the last half-century.

Hong Kong is a part of communist China. The surveillance state, like everywhere in the world these days, is visible. Aside from the usual traffic cameras, if you look you can see many cameras. I have no doubt many eyes are also watching, but I did not catch any.

As a US Citizen, I wondered on his trip, after all the glaring news items about the CCP and Hong Kong, as well as a dire warning from the State Department not encouraging travel because, in their words, it was not uncommon for Americans to be detained upon exit, for no reason, and unaided by the US Government, if that might be a problem. It was not.

Upon arrival, you pass through camera facial recognition, and friendly immigration officers, almost no waiting as all counters are open, and are at baggage claim within ten minutes. It took longer to board the United Airlines flight in San Francisco which now uses camera facial scans, and passport scans that are slow and make the boarding process longer than usual.

I was not followed as I meandered the streets of my youth. There were many police officers, casually minding the flow of people, happy to talk to you, hardly the threatening image presented by the media. And even upon departure, an equally fast transition through immigration and into the departure hall. That we could adopt some of these efficient practices would be a blessing in America.

So what is Hong Kong to China and why is it allowed to remain? The answer can be seen in what happened in China since the 1997 handover of the colony. Across the border, Shenzhen popped up, virtually another Hong Kong. And elsewhere across China, similar hubs of commerce and manufacturing. Shanghai, the former colony that became stagnant after the 1949 Communist takeover has become a new, bustling city rivaling any in the world. In short, the Chinese are adept at taking success and duplicating it. They have to. With a



View from a high rise shopping center cafe overlooking older apartment blocks.

massive 1.8 plus billion people, they have to be an economic giant. But like most of the world in these post-Covid days, economies are having a tough time.

As a visitor to the place of my birth, many things stood out. In America we believe in a divine right to exist, a

special bond with the Creator. But when you stand in a city of seven million, and watch the bustle as though it were one giant ant colony, no matter how efficient, you are left with a feeling of insignificance, not unlike our global presence in an infinite universe. Relevance is a purpose and here that translates to being active, in business, and movement, peddling everything from newspapers and magazines, to food, to knock-off designer bags.

At Victoria Park in Causeway Bay (the Eastern side of the Island) groups of elderly gather at dawn to practice Tai-Chi, their slow, deliberate movements a cross between meditation and combat. Youth are always busy with sports, usually soccer, a huge favorite, or swimming in the large aquatic center at one end of the park. They are polite, respectful, and usually in uniform for school, traits sadly lacking in American schools. They are expected to work hard and play hard, not to let down their parents with poor grades. You do not have school shootings here. Weapons are not allowed.

“You do not hear about politics here,” Talbot says. “We have no blackouts, no strikes. Anything broken gets fixed quickly. Hong Kong runs well and Hong Kong people are law-abiding.”



Watching construction in HK is amazing. Workers climbing over scaffolding like this, without tethers or nets. This has always been common practice and why construction moves at breakneck speeds.



Hong Kong is a blend of old and new, although older Colonial buildings are rapidly fading away.

And that last part is true, especially post-SARS even before Covid-19. Over half the people still wear masks even though it is no longer required. It has been ingrained into them and they do not question it. The rates of the virus are as high as in the US, but nothing is closed, tourists abound again, and considering the close proximity to each other you would think that the chances of infection would be higher. But everywhere is cleaned, and sanitized, workers whose job is to ensure that floors are sanitized with large moving UV lights, handrails, tables, and doors. All spotless.

In restaurants, everything is clean, far cleaner than American standards. Everything that can shine, does shine. The staff is immaculate. They greet you personally, and attend to you. They make the experience pleasurable where otherwise it might not be.

So when I consider the question of freedom: what is freedom? Is it the ability to do whatever you want, when you want? Society cannot function without law and order. The illusion of democracy, especially the image of democracy that we are trained to believe by our media, is just that; an illusion.

Recently, in America, we see the disparity of conflict within our own system. Without being partisan, it is clear that we have a dual system of freedom in existence. Censorship under the guise of fact-checking across social media. Contradictory reporting in print and television media depends on the partisan position. The struggle for truth has been replaced by convenience; who can discern the truth anymore, part marketing hype and part illusion? Even deepfakes and AI have muddied the waters. You just never know, anymore.

There is no doubt that, for whatever reason, we are told who the enemy is. As someone with the opportunity to see many different sides, in person, and not just reported, my conclusion is that unless you witness something firsthand, you cannot know the truth.

Hong Kong is a good example of that. Most people mind their own business, live their lives as best they can, enjoy their family, with what little or however much they may have, and do not engage in theoretical posturing as seen

on television.

In that regard, Hong Kong may be more free than many of us realize.



Cafés are peppered throughout the colony offering a respite from the humidity outside.



Shopping malls rival the world's best, with ever increasing complexity, and all the designer store brands you could want.

For more information visit: <https://www.willflyforfood.net/first-timers-travel-guide-to-hong-kong/>

*Source: South China Morning Post, April 19, 2023 [<https://www.scmp.com/business/article/3217553/chinese-cities-add-millionaires-fastest-pace-globally-hong-kong-falls-behind-singapore>]

All photographs by William Gensburger, unless otherwise noted.

Righteous

A short story by Doug Canter

Standing behind the barn's pine planks, Diamond inhaled the Shenandoah Valley breeze searching for traces of cinnamon that might have escaped from his mother's haven. He devoured the last chunk of biscuit, egg, and sausage, and gazed at the handful of colonial red brick structures in the distance, wondering where his life would take him. At the Dunkin Donuts in Mud Creek, his girlfriend Julia gripped a backpack. Her blond-streaked, long, black hair hung loosely over her broad shoulders as she dialed her uncle.

Miles away, Simon looked out the window as a street cleaner noisily swept crushed fast-food remnants and empty beer cans up the wet Baltimore street. He sighed deeply as the telephone rang, wondering who could be calling so early. Simon pushed a copy of Maya Angelou's *The Complete Poetry* behind the picture of Julia riding her first bicycle and reached for the ringing cell phone on his desk. Simon listened to his niece's strained voice. He mumbled "ahem" on the occasions when she stopped to sniffle.

Julia kept repeating "nothing happened." Every time he heard her say "nothing happened" Simon squeezed the cell phone harder.

"I only had two drinks," she said, grabbing the bus tickets as they slid out of the kiosk.

Simon sipped cold coffee from a mug one of his students had given him and rubbed the top of his close-cut curly hair. "Why were you even there?" He asked, thinking back decades to his Saturday nights at Morgan State. Does your father know?"

"My father's too busy fighting with his new wife," Julia said. "I've got a go," she added abruptly and stepped outside the Dunkin Donuts to meet the approaching Greyhound. Simon swore under his breath.

Two pigeons swooped down and sat on the green fire hydrant in front of the Two Pier Church of Christ across Saint Paul Street. Simon held the silent phone for a full minute, unsure whether to call his sister before he placed it in his

pocket. It would only take him three and a half hours to travel to Brawn Tree in Saturday traffic.

The next day, Diamond and his parents drove to the white wooden Baptist church on the Brawn Tree campus for Sunday Mass. From a distance, Mud Rest didn't look like much, a faded one-street Appalachia town with a white clapboard coop grocery, poplar paneled old bar, fully-stocked gun shop, Ford truck, and tractor dealership, real estate lawyer's single-story bricked office, the historic Confederate-era Pigeon Inn, and a combined Shell station and convenience store near campus a mile outside of town. Most people drove fifteen miles on the interstate to Harrisonville to buy their weekly groceries. In its heyday, before they took the statue of General Marcus Eliot down, before the hat factory closed, before Diamond was even born, twenty thousand people lived in the town and surrounding area of Hollow County. Now, only eight hundred year-round residents lived there.

Jesus' body hung contorted on a stained pine cross fixed to the white ceiling behind the pulpit where the Reverend Gabriel J. Eliot, Jr. stood. "Which one among you, if you had one hundred sheep and you lost one wouldn't leave the ninety-nine sheep in an open pasture and search for that lost one?" Reverend Eliot's words rocketed throughout the sanctuary. "Which one?" He screamed passionately. Diamond glanced at the seated congregation behind him, huddled together shoulder to shoulder, each with a solemn façade of allegiance to the voice of God. "Learn to do good; relieve the oppressed, plead for the widow." The gray heads in the church nodded, almost in unison. Diamond's father ended his sermon with a personal story about Diamond and his sister, about how he had to resist the temptation of trying to restrain their independence as they each grew. Diamond tapped his scuffed white sneakers and smoothed the tail of his long shaggy blond hair back over his collar. He hated it when his father told stories about him in church.

As Diamond and his mother sauntered up the center aisle towards the church door, Mr. Washington's plea for help floated through his mind. Yesterday had been unseasonably hot. Diamond's skinny six-foot-tall body rocked lightly in his granddaddy's oak rocker on the front porch as he sipped coffee. He remembered closing his eyes to pull in a strong waft of honeysuckle in the October air when he had heard a rumble on the stone driveway. Then, a tall and unnerving Black stranger walked up the porch steps uninvited. Diamond had immediately called the maid and instructed her to dial the sheriff. Diamond now saw the same man in the parking lot. Diamond instinctively lifted his red cap and smoothed his hair back before spitting reflexively on the lawn.

“God bless you, Reverend,” a plump matronly parishioner said to Reverend Eliot outside the church. Diamond stood silently next to his mother. He heard an unusual collective whispering like a thousand humming bees hovering near the parking lot. An angry glare poked thin rays through a mist behind a large poplar tree as the burning cast gray ghost-like shadows that looked like large dangling arms. Standing on a grassy island surrounded by pink and white wildflowers, Washington searched his pack for water and poured a quarter cup of the warm liquid over his sweaty scalp as he strode across the driveway and lawn in front of the church and through the buzzing to where Diamond’s father stood.

“Reverend Eliot,” Diamond’s father said with an outstretched arm, standing in the oversized shadow of Washington’s menacing figure.

Diamond had always been amazed at his father’s ability to maintain a smile and welcoming demeanor as he shook the many hands who floated out of church on Sunday mornings. “Have we met?” Reverend Eliot asked.

Washington motioned no. Beads of sweat danced on his brow. “Simon Washington,” he said. “I’m here to ask for help.” Diamond tried to lean closer to hear the rest of the conversation. Reverend Eliot was a welcoming and loving man. His smile never waned, but Diamond could tell that even his father was becoming perturbed by the way the curl of the edges of his lips remained fixed as if pinned to the middle of his cheeks.

“The sheriff’s deputy directing traffic at the intersection near the church parking lot had the presence of mind to take the large angry Black man into custody,” Diamond’s mother gossiped to a friend on the phone as they drove home. Diamond had summoned the deputy at his mother’s instruction. He didn’t hear enough of the conversation to understand Mr. Washington’s problem. Somebody was missing. That is all he heard before his father dispatched him to retrieve their golden retriever from the church office. In the end, the stranger had just appeared to be an angry Black man, but something about Washington’s lonely eyes from their first meeting haunted Diamond, and he thought of his father’s sermon.

Once back home, Diamond plodded outside to smoke a Marlboro in the moving afternoon shadows near the barn tortured like a man on fire. He answered the ringing phone as he quashed a lit match with a short waiving motion.

“The clinic is closed,” Julia said, through sobs. Her voice sounded low and vulnerable, just like the day he had met her at the gas station. The sunlight of their first kisses had been a strange seed. He had felt her warmth from those

gentle wet expressions even when they had stood in the cold shadows of the flowering poplar trees behind the barn when she had seemed so perfect.

“I thought you hadn’t decided. I thought you were going to wait to talk,” he said, angrily. An icy ache tore a piece of his insides. He had told Julia he would marry her even though he had not yet introduced Julia to his parents. After years of listening to his father’s sermons, Diamond knew his Pa and Ma would help him figure out how to care for his child.

Julia sniffled.

Diamond thought back to Washington’s appearance outside the church not understanding the foreboding he felt. But the words of his father’s recent sermons and the softness of Julia’s reassuring voice, even in the face of so much uncertainty, punctured his doubts.

“I need to see you,” Julia implored. “I need to find a place where I can make this go away safely.”

“God dammit, Julia. This is a baby you’re talkin about, a little precious person.” He really had no idea what caring for an infant would entail. It was as if his mind was filled with plastic images from his mother’s Christian Family Action League. He elicited Julia’s promise not to do anything until they spoke again. She had no car and only a little over \$200. He would never admit it aloud, but he relished having Julia dependent on him. As he thought of Julia waiting for him at his family’s hunting cabin, his mind touched the warm, lavender-scented crease below her shoulders.

In the shadow of a large poplar the next day, the acrid smoke from Diamond’s cigarette overpowered the scent of magnolia. Diamond heard the memory of Mr. Washington’s urgent plea in the light breeze, and he wondered if his Pa would feel as concerned if Diamond went missing. But the pounding of Reverend Eliot’s cane from inside the house intruded, interrupting the peacefulness of the meadow. “Diamond...,” his Pa screamed from the sun-draped porch, his devoted retriever licking his outstretched hand. “Get your ass out back and feed Millie.

Julia called her Uncle Simon who sat in a rocker outside the Pigeon Inn. He had slept all morning after his release from the county jail. He looked at a recent photo of Julia on his phone. Simon’s sister had married and had children when she was in high school. Eventually, her husband’s swearing, “fuck you” and “fuck that,” in the presence of Julia and her younger brother had gotten so abusive that Julia’s mother had asked Simon and his wife to take care of Julia one summer. One summer then became ten years. He answered his phone on the second ring. A slight drizzle began to fall. Beholding the grassy and wooded bucolic

Shenandoah Mountains, he savored the aftertaste of the local strawberry jam from lunch as he told Julia about his arrest. Simon started to confide that he felt out of place in Mud Rest, but his niece's muffled crying stopped him.

"I don't know what to do, Uncle Simon."

Simon waited.

"I blacked out."

"You only had two drinks..."

"I did. But I blacked out. I remember the red hallway carpet of the fraternity spinning around as I tried to will myself to the front door. But it was like my feet were glued to the floor."

"Did anyone hurt you?"

He heard her sobbing. "Someone with a gentle male voice held my arm to keep me from falling. I leaned..."

"It's going to be okay. Tell me everything." He waited for her to stop crying.

"I leaned on his shoulder. He said something about going upstairs. I shook my head. I am almost positive I shook my head."

"Did you say anything?"

"I started crying when someone lifted my legs up in the air..." Julia said. She wiped flowing tears from her cheeks.

"Oh, God," Simon uttered softly.

"You have got to report this to the police," Simon said with exasperation.

Diamond sat on a tire outside the Shell station smoking a cigarette the next day. The Monday morning customers kept asking him about the "Black family" that "staged the college girl's disappearance." Several Twitter posts had fed the fury with images of Julia and her parents. Julia's light brown skin gave her a tanned appearance, but the image of her and her mother, a dark Black woman with a pearly smile, stunned him. He knew where Julia was staying. He knew Julia had not orchestrated her disappearance. But he was shocked to learn that Washington's arrest and the hysterical response on social media involved his girlfriend.

Diamond drove his truck for two and a half hours to his parent's cabin. After a few minutes of small talk, they settled in front of the gas fireplace. A brown and orange scarf wrapped around Julia's head. Her hair hung tied in a ponytail. She wore a loose black T-shirt that revealed her tattoos. The small turquoise stone necklace Simon had given her pressed against her throat. Diamond touched her course hair gently. He had offered to marry Julia, but she had college and career plans. "How would you support a baby?" She asked, crossing one of her jean-covered legs. As they talked, he took note of her facial features.

“Where, Diamond?” She repeated, loudly, interrupting his thoughts.

Diamond bowed his head in confusion, unable to think. He never had been able to keep up with Julia. Not really. He loved her recall of things, her memory, her thoughts. The fact that she seemed to love him had been enough, at least until now.

“We should talk with my father,” Diamond said flatly.

“The father I have never met. The father you have never asked me to meet.”

Diamond nodded, looking at his sneakers. It was his only option. He wanted the baby, and he was afraid of losing Julia.

“Okay,” Julia said hesitantly, out of choices as well, but not convinced. “There’s something that I...,” she started to say, but Diamond, so preoccupied with his own fears, spoke over her.

“We’ll leave as early as possible tomorrow morning.” He wondered if she knew about the outcry on social media.

“Let’s make sure we have all our options when we speak with you Father.” She patted her stomach. “Let’s make a list of places outside of Virginia where I can get a safe abortion.” She squinted her face in a way that seemed to say this is your fault.

After returning to campus, Julia reported her Friday night rape to the police and to the school administration. The police identified the four boys involved, all of whom lived at the Phi Psi fraternity house. But the police said they did not have enough evidence to prosecute, and they turned the results of their investigation over to the school. The school initiated its own investigation. The incident was the fourth time in three years that a female coed at Brawn Tree had reported rape or sexual harassment of some kind at the Phi Psi house. But even after the overwhelming proof from both investigations and notwithstanding the repeat nature of the accusations over Phi Psi parties, the school did nothing. Rumors circulated that one of the identified fraternity boys was the son of a wealthy alumnus who had contributed a large sum of money to the school. The comments on social media were split. Some blamed Julia for drinking too much. Others pointed out that not many freshmen women, or even men for that matter, had experience monitoring their consumption of grain alcohol punch. Julia didn’t really care about the anonymous community’s views as long as she could find a place to obtain a safe abortion.

“It’s been a hell of a week,” Simon said to his wife as he, Lydia, and Julia followed the hostess. They arrived first. Photos of eastern gray foxes adorned the light pine walls. Two white birch logs burned red and yellow in the hearth on the

room's north side. Julia had not yet told Uncle Simon and Aunt Lydia that she was pregnant. They had been so distraught about the Phi Psi assault and dealings with the local police, and she had been preoccupied with searching for safe options that she hadn't been able to find the strength. Diamond and his parents arrived ten minutes later.

Reverend and Mrs. Eliot smiled grimly as they spotted Washington and his wife seated at the center table. Julia wore tight-washed-out jeans and a white linen top. Diamond's initial grin of genuine delight at the sight of Julia disappeared abruptly when he recognized Washington. Diamond felt uncomfortable sitting in the dining room with Julia's uncle and aunt but tried to hide it. His father could not. Diamond's Pa clenched his teeth as he reached to shake Simon's large Black hand, which exacerbated Diamond's anxiety.

"Nice to meet you again," Julia's uncle said evenly as he squeezed Reverend Eliot's outstretched fingers.

Glancing down after releasing his grip, Reverend Eliot loudly cleared his throat and took his seat before the ladies. He sat at the head of the table across from Diamond's Ma. Her white print dress patterned with red orchards seemed to hold up her thin body and made her face seem even more pale than usual. She smiled weakly across the table at Diamond and Julia as Reverend Eliot said something about God's grace. Diamond's red MAGA hat pushed back his shaggy hair. He and Julia sat across from her Uncle Simon and his wife, facing the picture window and the thick, dark Virginia woods behind the inn, which stood as monuments of past terror, markers of unpaid debts.

"Red wine or whiskey?" Reverend Eliot asked the waitress. Diamond felt nervous. He had always relied on his father to lead the way for him. But watching his father now, a deep sense of insecurity swept over him.

"Just water for me," Simon said. Julia's uncle dressed like an accountant with wire-rimmed glasses and a white starched shirt. He didn't possess the appearance of any Black man Diamond had ever met. The only Black men that Diamond had ever known were Mr. Carver, the seventy-year-old church maintenance man, and Mr. Lee, the groundskeeper at the Eliot farm. A flash of guilt, like when you owe someone money but rationalize it is not important, rose and disappeared instantaneously within Diamond.

"I'll take a glass of the local white chardonnay, Aunt Lydia said.

"So dear," how do you feel being back on campus?" Diamond's Ma asked Julia.

Julia frowned as she faced her uncle and aunt.

"The police have not been too helpful," Simon said.

Reverend Eliot's consummate fake smile evaporated.

"I apologize for that," Diamond's Ma said. "They mistook you for one of those city protesters." Diamond watched Washington's expression closely.

Simon squinted and frowned. "I was referring to their handling of the investigation."

Reverend Eliot, his wife, and Diamond sat questioningly. Diamond was not sure what Julia's uncle was talking about. But years of poor school performance and low teacher expectations had taught Diamond not to search for answers to things he didn't understand.

As the conversation continued, Diamond fidgeted with his top button. He was impressed with Julia's uncle. He spoke just like the college professors at the local Hollow County Community College, and, as the talk turned to football, he seemed to exhibit a good sense of humor. "Julia and I have an announcement," Diamond eventually inserted.

"Good timing," the Reverend said as the drinks arrived.

Diamond noticed Julia's grimace and paused, waiting for reassurance. Diamond had convinced himself that he loved Julia, and it felt good.

"Diamond, not now," Julia said angrily.

"Mr. Washington," Diamond continued. "I'd like your permission to marry your niece."

Reverend Eliot choked on a piece of bread and coughed violently.

Simon exhaled deeply, looking skeptical. "Well, young man...I'm not Julia's father."

"Diamond," Julia said sternly with a quick shake of her head.

Like a truck traveling down a hill without breaks, Diamond pressed forward. His desire to be smarter and more successful and the thought that he could obtain those attributes through Julia was the magnet that pulled him to her. "I love her sir and will take care of her and the baby." Diamond's glance quickly captured his parents' reactions.

"Baby," Simon, Lydia, and Diamond's parents repeated loudly almost in unison.

Salty tears streaked down Julia's cheeks. Simon reached over and put his hand over hers. "What's this?" He asked.

Reverend Eliot frowned at his son and spoke coldly. "When the hell were you going to tell us about this?"

Diamond squirmed. "I kept trying, but there never seemed to be the right time. Besides, I knew you and Ma would welcome Julia," Diamond said haltingly with the recent discovery of Julia's race still on his mind. Searching his father's

cold gray eyes for reassurance now, Diamond wondered how he could have misjudged the situation so wildly. His father's sermons had lulled him into a false sense of grace. But now Diamond saw the twitch in his father's right eye and tightly pressed lips as his Pa sat next to Julia's uncle.

"Another whiskey," Reverend Eliot barked as the waitress placed a plate with herb-roasted chicken and fresh beans in front of Lydia.

"I'm impressed young man, impressed you want to marry Julia and take care of the responsibility of a child in light of the circumstances."

"Yes, mixed marriages can be difficult," Diamond's father said gruffly. Diamond recognized the anguish on Mr. Washington's face. It was the same look he had seen on his grandfather's face when the bank had foreclosed on his farm.

Simon noisily sucked a ball of saliva from the back of his mouth and then swallowed it with a deep and controlled breath.

"Babies are a blessing," Diamond's Ma said. Reverend Eliot nodded at his wife as he grabbed a fork and knife to attack the chunk of rare roast that the waitress had placed in front of him.

Wet drops trickled silently down Julia's smooth tan-colored skin. Diamond knew he could still love her.

"Julia, is this what you want?" Simon asked. He smiled and spoke softly, but his inflections revealed skepticism.

As if in a trance, Julia said ever so softly, "I'm not even sure it's yours, Diamond."

Diamond sat motionless with a contorted grimace.

"Does he know what happened at Phi Psi?" Simon asked his niece.

She motioned no, and Diamond questioned her. She told Diamond the whole story starting with his call to her canceling their Friday night date the day of the Phi Psi party.

Diamond felt like a heavy weight pressed against his lungs. He noticed that his father's twitch had subsided.

"How could I marry you now?" Diamond blurted out.

Julia glared at him. "You were the one who made me feel like a criminal when I talked about an abortion." You were the one who said babies are precious and that you would take care of us forever, no matter what." Her voice cut like jagged glass.

Diamond shook his head in disbelief. He rubbed the stubble of facial hair on his chin. She just didn't get it, he thought. She was a vase with clearly exposed cracks. Her skin seemed blacker now than he ever noticed before.

Simon noticed Julia’s anguished glare. She breathed loudly through flaring nostrils. Droplets of pain danced in her deep brown eyes, and it angered Diamond. Reverend Eliot scanned the room for their waitress. While the Reverend occupied himself with the bill, Simon turned toward his niece and whispered softly, “Sweet girl, for all the darkness outside, an eternal light illuminates somewhere, inside you, inside us all, even in the ghostly low moonlight, guiding us quietly towards places unknown to you, to me, but known – I am sure – to some higher force of destiny and justice.” Then, he turned to Diamond and his parents and slammed the bottom of his fork on the white tablecloth. “I suggest you leave now before I do something I’ll regret.”

Reverend Eliot abruptly stopped chewing his meat. He quickly turned away from Simon and Diamond and summoned the retreating waitress. “What is this?” Reverend Eliot asked evenly with a hint of condescension, pointing to his unpaid bill. Diamond sighed, scared of Washington’s fury, uncertain of his own destiny, relieved of the heavy burden of loving Julia, and disgusted at how much like his father he had become.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Doug Canter is a Maryland-based writer and English teacher. His writing has appeared in *Adelaide Magazine*, *Hedge Apple Magazine*, *Evansville Review*, *Talking Writing*, *20-Something Magazine*, *Public Utilities Fortnightly*, and *Solstice Magazine’s* Feature Blog, among others, as well as on the websites of the American Bar Association, Discovery Channel Tech, and Danya Institute. When he is not teaching or writing, Doug is walking the local trails on the C&O Canal near the Potomac River or riding his motorcycle. In

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Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny

Movie Review by William Gensburger



The final installment of action-archaeologist, Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) directed by James Mangold (Wolverine), not Steven Spielberg, offers a suitable close to the film series that has run from Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1984), Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (1989), which featured the late Sean Connery as Dr. Henry Jones, Indie's father, along with the classic line "We named the dog Indiana." Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of Crystal Skulls (2008), which introduced a son, Mutt (Shia LaBeouf)

'Dial of Destiny,' which could have been renamed 'Victim of Time,' offers old Indiana, circa 1960s, in one final adventure. And while Harrison Ford is in good shape for his 81 years, the aging credibility of his action movies, especially Indiana Jones, is not lost on the audience.

Young Indy is gone. Much time has passed through all his adventures. The prestigious university where he taught history between adventures has left him and he is now on his final days as history professor at a less-than-stellar college, all too happy to send him into retirement.

We learn that he has experienced loss since the last film, that Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen) whom he married, is no longer with him and the days are without purpose.

Into his life comes a young woman on a quest to find the mythological Dial of Destiny created by Archimedes, a device that can affect time, that the inventor split into two to keep safe from evil.

And the evil, once again, are the Nazis, beginning in the 1940s with the main baddie played by Mads Mikkelsen whose plans stretch to the present and a chance to fulfill the Nazi dream.

And this is where the film becomes unique as we are shown a de-aged Indiana Jones, created by AI and some movie magic. It is Harrison Ford, as his voice proves, but the young face of a fresh Han Solo/Indiana Jones is the result of AI taking all videos of him from that period and creating a living face. And it's good, realistic, not like the poorer CGI we've seen some years back with Star Wars' recreated Leia or Grand Moff Tarkin.

The young woman, Helena Shaw (Phoebe Waller-Bridge) is related to Indie's past, as we learn, although she comes with loads of baggage, more a treasure hunter trying to pay off a debt, than an archaeologist, and certainly disinterested in her Godfather; he's old and has nothing to teach her.

And yet, as the film unfolds, he has much to teach her. Not only is his knowledge voluminous, but all practical skills acquired from a life of living allow him to survive the onslaught as they are forced to find the remaining half of the Dial of Destiny, and discover its secrets before the Nazis.

John Rhys-Davis also returns as Sallah, the loyal friend throughout the films.

There have been many critics of this film. I am not one of them. This is a film about aging, losing the spotlight that once enveloped you. It is about losing people you loved and trying to find relevance in the final years of your life. All that was important in youth turns out to be less so, certainly temporal.

The real values that are left, Indiana Jones discovers, and in the process, changes Helena Shaw from a selfish and impetuous imposter to a woman with a deeper character and understanding of the real gift she has received; her relationship with Indiana Jones.

The ending of the film is poignant, offering hope for the final years of this weatherbeaten man.

And as the camera pulls back we are given one final tease in a true iconic manner. *He's old, but he ain't dead yet, kid!*

Cast: Harrison Ford, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Antonio Banderas, John Rhys-Davies, Shaunette Renee Wilson, Thomas Kretschmann, Toby Jones, Boyd Holbrook, Olivier Richters, Ethann Isidore, Mads Mikkelsen

Beneath It All

A short story by Lee Conrad

Killian, Ohio. August 1961:

The Murray brothers, Phil and Gary, bolted out the screen door of their ranch-style suburban home on the outskirts of Killian, Ohio, looking for adventure. The early afternoon was moist and oppressive after days of heavy rain and storms. They dressed alike: white cotton pullovers with blue stripes, shorts, and Keds sneakers.

“Make sure you are home by supper,” their mom yelled. “Philip, do you have your watch?”

“Yes, Mom,” he said as he held his arm up, the Mickey Mouse watch tight around his wrist as they raced out of the backyard towards the meadow.

Phil, fifteen and the older of the two by one year, taunted his younger sibling.

“Hurry up. I’ll beat you to the fort and won’t let you in.”

Gary, skinnier and less athletic, struggled to keep up.

“No fair, Phil,” he whined.

Phil shrugged his shoulders and stopped.

“I won’t leave you behind. Nobody should ever be left behind.”

The brothers strolled out of their neighborhood past an old collapsed barn into a lush meadow, disturbing red-wing blackbirds as they made their way alongside a wide creek. The creek and its banks were scoured by the rain. Tumbled rock and debris jammed the once-flowing waters.

An old dirt logging road ran parallel to it and up into the forest, where their fort, a haphazard bundle of cut limbs and branches, nestled in a grove of pine.

They paused after a half-hour of climbing and looked down at their neighborhood of matchbox houses all lined up in rows and semi-circles. The subdivision, built after the war, grew as returning GIs came home looking for work in the city of Killian. New businesses sprung up as some of the older ones faded away. Their parents would talk about how tough it was during the Depression, how people couldn’t find jobs, and that there was trouble in some of

the local factories. The boys thought that was ancient history. All they cared about was the here and now.

“Phil, I gotta pee.”

“Geez, Gary. Didn’t I tell you to go before we left?”

Gary stepped off the logging road and walked to a large pine tree that had been uprooted from the rain and the storm. As he did his business, his eyes settled on the earth that the fallen tree’s roots had disturbed.

“Phil! Come quick!”

Phil came running over to his brother.

“What’s wrong!”

“Look, Phil,” as the boy pointed to the upturned earth and the half-buried skull.

They sprinted home, slammed through the screen door, and jabbered at the same time. Their mother, trying to make sense of what they were saying, stopped them in mid-sentence.

“One at a time, boys; now tell me what you are all excited about.”

Again, they talked over each other.

She held her hand up, the universal signal to shut up.

“Philip, suppose you tell me what is going on.”

Gary dejected at not being called on, sulked and turned away.

Phil pulled his brother back.

“We found a skull in the woods on the way to the fort.”

“What kind of skull?” said their mother, thinking a deer or a bear skull.

“A human skull, Mom,” said Gary, breaking in.

The boys were so intense that their mom thought it would be prudent to call the county sheriff.

“Well, I don’t know, Sheriff Deighton. They are fairly sure of what they saw. Yes, we will be here.”

After a half-hour, Sheriff Deighton arrived at the Murray’s house. Mrs. Murray welcomed him into the living room, where the boys told him what they saw.

“Are you sure it was human?” he asked.

“I took biology. I’m sure,” said Phil.

“Boys, I need you to take me to where you found this skull.”

The sheriff turned to Mrs. Murray.

“It could be an Indian skull. Lots of tribes around here hunted in those woods. But I still need to check it out. Let’s go, boys.”

Sheriff Deighton went to his patrol car, pulled out some tools and a flashlight, and started the long hike through the meadow and up the logging trail.

When they got to the spot, the boys showed him where the skull protruded from the ground.

“Stay back, boys, as I look this over. Might be a crime scene, might not.”

The sheriff carefully used a small pickaxe and a brush to clear away soil from the skull that was damaged, like it was struck. He soon found it was attached to a spinal cord and ribcages. The remains didn't look that old to him. As he continued, the remnants of cloth and a metal button lodged in the left rib cage were revealed, and he knew this wasn't an Indian warrior who lay here.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. July 1937

Pittsburgh was in the throes of the Depression as Billy Hart walked to the office of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee, or SWOC, on Grant Street. He passed a soup line that stretched for blocks. The people, beaten down and haggard, shuffled along. Some had been in and out of work as companies pitted workers against each other to drive wages down. President Roosevelt had promised much with his New Deal, but people were still out of work and hungry. Many were desperate and anger boiled out in protests and riots. A strike wave had broken out as industries that hadn't shut down were fighting off union organizing as workers complained of speed-ups, arbitrary firings, stagnant wages, and long working hours. Cops and company goons battled workers, and casualties mounted on both sides. In 1937, SWOC called a strike at the steel companies and 67,000 workers hit the picket lines. The steel companies escalated their war on the union and fought tooth and nail to keep their factories union free. And if it meant killing people, so be it.

Billy came out of one of those fights and the union, seeing potential in the twenty-three-year-old, hired him as an organizer.

The crowded office on the sixth floor offered no respite from the heat. Billy went in and over to his boss, organizing director Hal Johnson. Hal had come into SWOC after years of experience on picket lines and union fights, first in the Industrial Workers of the World before the government smashed them during the Great War, and then with the American Federation of Labor. He joined the fledgling Congress of Industrial Unions in 1935, eager to organize the Steel companies. He had a husky build with short blonde hair and a vivid scar on his forehead.

“Morning, Billy. Have a seat. Got an assignment for you.”

“Hope it's somewhere cool, Hal,” he said with a grin.

“Don’t count on it. But anyhow, we’re sending you to Killian, Ohio, about three hours by train. We got a letter from a guy who says their forge is ripe for organizing. We need you to check it out and see if there are people willing to step up to the plate and form a committee. Gets us a rundown on the company and who the people are that might oppose us. As usual, keep a low profile until you get the lay of the land. You leave tomorrow. Here’s your train ticket and his address. I registered you at the Killian Hotel as a salesman. We sent a plain letter to your contact that you would visit him tomorrow night.”

“I was hoping I could start working on the Steel company campaigns,” Billy said dejectedly.

“You will son, we need you to get a feel for things on your own with these smaller campaigns. And Billy, these shops are just as important. We need to organize everything that touches the industry.”

“Got it. How long do you want me there?”

“Just stay overnight and if it looks promising, we will send you back.” Hal stood up and shook Billy’s hand. “And be careful, you know it’s open season on unions and organizers.”

Forest and farmland changed to buildings as Billy looked through the train window. The conductor walked down the aisle and announced they were pulling into Killian. Suitcase in hand, he left the train, walked through the small brick station, and onto Main Street in Killian. A newsboy in raggedy cut-off pants, a grey cotton shirt, and his cap at an angle was hawking his paper.

Billy called him over.

“Hey, boy. Where is the Killian Hotel?”

“You want a tour guide, it’ll cost you a dime, mister.”

“Smart little bugger, ain’t ya? OK, here is a dime for the directions and a nickel for the paper.”

The boy took the fifteen cents, handed him the Killian Herald, and started to run off.

“Hey, where’s the hotel?”

The kid pointed down the street to a large modest building with a sign, Killian Hotel.

“Right there, mister, you can’t miss it unless you’re blind.”

The newsboy laughed, pocketed his coins, and ran off.

Billy walked down Main Street to the hotel. A few businesses were closed permanently, but it didn’t look as bad as other cities. The radio store, with its Zenith and RCA radios in the front showcase, had more people looking in

through the large window than buying. There was a church with a soup kitchen advertised, but no long line had formed, just a handful of people who looked like they could use a meal or two.

The Killian Hotel had seen better days and the lobby, while clean, was empty.

The desk clerk welcomed him.

“Yes sir, can I help you?”

“I have a reservation. The name is William Hart.”

“Yes, we have it right here. A salesman, hmm. You only have one suitcase? No wares?”

Thinking quickly Billy said, “I have our catalog and order forms in my suitcase.”

“Very well Mr. Hart. Take the stairs to room 301. Have a pleasant stay.”

As Billy walked away the desk clerk put a checkmark next to Billy’s name and picked up the phone.

That night after dinner in the hotel, Billy took his now empty suitcase from his room, walked through the lobby, and into the early night. The directions to his contact’s house in Killian were clear and specific. Billy walked down Main Street, past the Post Office, down Conklin Street to Jackson and at number 21 he would find Calvin Kirby. Billy would announce himself as a salesman from Pittsburg and Kirby would let him in.

Calvin Kirby greeted Billy with a hearty “Yes, I would like to see what you have in your catalog. Come on in.”

Calvin showed Billy into the living room. It reminded him of his parent’s house with well-worn sofas and chairs, and a Philco tombstone radio on a stand.

“Would you like some lemonade, Mr. Hart?”

“That would be fine. And call me Billy.”

“Lizzy,” he called out. “Can you bring us a few lemonades?”

A young girl of about fourteen with straw-colored hair and violet-blue eyes walked out of the kitchen, into the room, and placed the drinks near the men.

“Thank you, honey.”

She went over to a chair where a book lay and read, ignoring the adults.

“Is your wife at home, Mr. Kirby?”

“No, Billy. She passed a few years ago. Tuberculosis.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Kirby.”

Calvin nodded his head.

Lizzy looked up from her book to Billy and then back down. She couldn’t help but notice his chestnut-colored eyes, his light brown wavy hair, and his fine,

smooth face, seemingly untouched by hardship. But in these times, she knew people hid that. Her father did.

“So, Calvin, we got your letter at the union office. What can you tell me about the situation here? Do many workers at the plant feel the same way you do?”

“This is a company town, Billy. The same family has run the Roberts Forging Company for fifty years. The original owner, Nathaniel Roberts, passed away ten years ago, and his son, James, took control. He is nothing like his father. James has contempt for the workers. Thinks we are his slaves. When we speak up, he calls us a bunch of reds and commies. The mayor and the newspaper publisher are good friends of Roberts, and a cousin, Lawrence Stone, is the police chief. Roberts even owns the hotels.”

“And your co-workers? How many?”

“There’s a little over a hundred, not counting foreman and supervisors. A lot of them are for a union, but they are scared. Sure, Roosevelt says we have a right to organize, but he ain’t here in Killian, and Killian is run by the Roberts family, and they got muscle. All we want, Billy, is to be treated fairly and respected. We want a union and a contract.” Calvin leaned into Billy. “I can barely hang onto this place with the wages they give me,” he whispered.

Billy looked over at Lizzy, still reading and hopefully unaware of her father’s troubles. “We got muscle too, Calvin. With all the workers sticking together, we can win you a union and a contract. Maybe even organize the other places here, too. Make it a union town.”

Calvin Kirby looked into Billy’s eyes and saw confidence.

“Ok, Billy. What do you need me to do?”

“I need a list of workers who are for a union. Start small and only contact people you trust. We don’t want Roberts getting wind of any union activity until we are ready. A small meeting someplace outside of town where there are no prying eyes and then see where we go.”

“I can do that. There is a diner on the outskirts of town that caters to truck drivers. We can meet there.”

“Alright. I will report back to the union and will be back in touch. Where is the factory?”

Calvin gave Billy the directions.

Billy stood up to leave, shook Calvin’s hand, and turned to Lizzy.

“Goodbye, Lizzy. Thank you for the lemonade.”

Lizzy smiled; her heart fluttered.

“You’re welcome, Mr. Hart.”

Calvin Kirby closed the door as Billy left.

“Isn’t he gorgeous, father?”

“Hush, girl. He is twice your age. Go back to your book.”

Billy went back to the hotel, through the lobby, and to the stairs to his floor. A man in a chair by a large potted palm tree peered over his newspaper and watched Billy amble by.

Early the next morning, Billy walked to where Roberts Forge was located. Chimneys bellowed smoke from the coal-fired furnaces. He watched the workers stream in under the watchful eyes of the guards that stood near two main entrances. Billy made a mental note of their positions and locations where union leaflets could be distributed to the men as they went in.

Having talked to Kirby and mapped out the location of the factory, he returned to the hotel and checked out, taking the noon train back to Pittsburgh.

The desk clerk noted his departure.

Once back in Pittsburgh, Billy reported back to the union office and Hal Johnson.

“So how did it go in Killian?”

Billy gave him a rundown on his meeting, the layout of the forge, who the movers and shakers were, and the instructions he gave Kirby.

“Right, Billy. I’ll recommend sending you back in two weeks. Let’s give Kirby some time to get things together. If it doesn’t look like we can do anything, tell Kirby we will still keep in contact with him.”

Over the next two weeks, Billy helped other organizers in the region with house calls to prospective union supporters and handed out flyers at various sites a drive was going on. While this kept him busy, he was itching to get back to Killian.

Billy reported back to Hal Johnson.

He was on the phone and agitated.

“Damn, Ericson. How many? OK, call me back when you have more information.”

It took Hal a minute before he saw Billy, his mind elsewhere.

“What happened, Hal?”

“The police attacked our union office in Massillon last night. They opened fire on strikers and supporters who came to the office for a party. Hell, they were dancing in the street to a fiddle player when the cops opened fire. Three dead. We don’t know how many were wounded.”

“When does it end, Hal?”

"Remarkable."

—Mark Sullivan, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Beneath a Scarlet Sky*

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Hal slammed his hand on his desk. “When the owners of Republic Steel and all the rest of those steel barons come to their senses, stop killing their workers, and sign a union contract!”

Hal regained his composure.

“Sorry. Anyhow, Billy. You’re approved to go back to Killian. You leave on Friday. Here’s your train ticket and again, you are staying at the Killian Hotel.”

Hal Johnson stood up.

“Good luck, Billy. Keep your wits about you. Take the Union button off. We don’t want to give anything away just yet.”

Billy took the metal Steel Workers Organizing Committee button off and put it in the inside pocket of his suit coat.

“Hey, Hal. You got an extra button I can have?”

“Loads, Billy.” He reached into a desk drawer where scores of buttons nestled. “Here you go.”

On Friday night, Billy knocked on Calvin Kirby’s door.

Lizzy opened it, winked, and said, “Why yes, come in. My father wondered why his order didn’t come.”

“Smart girl, Lizzy. You know the score, don’t ya? By the way, here is a union button for you. But you can’t wear it yet. Hide it away for the right time.”

Lizzy smiled. “You bet!”

Calvin came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a towel, and greeted Billy.

“Got your letter, Billy. I have a list and a few of us can meet at the Junction Diner tomorrow night if that is what you want.”

“That’s fine, Calvin. Set it up with the men. Does someone have a car to pick me up?”

“There will be five of us. Two cars. I will get Frank Holecek to pick me up and we will meet you at the corner of Main and Prospect at 8 pm.”

The next day, Billy walked down Main Street towards Prospect. A Killian police car sat back on a side street. The driver watched Billy walk by. He wasn’t alone. Another man sat in the front and one in the back.

At the corner of Prospect and Main, a 1932 black DeSoto pulled up and Billy, recognizing Calvin, got into the back seat. They drove to the Junction Diner with the driver looking in the rear-view mirror.

“I don’t see anyone, Calvin.”

“Good, just drive the speed limit if you please, Frank.”

Frank pulled up next to a grey Chevy coupe and parked. A few tractor-trailers were in the lot, but it was still early for the long haulers who usually

stopped in at midnight to get a jolt of java in their system before they made their final run.

The men went into the diner and sat at a table in the back, where two others waited. Calvin introduced Billy to the other men, Ken and Samuel.

A waitress came over for their orders.

“Coffee all around, Ginny.”

“I would like some apple pie if you have it,” said Billy.

“You got it, hon. Be right back, fellas.”

Once the coffee and pie were set on the table, Calvin explained to the others that Billy was from the steelworkers and that the union was going to help the men organize. They talked for two hours. All the men were certain that Roberts would not give in easily. Billy gave them instructions on mapping out the inside of the forge, what the departments were, and who they could trust in every department.

“Ok, fellas. You know what you need to do. I’ll be back with more help.”

The men left the diner and walked to their cars.

August 1961.

Thomas Murray came home in the early evening, having clocked out at his job as a salesman at Sears and Roebuck, and called out to his wife.

“I’m home.”

She came to the foyer and kissed him.

“It’s quiet. Where are the boys?” said Thomas.

“They’re with the sheriff.”

“What?”

“Well, they went up to that fort of theirs and along the way, they found a skeleton.”

“A human skeleton?”

“That’s what they said. It was a skull.”

“Holy cow.”

“The sheriff thought it might be an Indian grave. They’ve been gone for a while. Should be back soon. Let’s hold off supper until they get back.”

It was a half-hour later when the sheriff brought the boys back home.

“Why hello, Mr. Murray. Got your boys back safe and sound.”

He turned to Phil and Gary.

“Why don’t you two go out back for a bit? I want to talk to your parents in private. Police business, you know.” He winked at the boys.

“Ok, Sheriff Deighton,” said Phil.

“Come on, Gary.”

Gary didn’t budge.

“Come on!” Phil said as he pulled his reluctant brother along. Once out the back door, they silently stood by it, listening.

Once they left, the sheriff told the Murrays what he found.

“It ain’t no Indian brave. Modern clothes... and this.” He held out the metal button. “I washed it off in the creek.”

The pitted button spelled out: Steel Workers Organizing Committee.

Mrs. Murray sobbed and put her face in her hands. Her violet-blue eyes filled with tears.

“Oh my God,” she cried.

“Lizzy, what’s wrong,” said Tom.

Lizzy’s voice choked. “I’ll be right back,” she said as she rushed upstairs to their bedroom.

The two men stood dumbfounded.

She went in, caught her breath as memories flooded back to her, and went to her jewelry case. Inside were mementos and trinkets. She saw the pin right away. Lizzy went downstairs to the two men and held out her shaking hand. The pin was identical to the one Sheriff Deighton had.

“I think I know whose body is in the pine grove,” she said.

July 1937

“We’ll let you off at the same spot we picked you up, Billy, not the hotel. Secrecy, ya know.”

“Right, Calvin. You guys gave me a good report. I think I can convince the union to set up funds and field staff for an organizing drive here. Get to work lining up more people and I will be back in touch with you all.”

After they dropped him off, Billy walked down the dark tree-lined street back to his hotel. It was late, no one was out. They had talked for hours. He was aware of the car that pulled out of the side street and didn’t notice it was a police car until it pulled up alongside him. Police Chief Lawrence Stone got out as well as two other men. One carried a club.

Billy stopped and waited. The chief, tall and sinewy, stood in front of him, the others behind. He kept his cool.

“Evening, officer. What can I do for you?”

“Out kind of late, aren’t you, Mr. Hart?”

“You know my name?”

“Of course, Mr. Hart. It’s my job. I don’t believe you’re selling wares, no sir. I believe you are one of them commie union agitators stirring up trouble in my town.”

“You got me wrong, officer.”

“And that meeting with Calvin Kirby and others? You selling them pots and pans?”

The sheriff laughed, and the others laughed along with him.

“Yep, that’s what I was doing.”

The punch to Billy’s stomach came fast and hard.

Billy bent over, vomiting the coffee and pie from the diner.

“Now, don’t mess with me, son. We aren’t going to let you and your kind in Killian... ever. Got it? You’re getting back on the train tomorrow.”

“You got that, boy,” said the man with the club as he poked Billy in the back.

Billy’s temper got the best of him, and he lashed at the man.

The man with the club slammed it down on Billy’s head. Not once, but two hard blows. Billy dropped to the sidewalk like a discarded rag doll. The night was still as Billy passed into the void.

“Simpson, you damn fool! You killed him.”

“I didn’t mean to, but he attacked me.” Simpson walked around in a circle and threw his hands up. “Now what?”

“Put him in my trunk. We’ll get rid of the body. Shit, his head is bleeding all over. Grab that blanket in the trunk and wrap his head. Fuller, we’re going to your place and get that pickup of yours and head out to the old logging road.” The police chief shook his head in disgust and glared at Simpson. “Now I have a fine mess to clean up. You can bet I will tell Mr. Roberts what went down.”

Simpson, his face worried, said, “Why don’t we say he was mugged?”

“And have an investigation and those union agitators coming here pointing their fingers? No way. He will check out of the hotel tomorrow, get on the train and head back to Pittsburgh.”

“How is a dead man going to do that?”

“Leave that to me, Fuller. Now get your truck and don’t forget the shovels. And Simpson, get rid of that club.”

At 11 pm, the chief in his car, closely followed by Fuller in his pickup, drove five miles out of town, past the abandoned Krenshaw farm, to a pasture along a creek and a logging road that went out of use twenty years earlier. It was still passable, and the pickup truck could easily make the climb to the pine forest above.

“Alright Simpson, you and Fuller take this guy up into the pine grove and bury him deep. We don’t need him coming back to haunt us.” Chief Stone gave Simpson a hard stare. “Do we, Simpson?”

Fuller kept the gears low and drove the 1934 Ford pickup truck up the incline and into a wooded area. The two men grabbed their shovels and dug among the trees. After about four feet, Fuller gave up.

“Hell, Simpson, too many roots here. It’s deep enough.”

“Take that blanket off his head and throw it in the bottom. Let’s dump this guy and get out of here. Spread a bunch of pine needles and brush on top.”

Billy Hart lay in his shallow grave. His closed chestnut-colored eyes could not see the beauty of the star-filled night. He would not smell the fresh earth or the scent of pine. He would lie here beneath it all, left behind, silent, and unknowing.

The police chief called James Roberts early in the morning to explain the situation.

“Hell, Lawrence! What kind of idiots do you have working with you? Clean it up! Between us? You never called me, right?”

The heavy click of the disconnected phone reverberated in Chief Stone’s ear.

He then went to the desk clerk of the Killian Hotel and demanded the key to Billy Hart’s room. The Police chief came back down with Billy’s suitcase and walked over to the desk clerk.

“Mr. Hart has checked out and gone back to Pittsburgh.”

The clerk looked at the sheriff askance. “But... “

“You get paid by Mr. Roberts, the owner of this hotel, right?”

The clerk nodded.

“Mr. Roberts says this is the way it is. I don’t have to call him, do I?”

Chief Stone went to his car, threw the suitcase into the trunk, and drove away.

August 1961

Lizzy Murray told her husband and the sheriff of the visits by a young union man named Billy Hart in the summer of 1937.

“My father got a letter from the union three weeks after Billy left saying a union official was coming to meet him. Dad thought it was about starting the union organizing at the forge. When the man came to our house, Hal Johnson was his name, I think. His first question was when we last saw Billy. Dad told him the last time was when they dropped him off after their meeting at the diner. Dad

assumed he went back to Pittsburgh the following day. Mr. Johnson looked at my father with pained eyes and said Billy never came back and no one, not even his family, has heard from him.”

Lizzy lowered her head and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“He seemed like such a nice young man,” remembering the first time they met.

“We’ll know more in the next few days after the coroner gets up there and exhumes the body.”

On the following Saturday, Sheriff Deighton visited the Murrays.

“You were right, Mrs. Murray. Although it was in bad shape, there was a wallet, and it held a union card. You could barely make it out, but the name is William Hart.”

Lizzy let out a sigh. “Now what, sheriff?”

“I suppose a call to the Steelworkers union in Pittsburgh. Doubt if there is anyone there that remembers him, but I think someone would like to know and tell us where he should be buried... again, that is.”

It took several days, but after Sheriff Deighton called the Steelworker's headquarters and after being passed from one person to another, a union rep said he would ask around and call him back.

The return call to the sheriff wasn't from the union rep he talked to but a retired official. It was Hal Johnson.

“This is hard news, sheriff but a relief to know Billy has been found. Any ideas what happened?”

“Well, Mr. Johnson, it's clear to me he was murdered. His head was caved in from a blunt instrument, according to the coroner. And, of course, he was buried in the woods outside of Killian. We didn't know who he was until Lizzy Murray recognized the Union pin that was buried with him. She said you visited her and her father Calvin Kirby when Billy didn't come back.”

“Isn't that something? I remember Calvin. He helped on the campaign when we finally won a union at Killian Forge after the war. And Lizzy too.”

There was a sigh on the other end of the phone. “Poor Billy.” Johnson's voice was barely audible. “Of course, after all these years, probably no suspects to arrest, but plenty to suspect. After I met the Kirby's I went to the hotel and asked about Billy. The desk clerk said he checked out and took the train back to Pittsburgh. Lying son of a bitch. If you can find him, he would be worth talking to. You are too young to remember, but it was a war getting places unionized in the thirties. Lots of violence...” his voice trailed off.

“All before my time, Mr. Johnson. But I need to know what to do with the body. Does he have any family that would claim him?”

“Not that I know of. He was an only child, and his parents are long gone.”

“Ok, Mr. Johnson, I will ask around. I am sure we can do something here.”

“Sheriff Deighton, please keep me informed of any service you have. I want to say goodbye to Billy.”

Lizzy contacted her dad’s workmates at the forge. Some had passed on as her father did. In 1958 a heart attack claimed him. Others died in the war, but Frank Holecek the only other one that met Billy was still around. He was a former union president at the forge and told Lizzy not to worry, the union would pay for the burial and a headstone.

In early September, Billy was buried at the Haven Memorial Cemetery. Steelworkers Local 1210 paid for the internment and a headstone that had Billy’s name and date of death as 1937. On it a simple inscription: Union Brother.

The gathering of people included the Murray family, Frank Holecek, union officials from the forge and forge workers who were just learning about the murder of Billy.

Hal Johnson drove from Pittsburgh for the burial and met the Murrays at the cemetery. Lizzy saw the elderly man walking towards them. Tears welled up as she walked towards him.

“Mr. Johnson, I’m Lizzy.”

They hugged, and he stood back.

Hal’s voice was shaky. “Well, now we know, don’t we?”

Lizzy nodded.

“Let me introduce you to my boys. They are the ones that found him. We sat them down, and I told them everything and how he had gone missing. Frank Holecek filled in some of the things I didn’t know. The boys are a little disturbed with what they stumbled upon.”

Gary and Phil were standing next to their father. All dressed in their Sunday finest, here to say goodbye to someone they never met. Their eyes were downcast. What started as an adventure on an August morning turned into mystery and murder. They weren’t sure how they felt.

Lizzy walked up to her family.

“Tom, boys, this is Mr. Johnson. He was a friend of Mr. Hart and worked with him so many years ago.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Johnson,” said Tom.

“Call me Hal.”

Hal shook the boy’s hands.

“Phil and Gary, right?”

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

A hearse pulled into the cemetery carrying the remains of Billy. The large crowd parted as it drove up to the burial site. A reporter from the Killian Herald stood off to the side, jotting down notes. The news of Billy had made the rounds of the town only days before, igniting controversy, speculation, and mystery. Six members of the union local went over and each grabbed part of the two rails on the side of the coffin and walked it over to his final resting place. A minister stood by. No one knew if Billy was religious or not, but the minister said the words anyway.

Before the casket was lowered, Hal asked Lizzy if he could say a few words.

Hal cleared his throat.

“Union brothers... and sister,” he said as he looked at Lizzy, “Almost 25 years ago, I said goodbye to Billy Hart as I sent him here to Killian. I didn’t know at that time I would be here now, in 1961, saying goodbye to him again.” Hal choked up; his voice strained. “For all these years, we didn’t know where Billy was or what had happened to him. We knew he didn’t run away. He wasn’t that kind. Thanks to these two boys, Phil and Gary Murray, who found Billy, and to their mother Lizzy, who, because of a pin I had given Billy before he left, we were able to determine it was him. And like the good union man he was, he always had his union card with him. We might never know who murdered him, but we know what forces killed him, don’t we?”

Hal looked at all the people assembled. Heads nodded and grim faces looked back at him.

“So, Billy, sleep peacefully now. Friends have found you and a proper resting place has been prepared by your union brothers and sisters. You will not be forgotten.”

Hal wiped his eyes and stepped back as the coffin was lowered. Someone in the back started singing the union hymn Solidarity Forever. Everyone joined in, then silence and sounds of weeping.

“Mr. Johnson, would you like to come back to the house for some lunch or coffee before you head back to Pennsylvania?”

“I would like that, Lizzy. It’ll give me a chance to tell the boys about the Billy I knew.”

The gathering at the cemetery broke up and people moved to their cars. Lizzy and Hal looked back one more time, both with their private thoughts, and said goodbye to Billy one last time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lee Conrad lives in upstate New York with his longtime love and their three rescue cats. His stories have appeared in Fiction on the Web, Literally Stories, Ariel Chart, Sundial Magazine, The London Reader, Books & Pieces Writing Magazine, Written Tales and Blood and Bourbon.

Find him on Facebook:

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

Just Reward

A short story by Ami Thompson

Mark couldn't believe his luck. His very trusted tried and true Garfield alarm clock, the same clock that he had since he was six, didn't wake him this Monday morning. Instead of being well prepared, calm, and casually cool for his meeting, Mark was in a state of panic. His feet barely touched the floor as he catapulted himself into the bathroom. As his six foot three frame jumped into the shower, his elbow hit the shelf that held his shampoo. The shampoo took on a life of its own. It flew across the shower, hit the glass door, and cracked the opening, causing Herbal Essence to empty out on the floor. The room filled with the scent of ginseng and ginger. At least my feet will smell good, he thought.

The sun rose at 7:45 AM that Monday. Gina had already been up two hours. She had done three loads of laundry, had eaten her Quaker Oats, and had finished her daily Soduko puzzle. Already feeling a sense of accomplishment, Gina headed upstairs to decide on the perfect outfit. It had to "wow" without looking like it was meant to impress. Five blouses, six skirts, and two dresses later she was finally ready. She stood in front of the mirror and felt as though nothing could stand in her way.

Peter was completely drenched. The skies might just as well have opened up and unleashed a biblical flood. However, this was not the case. Peter was well over three hundred pounds and had a litany of medical issues. His doctors suggested starting a workout regimen. Peter had circled Monday the 24th as the day. So, Peter got on the treadmill and began. He walked for what he thought was an eternity. Sweat was running down his forehead and into his eyes. The eternity turned out to be 12 minutes.

Mark put on his Mickey watch and realized he just might make it to his meeting on time. Maybe his luck was changing. He grabbed his briefcase and ran to his beloved jalopy. A little rust never hurt anyone he told himself as he pried open the door with a coat hanger. Mark looked down at the sticky note on his briefcase. 212 Washington St. 1 pm.

Oozing confidence, Gina opened the calendar app on her new iPhone. She scrolled down to confirm her meeting was at 1 pm. She got in her brand new silver Rogue and punched 212 Washington Street into the onboard GPS.

Peter, basking in the afterglow of his workout, mentally began going through his day. He had a meeting at Panera. This made him smile because he figured his earlier workout would justify eating a giant cinnamon roll. “Maybe I can do this exercise thing after all,” he laughed. workout his lunch, he had to go to the offices at 212 Washington Street.

Gina was the first to arrive at 212 Washington Street. She entered the building and was reading the directory when Mark absentmindedly ran into her. Ever apologetic, Mark helped Gina to her feet. Gina’s outfit, the one that she thought would make her a killing, was now wrinkled and torn. The heel from one of her shoes had broken off. Steaming, she got up, not accepting either Mark’s help or apologies, and continued reading the directory. She found her listing and realized it was on the fourth floor. Still refusing to even recognize that Mark was still standing beside her, she marched to the elevator. Mark ran after her. She continued on.

Reaching the bank of elevators, she was forced to stop and wait for one to reach the first floor. This gave Mark the opportunity to explain his actions.

“You see,” he began, “I have an important meeting to attend and I am running slightly behind. I was running to make up some time and you got in my way.”

“I got in your way?” she replied in disbelief.

“Well, technically yes.”

“Technically? Really?”

“Yes.”

As she was about to explode, the elevator door opened. Gina entered and before she could punch in the fourth floor, Mark had followed her into the elevator.

Gina hoped that more people would enter the elevator so that she did not have to be alone with Mark. Elevators, in her opinion, although highly efficient, were inherently awkward. There was the question of where to look in the elevator. Do you look at the floor or the ceiling? Do you look at the back of a stranger's head and if so, how long before the stranger can feel your eyes burning through them? Slowly, a faint smile took hold of her face. She was lost in the idea of burning more than her eyes through Mark.

Unaware of Gina’s daydream, Mark continued the conversation. “Even with you causing a minor time stoppage, I should still make it in time.”

“Congratulations,” Gina snapped.

“Congratulations? Well, thank you, but I am not there yet.”

With the hairs on the back of her neck beginning to stand up, Gina could not help but

question whether her elevator mate was for real. Who speaks with terms such as “technically, and time stoppage?” she wondered. Who barrels though someone and not only blames the victim but does not even show concern for her? And his meeting. Who could seriously want a meeting with him? The only reason she could come up with a meeting was so they could arrange his passage back to the mothership.

Peter pulled into the parking garage at 212 Washington St. The first spot he could find was two floors below ground level. Maybe because of the sugar high from his breakfast, or maybe because deep down he wanted to become healthier, Peter decided to walk up to the office. It will be invigorating he told himself. It will be good to clear your mind before the meeting. Peter reached the second floor above ground level and was completely winded. He stopped to catch his breath. While recouping, he realized that his exercising efforts, although they were well-intentioned, were not helping him today. He had to put the importance of the meeting before the importance of his health. He left the staircase behind and hunted for the nearest elevator. He pushed the button and waited.

The elevator arrived and Peter entered. He was surprised by what he saw. A middle-aged woman was standing at the rear of the elevator. Peter was taken aback by her appearance. Her obviously expensive ensemble was torn in the shoulder. He also wondered why she was holding a broken heel from what he guessed were her Michael Kors shoes in her hand. Conversely, there was also a gentleman on the elevator. He was dressed in a powder blue three-piece suit and stood staring at the ceiling. Peter wondered how the gentleman was able to breathe with the amount of spray starch ironed into the suit. After his quick surveying of the scene, Peter shrugged his shoulders, turned around, and hit the button for floor four.

The offices on the fourth floor of 212 Washington were on the cutting edge of style meeting productivity. They were no doubt furnished by a high-end interior designer. The couches in the waiting room were not your average couches. They were grey Italian leather with abstract-designed sheepskin pillows at either end. It was inviting and intimidating at the same time. They offered the client the ability to sit and wait, while also telling the client they were in the midst of a high-powered business. Currently, the offices were silent. A calm before the storm.

Peter stood still in the front portion of the elevator. He did not want to expend any unnecessary energy. His journey up the stairs was still wearing on him. He began to meditate in an effort to find his inner “pizza”. Peter had decided long ago that this mantra appealed to his senses much more so than simply mumbling about inner peace. This way he could easily envision his piece of peace within. Mark stood on the right side of the elevator. He kept checking his watch, as if trying to somehow will time to stop, so he wouldn’t be late for the meeting. Gina remained in the back corner of the elevator. She could not believe how quickly her day had changed. She had planned every aspect of her day, ensuring peak performance and excellence. Unfortunately, she didn’t plan on meeting Mark. As she began thinking of a world without Mark, the elevator made an ear-shattering noise and came to a complete stop.

“Oh, this is quite an unexpected inconvenience,” declared Mark.

With that breaking the last piece of straw on Gina’s back, Gina fumed, “Believe it or not, you are not the only one with a meeting to attend.”

“Mine is very important. It could prove to be life-altering,” stated Mark.

“Mine too, has the potential for being life-changing,” replied Gina.

As this standoff was taking place before him, Peter remained quiet. Should he reveal that he was also headed to an important meeting? Maybe it was best to keep this to himself. Finally, feeling as though he had to say something, Peter said, “I’m going to try to call for help.”

Peter picked up the phone and quickly started talking. “Yes, yes hello. We are trapped somewhere between floors two and four. What was that? As a matter of fact, no, I didn’t hear any alarm. Just a horrific high-pitched screech and then the elevator stopped. There are three of us stuck in here. Please send help.”

Peter returned the phone to its holder and turned to face the other two. “Well, they were unaware of our predicament, but are alerting the authorities and sending help.”

“Thank goodness, “ shrieked Mark.

Gina too felt a sense of relief.

Trying to keep his elevator mates from killing each other, Peter, having found his inner pizza, said, “Well I hope you can make your meetings. They sound important. Whom may I ask are they with and what are they about? Telling me will pass the time and calm your nerves.”

Agreeing with his logic, Mark piped up, “I am meeting with Raymond at his family-owned business. I received a letter requesting my appearance today at 1:00. The letter hinted at finding a just reward.”

“A just reward? For what?”

“I am not certain. Only that I needed to be there at 1:00 and will have a big surprise.” And what a surprise it will be thought Peter.

Suddenly, the elevator began dropping, and then equally suddenly, began moving upward. This

continued for a minute and then it came to a complete stop.

Even with the jostling, Gina kept her eye on the prize. She couldn't wait to attend her meeting. She had heard of Raymond and his family and was impressed. Their exploits were legendary. Seems like a day didn't go by without Raymond providing a storyline for the papers. Yes, thought Gina He is exactly the person to know about my brother and his killer.

“And what about you?” Peter asked Gina. “Are you getting a just reward too?”

“No. As it happens though, I too, have a meeting with Raymond at 1:00.”

“I am sure you are mistaken. I am meeting with him at 1:00. You will just have to wait until my appointment is over before you conduct your business,” offered Mark.

With blood boiling, Gina stammered, “I have had enough of you and your blue suit and your self-centered narcissistic way. I have a meeting and I am going to attend it at 1:00!” Mark took that verbal hit to the heart and stood speechless.

Raymond waited for the arrival of his guests. The family was certain it had chosen wisely. Then and again, it was 1:00 and no one had arrived. No one was ever late for a meeting with Raymond.

Peter had seen all he needed to. He picked up the phone and began speaking. “Raymond, it's Peter. You have chosen well. Let the elevator work again.”

Mark and Gina heard Peter, but they really couldn't believe their ears. Whom had they been sharing an elevator with? How did he know Raymond? Hadn't he used the same phone to call for help earlier?

Gina was the first to question Peter. “What is this all about?” she demanded.

“Raymond only lets an elite few to the fourth floor. Think of this as passing your first test.”

“You mean you planned the elevator malfunction?” queried Mark.

“Think of it as a precautionary drill.”

“Who are you?” questioned Gina.

“I am the real-world liaison for Raymond. I'm part of the family.”

Raymond was pleased upon hearing the news. He fluffed the sheepskin pillows, puffed his cigar, and waited. Although rare, he did so like to expand the family and the family's business.

"You're part of the family?" Gina quipped incredulously.

"Yes. And soon you will be too. Raymond will handle the initiation process."

Mark stood in disbelief and while processing what he just heard, mumbled, "But I thought you called for help using that phone. That was part of the charade I guess. Simply ingenious really. I never even thought to ask to speak to the person on the other end. You were taking care of it...Well, I guess you were really taking care of it. Simply ingenious."

The elevator doors opened onto the luxurious waiting room of the powerful Raymond family. Gina was dutifully impressed, but not surprised. Raymond was known for taking care of every little detail of a job, so why should his attention to appearance be any different? Mark, on the other hand, stood gawking. The opulence was overwhelming and poor Mark didn't know exactly how to act. To say he was out of his element would be an understatement. It was more like he was out of his chemical compound.

Raymond rose to greet his guests. First, he strode toward Mark. Smiling, and who, he thought, would not smile looking at this blue-clad specimen, he greeted Mark. "Greetings, my fine friend. I trust you enjoyed your ride. Would you like to take a tour of the fourth floor? You will find it much more spacious than your previous surroundings."

"Thank you. When I return I expect we will discuss my just reward. After all, our meeting was for 1:00 and it is currently 1:04."

"Certainly, I have not forgotten, and fear not your reward is forthcoming." Raymond motioned toward Peter. "Please show our guest around." Without hesitation, Peter whisked Mark away.

Raymond took Gina's hand and kissed it. "Welcome my dear. Please sit and relax."

Ever gracious, Gina sat. "I wanted to thank you," she began. "This is an extraordinary opportunity. Just to be sitting here in your presence..."

Although pleased at the profuse flattering, he immediately told her to stop groveling. He already had a slew of sycophants. He had invited her for her allegedly forthright attitude. She was said to have killer instincts. Raymond was going to put these instincts to the test—literally. "Gina, I know you came here for a job. It is true I know his killer.

Instead of feeling nauseous, unnerved, or frightened upon hearing this, Gina sat up a little higher and listened that much harder. Her adrenaline and her heart were racing. She wanted to know her brother's killer.

"You are partially correct. We are not in the unclaimed money business, but we are in the just reward business."

From his pocket, Raymond pulled out a revolver and placed it on the gleaming table before him. Either for effect or for personal pleasure, Raymond then sat motionless and waited.

Gina did not disappoint. Instead of recoiling, she leaned in and studied the piece. She envisioned holding the gun. The frictionless handle meeting her perfectly manicured hand. The trigger begging for her touch. Finally, she spoke, "Is this the initiation Peter hinted at?"

"Yes."

"This is meant for Mark? This is his just reward?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Does it matter?"

Gina internally repeated the question. To her surprise and to her relief, the answer was no.

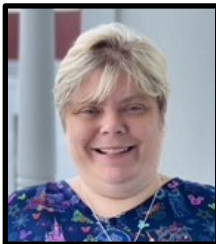
It didn't matter. Ridding the world of the annoying enigma of Mark, however, that mattered. Slowly and methodically, she took hold of the revolver.

From around the corner, she could hear Peter and Mark approaching. Peter was going on about the new restaurant around the corner. Mark surprisingly, was giving obligatory answers. His concentration, however, was still focused on his watch. Mickey read 1:13.

Mark began, "I find your boss to be insufferable. He is keeping me waiting. That is unacceptable. I demand my reward!"

Upon hearing this, as almost on a scripted cue, Gina delivered. Reward received.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ami Thompson grew up in the historic town of Plymouth, Massachusetts. However, she was always a Southerner in her heart, so in 2019 she moved to Florida with her husband Matt and her precious Yorkie Paisley.

Ami has her Master in Special Education and was in the education field for fifteen years.

Currently, she is in real estate as she pursues her writing career. When not with a pen in hand, Ami enjoys crafting. Ami is a sports enthusiast and enjoys watching baseball and hockey. This is her debut in the writing world.

WATCHERS

A poem by Jill Hedgecock

*Camouflaged on red ruinous clay
Atop a termite-mound outpost
Six pairs of beady red eyes*

*A gang, a mob
Of noisy chatter—
The ever-watchful dwarf mongooses*

*Hilltop sentry
Alert for snakes
Pythons, cobra, black mamba
Deadly enemies must
Kill or be killed*

*Three dutiful pointed faces
Stare ahead
Wary of the tribe of
Jackals stalking through grass*

*One vigilant lookout
Eyes a marabou stork to left
Too distant
To vocalize
Terrestrial predator alarm*

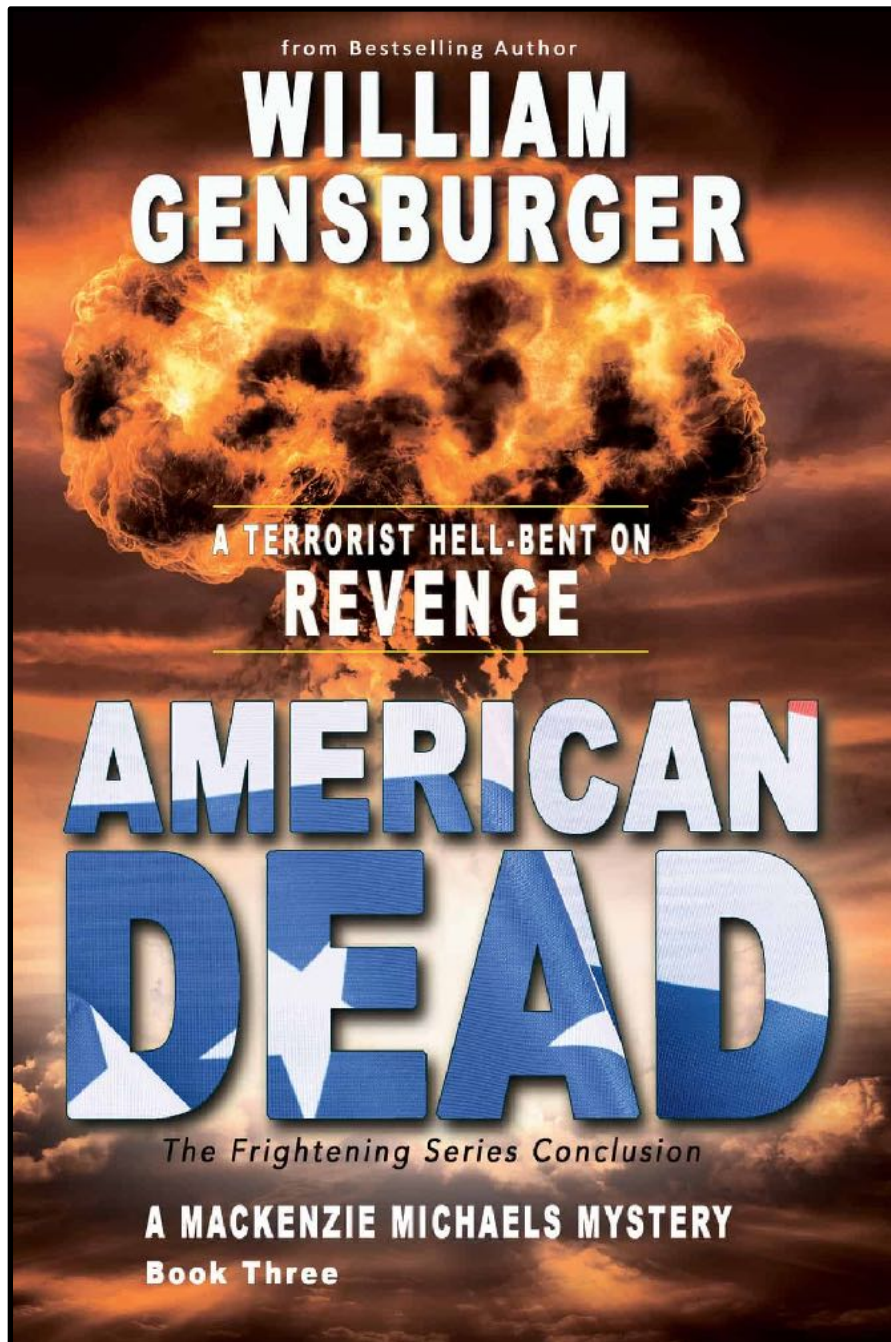
*Right sentinel
Fascinated by twitching tail
of spotted feline
Dozing leopard
Not yet a threat*

*Perched tawny eagle
Takes flight
Aerial predator alarm call
Silences chatter*

*Poof!
Twelve beady eyes
Disappear into
Red ruinous clay tunnels*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jill Hedgecock is the author of the Shadow trilogy novels: *Between Shadow's Eyes*, *From Shadow's Perspective*, and soon to be released *In Shadow's Reflection*. She is an avid animal lover with a special love of all things canine. www.jillhedgecock.com .



What began as a simple murder case in Corpus Christi, Texas (**Texas Dead**), moved to Montecito, California, the wealthy celebrity enclave where the exiled Royals live (**Angle of Death**). There, after a case involving Maxie's ex-husband, Brad Paschal, the major movie star caught up in the disappearance of his girlfriend, **Maxie, Devin, Kobe and Tyson** relocate to Los Angeles where the terrorist Hassan has been spotted. His goal: **American Dead**.

Then things take a major turn for the worst, endangering Maxie's life as well as a nuclear threat against the city. Can they stop this in time or will Maxie get killed at the hands of a dangerous villain? This book is the **explosive** series finale. **READ** more or **BUY** the book [HERE](#).

The Relationship

A short story by Mozid Mahmud

Kuddus was the first to see the girl. He had gone out near the river bank to relieve himself. The winter had not set yet, but the river was beginning to feel its pull. There was a little fog, one could feel the crippling cold coming ahead. Kuddus could not keep it in any longer. There was no time to look at anything. Once it bit the stomach, there was no respite. It would propel out. It was still dark out. One couldn't make out anything.

Kuddus did his deed and went over to the river to clean himself. He did not want to use the River's water. Angels hovered over the river, he had heard. He did not want to defile the river. Besides, the NGO employees who came over discouraged this use. They talked of how diseases spread. But there was no other way. There was the dwelling of catkin, raising its head along the river. Hundreds of these demesnes lay around. Bastards with no ownership. It's only might that determines proprietorship. Kuddus wasn't the owner here. It was Paramanik. Kuddus was his indentured servant. He was not paid by the month. Rather every year he received 12 minas of grains and 6000 takas. He received two lungis, two gamchas, clothing, and a blanket for the winter. The money wasn't much. One could earn more doing hard labor. But there wasn't hard labor to do all year long. This way, Kuddus did not have the uncertainty. He did not have to think perennially of food and work.

Kuddus's older brother Rahim was one of Paramanik's indentured servants, too. Their father had been one as well. He did not know about his grandfather's history. Their father died when they were young. He could not remember how long ago that was. He could only count to twenty. Any number beyond that did not hold meaning for him. Only looking forward till tomorrow seemed important, nothing beyond it. And if it was necessary, he had his older brother and Paramanik to rely on. They wouldn't deceive him. He wasn't even acquainted with the word "deceive". Everything seemed good to him in the world. Nothing bad. There wasn't much to think of here in the Lord's world. Whatever He lets happen must be for the good.

Kuddus felt the presence of someone near him in the fog. He thought someone had arrived to answer the call of nature, so hadn't looked back. But no one came by this char. Could it be a ghost? He looked straight, praying under his breath. But after a few paces, he couldn't keep his curiosity in check. He rubbed his eyes to see clearly. No, this was clearly a person – a girl. Her buttocks planted firmly to the ground. If she were a ghost, she would have been levitating in mid-air. He had heard that spirits could not touch the ground.

Kuddus hesitated for a while. He could not make sense of this. How could a girl come to be here? There were no houses within ten miles. The Padma lies adjacent to the catkin. No one could have floated all the way here. The sky by then had lightened up. One could see the yellow rays rising from the edges. Kuddus usually didn't get scared so easily. He had immense strength. He had once hauled a crocodile up shore. Everyone in the area knew this story. But one couldn't do anything about ghosts. They were not human, rather shadows. How could one fight with a shadow?

However, going near her, Kuddus realized she was not a shadow. She hadn't come here to piss either. She was a broken girl, covered in mud and grime. Kuddus wasn't able to determine her age. It could be over twenty, but less than two twenties. His mother had died at a young age. He had seen a few women in the village. But he had no distinct memory of them. However, seeing this girl disheveled here like this, he felt a pull within him, as if the man inside him had awakened. This awakening had led to affection for the girl. He desired to call this strange woman his own. He could see that she must've gone through a lot the previous night. Perhaps she hadn't eaten. But how had she arrived here. The question bugged him. Later on, he had learned that some men from Goalanda village had pulled her on a boat. She had been there the whole night. The men had used her the whole night, beat her up somewhere in her body. Then gave her something that put her to sleep. When she had woke up, she found herself here.

Kuddus, of course, did not understand much of it. He did not even know where Goalanda was. Wherever it may be, the girl seemed to be an angel to him.

When the girl asked for water, he brought her some from the river. She gulped it down, sprayed some of it over her face. She asked, "What village is this?"

"Dikri's Char," replied Kuddus.

How could a girl like this arrive in Kuddus's world? That a girl could be snatched away on a boat by a few men and left here to die after their torture was believable yet unthinkable in Kuddus's universe. He did not know where the

village was. One could see the edges of it on the other end of the river. She might as well have come from the land of fairy tales.

The girl wanted to know if Kuddus had any food with him. He returned to the house and brought some barley with husk and jaggery. On a tin-plate she soaked the barley in river water and gobbled them up. The previous night's exhaustion caved away. She forgot the hunger. She wanted to know where Kuddus lived, whether he could take her to live with him there. By then, Kuddus had become enamored with the girl. The girl had sobered up as well, did not want to go anywhere without him. In moments, he noticed this change in him. The Kuddus who couldn't think for himself, whose entire life revolved around his older brother Rahim. He had no one in the world other than his brother. His brother would marry, his sister-in-law would adore him. They would have kids and he would spend his life playing with his nephews and nieces. He had thought of having this girl marry his brother. But now the thought did not appeal to him. It wasn't possible for both of them to marry this girl. Besides, what if his brother asked him where he had got this girl from? It wouldn't be possible for him to leave this girl alone. He brought her with him back to the house.

Rahim had gone up to the herd in the morning. In addition to watching over the catkin, they took care of Paramanik's buffaloes, about twenty of them, some of which give milk. The two brothers kept watch over the buffaloes and milked them. Made ghee from the cream. They had it themselves. Every Friday morning, Rahim would take the milk and go over to Paramanik's house. He would return at night with rice, salt, and oil to light the lamps. Sometimes he brought in fish when he went to bathe in the river. They had about everything to live a sufficient life. They had never felt a hardship in life. That they would have to marry according to the law of their society was known to them, but they never yearned for women. Not even for their departed mother.

Leaving the girl at the house, Kuddus went to his brother and told him what had happened. Rahim was puzzled at such a strange incident. He had a bit more common sense than his younger brother. He asked, "What have you done, Kuddus? You brought over a strange girl? Wouldn't it be a sin? If anyone knew, we'd be exiled."

Still, Rahim could not help but be curious. He quickly finished the job and went over. The sight of the girl had the same effect on him as Kuddus. Truly, it seemed like he hadn't seen a girl like this before, either. At least not a girl in her youth. That there was a torment of the heart for women, he realized it then. Afterwards, the two brothers did not talk much. They lived in such obscurity. People did not visit that much here. Buffalo milk, fish from the river – there was

never a shortage of food. But they possibly couldn't keep a young girl like her with them forever.

It was soon dusk. Kuddus lit up the oil lamp. Rahim began to boil rice for the night. The girl had become her regular self. She said, "I can cook, let me help." She did all the arrangements. The three of them sat down to eat together. The food had a taste like never before. They began to find a new meaning in their life. The two brothers began to daydream about their futures with the girl. But no one could hear their secret longings. Kuddus had found the girl, so he seemed to have a better claim to her. He didn't think his brother would think about her like this. On the other hand, Rahim thought all his brother's thoughts revolved around him. Besides, it was only after his marriage that Kuddus could marry.

Trouble arrived when they headed to bed. There was only one bed. The two brothers had a pillow each and one blanket which they shared. There was no space for a third person. On top of that, she was a girl. They could have adjusted with a man, but they couldn't possibly have had her lay down with them. In the end, they gave their bed to her and the two brothers went out and slept outside. None of them could sleep. They all begin to weave their own dreams with her. They had no father. Their mother had died so long ago. Their household was essentially Paramanik's household. Their entire world centered on servitude. And there were no women in that world. No one to share one's misery and happiness with. The two brothers had been brought up like Cain and Abel. Would this girl be the point of their discord? Thinking such thoughts, they went off to sleep in the end. The girl woke them up in the morning. In such a small time, they became part of family.

Rahim told his brother, "We should build another room. She must have a place to stay." The two brothers went out and cut some wood to built it. Built a platform with bamboo. A second home rose up beside theirs. They began to dream of their own homes. On Friday, Rahim went to the village, as usual, to bring over the week's supply from Paramanik's. But as soon as he left, he started to sense loss. As if he was leaving something behind.

On his way back, he went to a store unfamiliar to them and bought a saree, some snow powder and a comb. He did this with precaution, lest anyone caught him in the act. He thought of many things on his way home. He should've asked the girl about her village. She had mentioned Goalanda or something. When he had asked around about Goalanda, people looked at him with suspicion.

"What would you do with Goalanda?"

Rahim had said, “No reason.” He surmised that his friend Habil had promised him he’d take him to Goalanda one day. That there were many beautiful girls there. They’d go by boat. It was several miles journey, taking four hours.

He returned earlier than usual. Just as he stepped near the house’s steps, he could hear the presence of Kuddus and the girl. They were laughing. The girl was asking him: *Will you marry me? I’m a bad person, though. But if you marry me, I won’t do any bad anymore.*

Rahim lost his thoughts hearing these words. He coughed a little loudly and entered the room. The girl became happy seeing the saree and snow powder. Seeing the girl overjoyed dissipated much of the despair he had felt while eavesdropping. They began to behave normally again and ate their dinner together.

When he woke up in the middle of the night, Kuddus couldn’t find his brother. He waited for a long while. Then he heard sounds coming from the nearby house. After this, the two brothers stopped trusting each other. They would get angry at little things. In front of the girl, they would both grow silent. They wouldn’t talk with one another. They’d gobble up their rice and sleep with their shoulders to each other. No one was able to sleep in peace.

The girl was to be blamed for the sin they almost committed. The two brothers also saw it as the Lord testing them, just as Harut and Marut were sent over to Babel. Even as the angels’ test was a failure, the Lord had seen fit to forgive them. The brothers had heard the story numerous times from the mullah at Paramanik’s. But Rahim and Kuddus had no way of escaping from *their* sins. The two brothers had been stabbed with the same knife of sin. But to save themselves from fratricide they had decided to return the girl to Goalanda.

They left on a boat at dawn. The river-path to Goalanda was straight and simple. One did not have to learn the pathways here. The river itself took you to your destination. Leaving the girl there, they got back and heaved a sigh of relief. At least, they had saved themselves from killing one another. They hugged each other and cried. But they couldn’t be like before anymore. The girl still held a powerful presence in their hearts. They found that they could not focus on work.

The next Friday, Rahim did not return from the village. He got back a day later. Then a few days later, Kuddus was gone for three days. This was how they took turns to go missing for the girl. The brothers had realized that without Goalanda they wouldn’t be able to live.

The girl had to be brought back. The girl, helpless herself, believed them, too. She couldn’t handle the brunt of her society, either. She wanted a little love

too. And the love of one man was still a dream of hers. In this tussle to belong to one, the brothers never wished to ask who *she* wanted to be with. Done for on the boat, any meaningful choice had been snatched away from her thereafter. Even in the Goalanda slum, where the men furiously guarded and abused their women, she was treated as someone who had lost her powers to be a person and had lost the ability to have relations. There was no custom to lead a household with two husbands but at least the love of two brothers was a thing of joy for her. She had heard of old stories of five brothers having one wife. Compared to that, two were less.

The month of Ashwin had arrived on the river. Rain drizzled most of the day. Rahim and Kuddus were both adept at rowing the boat. They lived by the river – it wouldn't make sense to fear the water. The brothers hadn't talked to one another on their way to Goalanda, not even on the way back. The girl sat in silence in the middle. Her second coming to these shores was more assured. She could not understand how their dynamic would play out now. Before, she had a relationship with both brothers. Though they did not recognize it. She did not have to face the shame at that time, but now? She had a relationship with many. But she had never had to face a complexity such as this. She had grown to blindly love the two brothers and depend on them. She was not able to explain why.

She wondered if it was right to have returned. Love had not been consistent in her past. She had no mother. Her father had married a second time. She did not remember the stories anymore. Her life had been decided in a Goalanda slum. The life she had wrought with the two brothers, in comparison, was complex and muddled. There was no path left to come out of such sin. Yet she was able to accumulate quite the desirable memories with these two after the incident of her rape.

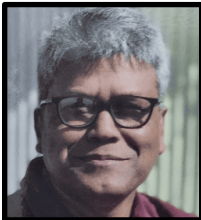
Till then, no one had spoken. Rahim sat still. Kuddus worked the oars. And the girl was busy in her thoughts. There weren't a lot of waves this time of the year. Rather, a reverse current began to take hold. The drizzle hadn't stopped but started to intensify. Perhaps a depression was underway. They took place once or twice a year. The sky was darkening with the onslaught of rain. Rahim and Kuddus began to feel anxious. Rahim moved over the hull and took over the helm. He paddled with all the strength in him. They were hopeful the boat would make it. It was only a few paces away. They knew how to swim well. Such a small distance was nothing to worry about. Kuddus looked at Rahim. Rahim lowered them down. Then an intense wind pushed them against the current. The

wooden boat could not weather the tension and broke apart, sinking away. The girl had helplessness in her voice. She cried out: *Mother!* The name of her Lord.

Two days later, the girl's body floated ashore. Rahim and Kuddus found it together. They both got down and brought it up. They dug a grave beneath the forests and buried her there with care. Then they embraced each other and began to cry. This girl, perhaps the only person besides their mother, was the only one they had both equally called their own.

* * *

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mozid Mahmud is a poet, novelist, and essayist based in Bangladesh. His works include *In Praise of Mahfuza* (1989), *Nazrul—Spokesman of the Third World* (1996) and *Rabindranath's Travelogues* (2010). He has been awarded the Rabindra-Nazrul Literary Prize, Bangladesh Writers Club Prize, and the country's National Press Club Award.

Play Army

A short story by Mike Sharlow

I loved war, particularly WWII.

I loved war movies like *The Battle of the Bulge*, TV shows like *Combat!* documentaries like *The World at War*, and any books and comics about war. Billy, my best friend, also loved war.

It was after supper and time to play army with BB guns. There was only one rule: no shooting at someone's head. This wasn't like playing army with toy guns, where you could dispute a kill. "Bam! Bam! You're dead!" often received the response, "No, I'm not! There's no way you could shoot me from there!" Or it was, "I shot you first!" "No, I shot you first!"

With BB guns there was no debate. You knew it when you got hit, and you usually knew when you shot someone. A yelp, scream, or curse was an obvious sign. This was often followed by a snicker or laughter from the shooter. Inflicting pain wasn't necessarily funny, but someone's reaction to the surprise of being shot was. One moment you were being stealthy, the tension was astronomical, and then there's a hard-hurting sting, surprising the hell out of you. If this was a bullet, you might have died before you had a chance to be surprised.

Tonight's battle took place in the fall of 1972. Billy, Eddie, and I were on one side. Jimmy Babb, Rob, Greg, and my brother Tim were on the other side. We took Eddie on our team because he would be impatient and stupid and draw attention to himself, thus drawing attention away from us.

The late October Southern California nights were cool. I had on a T-shirt, my army shirt, which I always wore, and a light jacket. I would probably get too warm once the fighting began, but I felt some security having three layers of clothing. Everyone, except for Greg, was at least wearing a light jacket. He only had on a black T-shirt. He was bigger, older, and more physically mature. I think he was fourteen. His dark hair always seemed a bit greasy, and his face was slick and shiny and peppered with pimples. A cloud of spicy BO surrounded him. He didn't talk much, and he laughed nervously about everything.

We had just enough BB guns to go around. I had my Daisy lever action with a wood stock. It was extremely basic. There was no engraving on the wood, and

there weren't even any sights on the barrel. Still, I got to be a rather good shot by eyeing down the barrel. Billy had his lever action Daisy with a plastic stock. Rob had a Daisy Red Ryder lever action with an engraved wood stock. Rob's Dad had it as a kid. It was in good condition and still shot with decent power, but it had a louder Pop! when fired. You knew when Rob fired his gun.

We congregated in the concrete alley behind the apartments. The whole block and it was a long block, consisted of separate but identical eight-unit apartment complexes with identical two-bedroom apartments. I had been to Eddie's, Billy's, and Rob's apartment. The kitchen, living room, bathroom, and bedrooms were in the same place, the exact same, but they looked much different.

Rob's parents were divorced, and he lived with his petite, pale, thin mom, who kept their apartment dark, tidy, and clean. It always smelled kind of new. The courtyard in their complex was an arboretum. There was no room for kids to play, nor were they allowed to.

Billy's apartment smelled like a combination of Mexican food and flowery perfume. Strangely, they went together. It was a bit messy, but not dirty. Billy lived with his mom and two older sisters. Billy slept in the living room on the couch.

Eddie's apartment was close to squalor. I had been there, not long ago, and saw Eddie's mom splayed out on the couch passed out half-naked in a shiny blue jumpsuit with the zipper undone to her dark crotch. The apartment had a foreign, funky, but inspiring scent, which excited me.

My mom kept our apartment clean and tidy, even with five in our family: my mom, dad, and two brothers. Our courtyard was landscaped with bushes, a couple of small trees, and grass. There was a fenced play area with swings, a slide, and a small playhouse for the little kids.

The entire block couldn't be our battlefield, so we decided to narrow it down to the complex where Billy, Greg, and Eddie lived. Their complex wasn't very well maintained. The buildings hadn't been painted in a long time. Storm doors swung wildly with broken springs and hinges, and some had glass broken. Many windows had torn or missing screens. The courtyard looked like a desert with patches of grass. The people who lived in this complex weren't the kind of people who easily complained. They were the people other people complained about. This was the worst apartment complex on the block and the best place to have our BB gunfight.

We split into our groups and went in opposite directions. There were not a lot of places to hide. Billy, Eddie, and I ducked behind one of the apartment buildings in the small alley between the complexes. These alleys were filled with

small rocks, which made it impossible to be completely quiet walking through them. Billy told Eddie to go to the other end of the building. "I don't want to. Somebody might shoot me."

"If you don't go, I will shoot you," Billy said. "Go."

Eddie ran indiscriminately through the rocks in his dirty tattered tennis shoes, making a racket that echoed off the opposing buildings like in a canyon. He was wearing a ratty white long-sleeved sweatshirt that turned gray from age, and his jeans were too small. Eddie was made squirrely, neurotic, and fragile by his mother's neglect. Eddie was going to get shot, probably more than once.

Billy and I ducked behind a dumpster and waited quietly until we heard Eddie. "Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!" Eddie tore through the rocks back towards us, as Pop! Pop! Pop! went off in the distance behind him. He turned the corner and dashed into his apartment, and as the screen door slammed behind him, a BB blew a hole in the bottom aluminum panel and stuck in the wood door. From the sound of this Billy and I knew it was a shot from Greg. He had a pump BB gun that also shot pellets. He wasn't supposed to use pellets, and he wasn't supposed to pump more than five times, which we thought was equal to the power of our guns. He must have pumped fifteen or twenty times with that shot.

"I'm going to get on the roof. Cover me." At thirteen, I was wiry and athletic, so I climbed on the dumpster, and from there I slid my gun on the flat carport roof and quickly pulled myself up. Billy stayed behind because at twelve years old he still wasn't strong enough to pull up his short stocky body onto the roof.

The carport roof was a few feet away from the shallow-pitched apartment roof. I took a running start and leaped across. I walked the length of the roof as quietly as possible. All the roofs on the entire block were covered with a layer of gravel. My dad said it was to protect me from the hot California sun.

I walked to the other end of the roof where I thought the enemy was. I stood at the edge of the roof, and I noticed that the streetlights had come on. It was getting dark, and I was feeling afraid of getting shot. I lay down and peeked my head over the edge of the roof. Rob saw me before I saw him, and he aimed at my head but missed. I jumped back and immediately grabbed a fistful of gravel and threw it at him. Through the dim light, I watched it pepper his face like a shotgun blast.

"Ow! What the heck!" Rob squealed.

"You shot at my head!" I would have punched him if I were on the ground.

"Can't throw rocks!" Teary-eyed, Rob glared at me, and he walked away quickly on the long straight sidewalk home. Rob was a pasty white boy with a

little belly of privilege who walked like he had a stick up his ass. He went to private school, and he acted like playing with us was slumming anyway.

“Big Baby!” I yelled. My heart was still pounding.

Then Greg appeared from around the corner pumping his gun like a madman.

I moved back on the roof and got on my hands and knees. I wanted to yell at Greg for pumping his gun so much, but I didn't. It would have drawn more attention to me. I made my way back to the carport roof and climbed down on the dumpster. Billy was gone.

I circled around to the front by going through the adjoining complex. This was outside our battlefield, but it was the safest way. It also provided an element of surprise, because I came up right behind my brother, Tim. I told him to put his gun down and raise his arms. This seemed like a good idea, but thirty seconds later I realized that my prisoner was going to be a hardship to move around with. I couldn't just let him go. There had to be consequences for getting captured.

“I'll give you a five-second head start before I shoot. One, two. . .”

Without thinking about it, my brother took off through the rocks behind the apartments. I shot him in the back at “Three.” I was afraid he was going to get away. He yelled out and fell face first and began to cry. When I shot him, he was halfway down the alley, so I didn't think it would hurt that much.

“I'm going home! You shot me in the back!” he bellowed.

“Time Out! Time Out!” I yelled.

Billy and Jimmy Babb came running from different directions and ended up at me at about the same time. “What's happening?” Billy asked.

“He shot me in the back,” Tim blubbered.

Billy didn't care. He was my best friend, and Tim was my little brother. “Where's Rob?”

“He went home.” I didn't feel like telling him the rest of the story. “You can shoot me.” I tried to hand Tim my gun, cocked and ready.

“I'm going home.” Tim started to leave.

“Shoot me.” I couldn't have him go home without evening things up. If he shot me, I would have something to hold against him if he told on me. I pointed the barrel at my stomach. “Pull the trigger,” I told Tim.

“That's gonna hurt, Mick,” Billy said as he squinted, anticipating the pain.

“Pull the trigger,” Jimmy Babb encouraged.

Tim placed his finger on the trigger without touching the rest of the gun. My arms were getting tired holding it up by the barrel. Then he pulled the trigger, and I instantly dropped the gun. I heard a WHAP! then felt a deep sting. The pain

instantly made me mad, and although it didn't hurt enough to make me cry, I still wanted to punch Tim, but I didn't.

Tim was satisfied, and he walked home with Jimmy Babb.

There was only Billy and me against Greg, wherever Greg was, and I got scared. "Greg's pumping his gun too many times."

"Let's quit," Billy said. He was scared too.

Then we yelled for Greg, and we found him standing in the middle of the alley like a psycho pumping his gun. It made a hair-raising Clack! Clack! Clack! Because we knew what was next. He pointed and fired at us. Billy ran behind a dumpster, and I ducked behind a car in the carport. Greg continued to stand in the middle of the alley pumping his gun for his next shot, which he aimed at Billy. The BB made a PANG! off the dumpster that was loud enough to make me jump from where I was hiding, so I was sure it scared the shit out of Billy.

"Only five pumps!" Billy yelled. Greg laughed and continued to pump his gun. Then I saw Billy aim and fire at Greg, so I cocked my gun and shot. Billy cocked and fired again, and so did I. We shot one more time before Greg was done pumping. He fired at Billy again and hit the dumpster a second time. As Greg pumped his gun for his fourth shot at us, we took the opportunity to continue to fire back. Greg never said "ouch" or even winced when I knew my shots were hitting him. Billy was closer to him than I was. We shot Greg about fifteen times, as he laughed and laughed like he was being tickled. It was freaky.

He deserved to get shot in the head for trying to kill us. I had heard that pumping a gun twenty times was equal to a .22 rifle.

I didn't aim at his head, but I did shoot at his bare arms. I got his attention, and he fired his next shot in my direction. I dropped out of sight behind a car, and then Greg fired. His shot hit the rear window with a loud POP! and the glass turned into a 10,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. That noise was an alarm that told us to get the hell out of there.

Greg had already vanished when Billy and I met by the dumpster.

"Greg shot the window." I'm sure Billy saw it, but I still needed to say it.

"I'm not taking the blame," Billy breathed heavily.

"Me either. I'm going," I said.

"We weren't even here. We were at my house playing with my army guys," Billy said and waved goodbye, as he took off.

"See you tomorrow." I disappeared into the shadows of the carport and headed home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mike Sharlow is from La Crosse, Wisconsin, a small city on the banks of the Mississippi. In 2020 he moved to the Phoenix metro area in Arizona. His novel *Welcome to the Ranks of the Enchanted* is included in the William Charvat Special American Fiction Collections at the Ohio State University. He has over 40 short story publications in magazines and anthologies. A full bibliography of his work can be found at www.mikesharlowwriter.com

The World as Seen Between a Cracked Frame

A short story by James Callan

A red-hot speedster sits at the bottom of a cold, brown river. A shimmering hot rod, once known for its speed, has gone static, lost in the gloom. Brazen as fire, it would rocket across town, eject like a bat out of hell, erupt like a cheetah with a warhead up its ass --the antics of a wild, cocksure, egotist. Loud engine with a loud paint job, it would catch the light, a sun-scorched cherry, a scarlet flame, a motion trail of zero-to-sixty in 4.2 seconds, an insane, 228 mile-per-hour top-speed torpedo. If it had wings, it would have flown. If it had gills, it might now breathe. And maybe the silver Jesus fish on the back bumper is happy down there at the bottom of the drink. But one thing is for sure: the black, prancing horse has drowned, never to gallop again.

Submerged in the mud, a Ferrari F40 becomes just another sunken treasure lining the waterlogged bowels of a serpentine monster, an unforgiving ribbon of rushing water and agricultural runoff. Bisecting a small town into north and south, into two distinct neighborhoods --the okay and the rough-- a torrent of spring rain spiked with upstream, industrial pollutants cleaves through a dying community. It weaves and slithers, a menacing python, a hungry water dragon that swallows drunkards, the careless, those who misjudge its current, and adventurous, little boys. It drinks them in without a second thought, without regret, without a pause for remorse. Sports cars too. Any cars. Those who drive them. Those who elect to jump, end their misery. The river isn't picky. She does not reject what is offered to her.

Blue sky below, dark water above; an Italian luxury sports car reflects the world upside down in its cracked windshield as it loses control, fishtails, breaks through the Lego barrier of a crudely constructed, multicolored bridge, the architectural design of a nine-year-old. It spins, somersaults, and plummets to the deep, malicious current below. It does not splash as it impacts upon the sheet of dyed felt stretched out over the hardwood floor. The coin-sized lily pads do not stir, do not budge beyond the micro-motion that comes as a byproduct of a Hot Wheels toy car crashing down after a brief stint of free fall. There is a muted thud,

a single resounding note, as a vehicle with a price tag well north of a million dollars sinks to a cold, aquatic, automotive hell.

There is the ding of a microwave downstairs, the notification of a hot, steamy meal resurrected from its deep freeze, the best Daddy can manage after Mommy has passed on the torch, passed on her kitchen duties, passed on. Then the television goes on because it's easier to zone out than talk over reheated mashed potatoes and semi-thawed patties of whatever. One more circuit of play. One more reiteration. Finally, Daddy cries out his name, shouts out what is already known, that dinner is ready, or rather, simply "Dinner!" at the top of his lungs from the bottom of the stairs as a one-dollar, hand-me-down plaything bounces off the hand-dyed wool that pads the floorboards.

It's all familiar. It's been seen before. Over and over again in a young child's mind, showcased in his play, an obsessive loop, a glitching, instant replay. It's been seen time and time again. 471 times or more; 471, the generated horsepower of a Ferrari F40. It's been seen in daydreams, night dreams, nightmares, daymares, mares, prancing horses, flying horses, seahorses, automotive, and river-bottom corpses. It happens all the time, every day. Reconstructed, simulated, mimicked in Lego agony. Encore. Endless. There is no reality outside of a world that is reflected in the frame of a cracked, free-falling windshield. There is no time that exists beyond those fleeting seconds between a breached barrier and the surprisingly subtle splash of water below.

It happens all the time. And really, it never ends. But once, it began: an origin story of sorts, the birth of a comic book villain --if only it was all just pretend. Before the offshoots and scions, the propagated young branches of tragedy that had taken root, multiplied, bloomed, a profusion to steal the sun, blotting out the far horizon, stalling the future; before all this, the Mother Tree stood tall, its roots far-reaching, its moving shadows a long, prolific train, a black funeral dress spread wide and voracious like a volatile pathogen, an ambitious, vigorous cancer before it toppled over, crashed down to end an era, to begin what never ends, a tireless orbiting of the moment everything sank. And now, it has festered into an inescapable thought, a calamitous satellite circling the shattered globe of a child's mind. It happened last year. Of course, it wasn't actually a Ferrari F40.

The gray sky below, turbid water above; a Japanese minivan reflects the world upside down in its cracked windshield as it loses control, fishtails, breaks through the concrete barrier that was meant to stop it, and would have, but for the automotive battering ram, the 18-wheel behemoth, the semi-truck that paved the way to disaster, the catalyst of a mother's doom, a child's recurring nightmare. The trucker may have been texting, possibly flicking through the

library of music on his phone to select a soundtrack to alleviate the tedium of his multi-state route, or maybe he nodded off, though not likely while on a two-lane bridge passing through the heart of town, probably just looked away at the wrong time, spilled fresh, hot coffee down his chin or shed live embers from a cigarette into his lap, or maybe he just plain-and-simple fucked up, coughed real hard and jerked the wheel, or decided to leave life behind, leave his more-than-likely cheating wife to do as she pleases without him, take out a minivan in the process, its driver, a mother, collateral damage in the heat of the moment. And what a moment it was, encapsulated in time, preserved in a young boy's memory cells, played out on the eternal reel projecting catastrophe in the cinema of a motherless child's mind.

The timing was perfect, cruel, and concise. On his bike, the boy crossed over the river, and pedaled into the rough neighborhood against his parents' advice. He was rebelling, being adventurous, testing boundaries, bending rules, exploring new territories of misbehavior, new territories of his town, gauging the consequence that came with exerting his will in disregard of Mom and Dad.

Coincidentally, his mother didn't see him as she too drove over the bridge heading in the opposite direction, and may or may not have seen what came next, the moments leading up to a truck veering sideways to smash into her Toyota Sienna, to smash into her side, to pin her arms and break them, to crush her ribcage making breathing more than a little difficult, but not so difficult as breathing while underwater, which would become her impending challenge when the truck slammed on its brakes just in time to slow its momentum from sending its bulk from plummeting over the edge, but not quite in time to stop from obliterating the traffic barrier, from pushing the devastated minivan over the boundary into the river below, from reducing a five-star safety rated vehicle into an ornate anchor, a seven-seated concave deathtrap firmly resisting a cold current at the base of a sediment-rich artery.

A boy on his bike takes it all in. Wide stare, his wet eyes reflect a family tragedy. As if a movie, an action sequence, he watches, transfixed, pauses, replays. A son witnesses his mother's demise. He sees it once in real-time. He sees it, innumerable, in his tortured mind, his prepubescent, broken brain.

His adventures are forgotten, discarded, and cast aside, like sparks of an automotive accident, a truck colliding with a minivan, little fire sprites taking flight, will-o'-the-wisp scattering, crashing, kamikaze on wet pavement, gone cold, gone tumbling down into the turbulent waters below. His escapades have vaporized in the flame of a semi-truck jackknifed across a bridge spanning a cruel torrent. His exploits have gone transparent, vanished in the bite of his budding grief. His

adventures are mute, humble, and infinitesimal. They have been upstaged, waylaid, and rendered obsolete by their evil twin. There is no more adventure. There is only misadventure. The worst of its kind.

There are 365 days in a year, 137 more days than the max MPH capable in a Ferrari F40, 106 fewer days than the generated horsepower of its 2.9L twin-turbo V8 engine, its mechanical heart. It doesn't beat like a human heart, but its pistons hammer out a rhythm like no human heart could ever muster, wouldn't want to --there's overkill and then there's being killed. The human heart beats about 35 million times a year, about the cost in dollars of twenty-three Ferrari F40s, about the cost of one thousand Toyota Sienna minivans, far less than the cost of one mother. The human heart doesn't bleed when someone grieves, but it aches, it burns, it weighs about 35 million pounds, weighs down the soul, pins it under the insurmountable hurt, keeps it there, hostage, below the deep current of transpiring days and nights.

Exactly one year after losing his mother, a child bikes to the bridge where he had last seen her. He brings his favorite toy, red like her lipstick. He pockets his Ferrari F40, fast and indomitable on any road. He stops between two neighborhoods, one that is okay, and another that is rough. He stops below the apex of a shallow, upside down, U-shaped steel frame, atop the flat asphalt it supports and beside the replaced, concrete barrier that stands out, newer than the rest. He stops, breathes in the chilled air, looks down to the black water which he hovers above, and floats beyond, like an angel overhead, casting its semi-shadow across the fast-moving water, a vague silhouette dead-center over one of our world's many capillaries, many avenues leading to an unavoidable end.

A Ferrari F40 rides the guard rail like a circus act, like Evel Knievel, like an idiot or a drunk, like a ten-year-old kid. Without regard for safety --the rules be damned-- a red-hot speedster disengages from the small, sweaty hand that holds it, that guides it, racing onward, top speed, a 228 mile-per-hour fledgling learning to fly, a prancing horse that thinks it might be Pegasus, an underwater ornament that never learned to swim. A child reacts and reaches out to grab open, free air, its cold molecules spilling through his little, clammy fingers. He panics, unable to cope, unable to reenact his favorite scene, the only scene in the whole of the world. He can't bear losing it; that which is most dear to his heart, the overtaxed organ that aches as if an eighteen-wheeler smashed into its purple mass. He can't bear losing it; the chance to relive the moment.

He looks down into the raging water. He lets go. He sees the world upside down.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



James Callan grew up in Minnesota and currently lives on the Kāpiti Coast, New Zealand. His wife and son are great apes of the human distinction, but the remainder of his family consists of varying lifeforms, including cats, a dog, pigs, cows, goats, and chickens. His writing has appeared in *Carte Blanche*, *Bridge Eight*, *White Wall Review*, *Mystery Tribune*, and elsewhere. He is the author of *A Transcendental Habit* (Queer Space, 2023).

The Old Man and the Parachute Jump

A short story by Reeve Chudd

My ninth year, 1960, was one of the greatest of my life. In the summer, my father took my brother, Andy (one year my senior), and me away from our daily Pacific Ocean swims to Cooperstown, New York, to see the Baseball Hall of Fame, and then to Manhattan to see the New York Stock Exchange in action, followed by lunch at Fraunces Tavern, where General Washington bid goodbye to his victorious troops. Later that same year, I deviously calculated the incubation rate for contracting the mumps, intentionally exposed myself to a victim of that malady, and, because I was blessed with the arithmetic gene, correctly came down with a good case of the disease so as to be excused from attending school on the first day (and each subsequent day) of the greatest World Series in history, the New York Yankees versus the Pittsburgh Pirates, viewing gleefully every televised pitch.

Creating just one of these memories would have made for a very good year indeed, but when my maternal grandfather, Sam Morro, took Andy and me for our first visit to Coney Island, well, that was just chocolate fudge icing on an already overwhelmingly delicious cake. As a boy, Sam had emigrated with his mother and brother from Odessa in Russian Ukraine, moved to San Francisco in time to experience the great earthquake and fire of 1906, and then traveled with his family to Brooklyn, where he made his home. And while I'm told that his performance as a father and husband was never a work of art and he was ineffective at consistently making a living and supporting his family, he was one of the most entertaining human beings who ever walked this earth and, most important, enjoyed his role as grandfather-playmate as much, if not more, than Andy and I reveled in his company. Grandpa Sam, at age 70, was more fun than I ever was or shall ever be, and for his wonderful memory, this story must be told.

Our entourage to Coney Island consisted of the three of us plus my great uncle, Lou Imershein (Sam's brother-in-law), and my two first cousins from Long Island, Bill and Rick Frankfort (sons of my mother's sister, Naomi), who were only a couple of years older than Andy and I. We arrived at Steeplechase Park of Coney Island in the morning, walking and singing with Sam on the way; my brother and I dressed in matching shirts and gray woolen slacks. Our wardrobe in those days was more appropriate for a business meeting than a playful outing;

my father insisted that, in Manhattan, one must never wear jeans or, as he called them, “dungarees”. For me personally, there would be no hand-me-downs; my mother’s slavery to fashion infested my wardrobe simultaneously and identically with Andy’s. Then, as was the accepted practice when serving as our shepherds, Sam and Lou gave us some money and then proceeded to nap outside on a Boardwalk bench while my brother, my cousins and I frolicked within the indoor Steeplechase building which housed many rides and carnival games. We all purchased circular paper multiple-ride tickets to suspend from our necks (a clown picture in the center, with sections on the circumference which ride stewards would punch out), and laughed and screamed the morning away.

One such ride was a huge, circular slide of dark, polished wood, which we all rode down multiple times. The slide was a vision of handcrafted artisanship, almost like a mahogany aqueduct, not only smooth from a high gloss varnish but further lubricated with wax, occasionally added by the ride steward. At the bottom was a spinning wooden turntable to catch the sliders and throw them further into dizzying euphoria. Rick and Bill competed with Andy and me as we raced each time from the turntable to the top of the ride, hoping that the ride steward would choose one of us to throw the next supply of wax beads down the slide. Each time we rode down the slide, we all achieved that glorious state of childhood fun: total abandon based upon sensual overload. Even today, I’m surprised that each of us didn’t pull facial muscles from over-smiling. The only unfortunate development of these many excursions down the slide was the increasingly dense deposit of wax permeating the fibers of our woolen slacks, which would play significantly in our experience on Coney Island later that same day.

At this heightened state of existence, we returned to awaken Sam and Lou for lunch, and they promptly took us to Nathan’s Famous restaurant, at the corner of Stillwell and Surf Avenues. Although Nathan’s hadn’t invented the hot dog on a bun (such innovation has often been attributed to Charles Feltman, of Feltman’s Gardens, just a few doors down Surf Avenue), we were about as close to the hallowed birthplace of the tube steak as one could get.

I have often found that my experience of taste is measurably enhanced by the emotional state with which I greet a meal. For example, my memory of the skirt steak which I ate at a run-down Cooperstown bar just after our visit to the Baseball Hall of Fame was that of a glorious feast, but Andy tells me that the

meat would have served better as material for bulletproof vests. Similarly, I cannot help but believe that the hot dog I had at Nathan's that day would have been suitable for (and enjoyed lovingly by) God himself (with apologies to vegetarians). The only "grace" which I thought at the time was to give thanks to taste buds.

As we savored our mustard-laden comestibles and washed them down with perfect lemonade, I stared out at the sparse clouds rolling across the sky, above the silhouettes of three of the most famous amusement park rides of the time: the Cyclone Roller Coaster, the Wonder Wheel (an enormous Ferris wheel) and a magnificent steel girder edifice, the Parachute Jump (sometimes referred to as "Brooklyn's Eiffel Tower").

Standing about 260 feet, the Parachute Jump (purchased from the 1939 New York World's Fair, where it was known more appropriately as the "Parachute Drop"), appeared on the Brooklyn skyline like an unfinished and overzealously constructed Erector Set mushroom. At the very top of the thin tower was the umbrella platform which held the cables for twelve benches upon which would sit its victims.

Looking from *terra firma*, I watched the riders on the benches of the Parachute Jump rising slowly until they reached the top girder umbrella, at which point they reversed direction and began their descent, whereupon their parachutes opened in slow-motion splendor. The romance of this vision was certainly not lost on me, and the die was cast when Andy, my trusted protector, and champion (the consummate salesman when it came to risky endeavors for the two of us), suggested that we try the experience.

Today, with amusement parks fearing liability for the injuries sustained by riders of their more fear-inducing attractions, one can only imagine that each seat of a "parachute jump" ride would be encased in a heavy gondola and magnificently cushioned and fortified with hydraulic suspension and dampeners. To the contrary, Coney Island's Parachute Jump had twelve flat, backless benches, each a mere slab of leather-covered wood held at each end by a 250-foot cable connected to the top girder umbrella. By the time I got my ride, whatever original cushioning had been installed beneath the leather covering of that flat bench had long been flattened by the body weight of millions of buttocks that preceded my own.

In addition, the texture on the leather covering of the bench had been polished smooth by those same derrières, and with the tremendous wax deposits now borne on my backside, I unsuccessfully attempted to position and stabilize myself upon a near frictionless surface. In fact, the only things holding my body to that bench were a flimsy seat belt and my death grip on the cable on my side of the bench. The terror which I felt being buckled into that rickety bench was only exacerbated by the realization that as the bench was raised at the beginning of the ride, I would have a perfect vision of the increasing void between my feet and the ground.

I had expected that, just as we had practiced in the Steeplechase building, on rides requiring two riders, the two sets of brothers would be paired off, Andy and I, and then Bill and Rick. On the Parachute Jump, however, the ride stewards required an adult to share a bench with a minor. So, the visitors from California, Andy and I, were to be the first riders, and Grandpa Sam (ever so willingly) sat with me, while Uncle Lou sat with Andy. Notwithstanding the presence of my white-haired grandfather just inches away, my growing anticipation of horror was taking its toll, and I was desperate for the assurances of my fearless sibling to quell my mounting terror.

Now, being a couple of years older than my grandfather was at that time, I am quite aware that a child's fear can often be temporarily replaced with distraction or bafflement, the manifestation of which is normally to render the child mute in silent contemplation. Such was the devious ploy of Andy and my grandfather. With the cooperation of the ride stewards, Andy and Lou were placed in the bench in front of mine, facing me, and thus, pondering in confusion why they were placed facing the opposite direction to my own, I was lost in thought until the first jerk of the cables brought me back to the realization that we were being lifted to our deaths.

As we rose, Sam continued to demand that I not look down, and Andy focused on me, yelling repeatedly "You're okay", as he did whenever he sensed my fear. Naturally, my gaze was drawn to the shrinking world below me, but moments before we reached the zenith of our climb, my brother released one hand from his grip on his bench cable and extended it toward my grandfather, pointing while looking at me and demanding, "Watch out for Grandpa." Of course, I thought Andy was directing me to be brave and to care for the ancient,

frail one next to me, and he skillfully hoodwinked my ego into thinking I could actually exert control over the situation. Immediately, my gaze shifted from the ground to the face of the old man in my charge.

All hell broke loose when our benches stopped their ascent at the top of the girder umbrella of the Parachute Jump. With a loud snap, our cables were released into greased pulleys so that we would have the sensation of free fall. Fortunately, none of us was wearing eyeglasses, as such lenses would have surely been shattered with my screams. Sam was already going deaf by that time, and I've always felt a slight sense of guilt that my shrieks in some way hastened the demise of his hearing.

The parachute, which had looked so enormous from my safe viewing at Nathan's Famous, was about twenty feet in diameter and so diaphanous that it appeared threadbare at first glance. We were undoubtedly falling to our doom, and the silent faces of Uncle Lou and Andy bore the same bug-eyed, petrified shock which I was vocalizing. But as I looked over at my grandfather, seeing the updraft of wind playing with his perfectly white hair and bushy eyebrows, I saw that he was smiling gently. Yes, this old man looked like he was enjoying himself, and I searched in vain for telltale signs of tension or stress in his face and neck. Was this wonderful man of letters so ignorant that he didn't recognize that he was about to join his ancestors?

I saw fit to scream for the entire descent, and just as our bench was about to meet the hard earth and convert our bodies into street pizza, the cables held fast and some primitive shock absorption system allowed our bench to stop in mid-air with only enough force to drive my spine through the top of my head.

"We made it!" screamed Andy with glee, as I gasped for air and carefully checked to see if I'd successfully controlled my body's waste functions. Uncle Lou had done his duty, and he was done, declining another ride, and so, undaunted, Grandpa Sam rode successively with Bill, and then Rick, as if the experience were a hayride. Now, looking back on that day, I'm certain that I, in my seventies, would never have the fortitude that he exhibited that day, at 70. And the silent nirvana he exhibited while, by all appearances, he was about to meet his maker, will forever be my fondest vision of him within my mind's eye.

As we walked away to catch the subway from Coney Island, Sam explained to us, in inspired words that rivaled the battle speech of Henry V, how our manhood had been tested that day, and how proudly we'd performed. As for me, I was swearing under my breath never again to allow my brother to coax me into risking life and limb for a quick thrill, an oath I'd forgotten by dinnertime. As time converts so many frightening childhood experiences into pillow-soft, smile-inducing recollections of youthful excitement, our trip to Coney Island is now a comforting parcel of the reminiscences of what turned out to be a very, very good year, indeed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Reeve Chudd is a retired trusts and estates attorney from Los Angeles, now residing in Carmel, Indiana. He wanted to become a professional writer, but he didn't want to sacrifice eating. His four university degrees, when added now to \$4.65, will purchase a grande latte at Starbucks. He is on FaceBook, but no other social media. This piece is a reminiscence of his glorious childhood.

PENNSYLVANIA

A short story by Stevie doCarmo

“So is she what you thought?”

“Who?”

“Who,” Will said. “Earth to Em. Coryn.”

They had just walked out of the museum. Were moving slowly, the two of them, across the deserted campus.

“Not after the pictures you’d shown me,” she said.

They walked.

“She’s Cory now,” she said. “Remember?”

Cicadas churred. It was still hot out. She watched the sidewalk under her espadrilles.

“I kept looking at her during that talk,” she said. “I didn’t even know it was her.”

“Why were you looking at her?”

She looked at him. “*Look* at her.”

The car was up ahead, parked across the street from campus. No traffic. Students wouldn’t swarm town again for two more weeks.

“So you gonna call her?” he said. He carried the gallery pamphlet with her number scrawled on it.

“Not calling your ex.”

He gazed up at trees, grinning.

“We’re married now,” he said. “Exes are ex-spouses. Didn’t you read the manual?”

She didn’t answer.

“You’d like her,” he said. “Really, truly. I mean it.”

Sunset blared out at them from between buildings.

“And isn’t that something you’re supposed to do?” he said. “For Rob?”

“What.”

“Meeeeeeet new people?”

They crossed the road. Got in the car. He put the windows down but didn't start the engine.

She stared into the dashboard.

“A few months I dated Coryn,” Will said. “Six years ago. So what.”

“Cory.”

“*Core-ree.*”

She stared at the dash.

“I think you'd like her.”

A bright glob of nothing in the middle of her laptop screen.

She ignored it for several minutes. Tried reading around it. Then pressed her palms to her eyes. Listened to herself breathe.

She found her purse in the kitchen. Chased a pill with tap water. Climbed the stairs and lay down on the bedcovers.

A crow on the patio out back cawed incessantly.

Will got home. Climbed the stairs. Sat on the bed.

“Uh-oh. You okay?”

“Migraine.”

He put his hand on her forehead.

“It's not a fever,” she said.

“Need anything?”

“Kill that fucking crow.”

She peered around the edge of the front door. Again.

The man and woman were still out there. In a top-down convertible Mercedes curbed-parked right in front of the house. Loudly discussing the *last* time he tried to teach her to drive stick.

She'd be late for Rob. She stood there, purse on hip. Hands at sides. Eyes closed. Breathing.

Two lightly sweat-glazed girls on the couch in the spartan living room. Laptops out. Books all around. The ancient lumpy-glass windows behind them hoisted open to the warm breeze.

“Susan, Tashi,” Cory said. “This is Emma.”

They took two cane-back chairs out to the porch behind the kitchen. Nothing around the old farmhouse but woods.

“You rent this place?”

“It’s the College’s,” Cory said. “We’re on a corner of the old preserve.” She leaned back in the creaking chair. Fingers laced over her stomach. Knees spread. “Basically I just caretake it for the year. That and call if I see bears.”

Emma nodded. The bears went right by her. “Your students? Inside?”

“My workshop seniors. Yeah. Two of them.”

The semi-terrifying buzz-cut had grown out some since museum day. Softer now. Gesturing toward feline. Same ratty denim overalls, though. Same sandalwood cloud around her. Same naked face, freckled and a touch sun-burned around the nose, the startling gray eyes.

“So what are you doing?”

“Like—right now?”

“Life-wise.”

“Oh. I’m—a tech writer,” Emma said. “Semi-freelance.” She cleared her throat. “There’s an agency in Chicago that emails me work.”

“Want one?” She’d pulled a tangerine from her overalls’ pocket. “Tashi brought a whole crate.”

“I’m good.”

She dug in a thumbnail. “What do you for yourself?”

“For myself?”

“Mm-hmm.”

She watched Cory’s thumb work. “I—take pictures. I read. I write little things.”

“Gonna let me read something?”

Emma guffawed. “You’re joking.”

Cory laughed. Dropped a chunk of peel on the wood planks.

“Emma.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m so glad you called.”

A photo of her on the old Airstream-style fridge inside. In some woman’s arms. The woman’s chin was on her shoulder. They both smiled wide at the camera, verge of laughter, faces flash-lit, nighttime dark all around.

“Your sister?”

Cory looked over. “Girlfriend.” She was washing her hands.

Emma leaned closer. Tried to think of what to say.

“She’s older than you,” she somehow landed on.

“Yeah. Goin’ like a freight train for forty.”

She twisted off the spigot. Stepped to Emma’s side, drying her hands on a dishrag. “Anna,” she said. “In New York. In case you’re about to ask. Stage manager.”

She tossed the rag at the counter. A boyish motion. The two students had gone. The kitchen had filled with sunset.

“Surprised?”

Emma cocked an eyebrow. Looked her host up and down.

Cory laughed. “That was funny.”

Her voice was girly.

“I meant to bring you wine,” Emma called from the driveway, unlocking the car.

“Oh, gosh,” from the front door. “I’m four years sober.”

“No.”

“Emma. Please.”

“Nuh-uh. You go.”

“They want to see you, too.”

“No they don’t. They’re your friends. And that woman fucking hates me.”

He collapsed against the doorframe. Exaggerated exasperated. “No one on this *earth* hates you, Em.”

“She’s condescending as shit to me. Every time I see her. Just because I went to a state school and she went to—fucking—Brown.”

“Show some compassion. Ivy Leaguers don’t like when people are smarter and prettier than them.”

She glared from under her brows.

“They’re only here tonight,” he said. “Come on. Wine it out.”

“I’m exploring sobriety.”

He looked at her.

“I’m not kidding,” she said. “I hung out with your ex. You know I have limits and you can’t just sneak up on me with shit.”

An email from Bethany. Her senior-year housemate. Now in Philadelphia. Married. Pregnant.

She stared at the screen. Tried to figure out what to write back.

“I just read Castor and Pollux.”

He looked up. “You what now?”

“A story of hers. ‘Castor and Pollux,’” Emma said.

She was on one sofa, laptop out. He was on the other, changing the strings on his old Martin.

“What’s it about?”

“Two twins. In Wyoming. And one comes out to the other.”

“Yeah? Good?”

“Jesus Christ,” stretching an arm over her head. “Intense is what it is. She doesn’t have siblings, does she?”

“Corynnnnn.” He was fighting a tuning peg, wrists bent awkwardly. “No. Only child.”

She watched him.

“Did you know she has a girlfriend?” she said. “In New York?”

He gave up on the peg. Collapsed back into the sofa, guitar on his lap. Looked at her. Obviously hungover.

“No,” he said.

She studied him. “Think it’s strange?”

He bent down a long, waving string end. Face-shrugged.

“We’re modern people,” he said.

She considered this.

“Well, was she, like— *bi* when you were going out?”

He leered. “No.”

They looked at each other.

She shut the laptop.

“You ever read any of her stuff?” she said. “She’s a little bit of a big fucking deal.”

“Yeah?”

“That story’s in *The Paris Review*.”

He still smiled. “She wasn’t a writer when I knew her.”

She looked at him. The question implicit.

“She was a party girl,” sitting up again, going back to the tuning peg. “She was a business major.”

She watched him work.

“I feel like you showed me some awful video of her once.”

“Yeah?”

“A New Year’s thing,” she said. “A Y2K party. She was completely trashed.”

“Sounds right.”

“She had long hair. A sequin dress.”

“Emma.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Cory’s knee was drawn up, her fingers laced over it. “I like that you never wear makeup.”

She smiled. Was examining her own fingerprints. Pinching them. For no good reason.

They sat on a bench outside the hulking Victorian mansion that housed the College’s English Department.

“You don’t say.”

“Not many of your people have the good sense not to.”

She looked over. "Who are my people?"

"You know."

She bugged her eyes. "Who are my people?"

"Ridiculously pretty people."

She went back to her fingerprints. Other hand now. "I'm frumpy."

"You're not frumpy. You're rumpled."

They both laughed.

"It's all this linen you wear."

A male student waved from across the house's manicured yard. Cory waved back.

"Don't come over here," she murmured.

They watched together.

"Frumpy is just what they call women who refuse to wear clownface."

Emma looked at her. "Wow."

Cory thrust her face closer. Squinted interestedly.

"What?"

She knuckled Emma's hair aside. "Your ears aren't even pierced."

"Nuh-uh. Was always too afraid."

"Of what?"

"That gun."

Cory studied her. "You're a little too afraid of things, Emma."

She shrugged. "That's my diagnosis."

"What is?"

"Generalized anxiety disorder."

Cory looked at her. Emma straightened her posture. Collapsed it again with a comedic sigh.

"I know I'm not exotic."

"Emma."

"Mm-hmm."

"Look at me."

She did.

“You’re exotic as fuck.”

Emma looked back out at the yard.

“Do you hear me?” Cory said.

She nodded.

“Do you hear me?”

“I hear you.”

“Do you hear me?”

She laughed.

“I’ll pierce your ears if you want,” Cory said.

She was quiet a moment. “How?”

“Sewing needle. Ice cube.”

She drew her own knee up. Rested her cheekbone on it. “Can I think about it?”

“Yes,” mugging, imitating Emma’s deeper voice. “You can think about it.”

They sat.

Emma turned to Cory, grinning. “*You’re* ridiculously pretty.”

“Ha. No I am not.”

“Even with that U.S. Marine haircut.”

“I’m not even standard-issue pretty,” Cory said. “I just miss. And you know what?”

“I don’t concede.”

“I’m fine with it. You know why?”

“Why.”

“Because I’m sexy as fuck.”

Cory waved at someone leaving the English Department building.

“Sorry I keep cursing,” she said.

The sun’s rays were tipping. A pack of shouting, laughing girls passed at the far end of the yard.

“So I’m just gonna ask,” Cory said. “Where’s your family?”

Emma's cheekbone was back on her knee. She didn't answer.

"Never mind," Cory said.

She flicked Emma's thigh.

An SUV blaring hip-hop passed on the road behind them.

"It was hard for me to call you that first time," Emma said.

"I know it was."

"I'm opening that Macallan Lily and Danny left," he called from the kitchen.
"Want a snort?"

"No thanks."

"Ice? Water?"

"None for me, thanks!"

He stuck his head in the living room. Looked at her.

"Really exploring sobriety?"

She climbed the steps to the mansion's stone terrace. Spotted Cory and her class on the lawn below it, sitting in sun and shade, everyone writing away in notebooks. Cory, too.

Eleven girls. Two boys.

One boy wore combat boots. A way-too-big rugby jersey. Lots of eyeliner.

A blue jay swooped over the scene.

Cory flipped a page. Kept writing.

A pony-tailed girl got up to go. Bent and swapped cheek-kisses with Cory as she left.

Emma watched how Cory held her forehead as she wrote. Waited for the moment she'd look up. See her. Smile.

"I *hate* those fucking things."

A carpenter bee. Hovering in front of them. Emma looked around for something to swing at it.

"No no no," Cory, holding her forearm. "They're reincarnated people. Why do you think they come stare at us like that?"

She slid the photo out from between the book's pages. Her old, tattered copy of *Charlotte's Web*.

She stood examining the picture in the sunlight pouring through the bedroom window.

Her mother.

One of those vintage snapshots with a white border all around. Yellowed. Faded. Cracked through one corner.

On a beach, she stood. A beanpole in a paisley bikini. Hair moving in a breeze. The top of her head was lost to sun glare.

Emma touched a fingertip to the teenager's face, shoulder.

"I met someone," she whispered.

"I've been trying so hard not to say I told you so."

She didn't look up from her book. "Don't break a streak."

"Except really."

"What."

"Really."

"What?"

"You and Coryn."

Now she looked. "Cory. Asshole."

He was crawling across the sofa. Coming at her.

"And something else."

"Ow."

"Em."

"What."

"Why do you have to be so sexy?"

"Just to irk you. Get off."

"Are you gonna leave me for your new girlfriend?"

She was plucking sunflower seeds from an oily paper sack. Cracking them one by one between her incisors.

“Emma.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“What do you want to ask me?”

Emma sat down in the grass. Had just completed a slow circuit of the little farmhouse, taking pictures.

“Why do you think I want to ask something?”

“Everybody wants to ask people things.” She split another seed. Inspected it. “So here’s permission. Ask me anything.”

Emma crossed her legs. Skimmed her palm over the tops of grass blades.

“I don’t know if it’s a why or a how.”

“Ask both.”

She skimmed the grass.

“Why and how did you change so much in just a few years?”

Cory set the paper sack by Emma’s knee. Leaned back on her palms, stretching her legs in front of her.

“I wanted to is why. I just plain did it is how.”

Emma looked at her.

“That means the queerness, too,” Cory said. “If you’re wondering.”

Emma pressed a tuft of grass down with her palm. Released it. Watched it climb again. A frantic black ant ran on one blade.

“My father died,” Cory said, “and it prompted the exact freak-out soul-search you’d expect. Within a few months, I saw I’d grown up in a tiny cult. And I never wanted to be in another one. So I killed the scaredy-cat daughter in me and turned myself into an artist and knocked it off with boys already because I knew it was just a matter of time till I turned one into my next Jim Jones.”

They looked at each other. Sunset beamed through the trees, lighting Cory’s face.

“You know who that is?”

“Yes.”

“Plus the overwhelming, and I mean the truly vast majority of boys, would be happy to have that role.”

Emma reached into the paper sack. Brought up a single seed. Jostled it on her palm.

“Do you think Will’s like that?”

“That’s for you to decide.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “You went out with him, too.”

“I was so drunk senior year of college I don’t even remember how Will and I met.”

They looked at the woods. A breeze rustled the trees. Sun shone through them.

Emma tried to get into the sunflower seed with a thumbnail.

“Here,” Cory said.

She split it with her teeth. Gave it back to Emma. “Better eat that. Skinny cat.”

She held the seed in her palm, studying it. “It never would’ve occurred to me you could decide to like—girls.”

Cory laughed.

“Emma.”

She looked at her.

“You have no idea how easy it is.”

Emma chimp-mouthed the sunflower seed off her palm.

“Everyone’s born queer,” Cory said. “Sex rules are just the first fences they put up around us when we’re little. You kick those first fences down and it’s outrageous the changes you can make to yourself. I mean it’s like you grow a whole new brain.”

“I’m trying to imagine Will taking this advice.”

“Almost no boys can do it,” Cory said. “I’m not saying it’s their fault. Or they’re defective. It’s just fences aren’t the word for what they put around them. They put four-foot-thick, fifty-foot-high fortress walls. It’s sad but they’re write-offs. Almost all of them.”

Emma went back to palm-skimming the grass.

“Nice camera.”

“My birthday present,” Emma said. “From Will.”

“When was your birthday?”

“June.”

“Get out!” Cory thumped the ground with her palms. “What day?”

“The seventeenth.”

“We’re Gemini.”

She stood frozen in place, half-unconscious with rage, and for about two seconds she wasn’t sure if she was just envisioning it or actually doing it: grabbing the frat boy’s giant soda cup from the tabletop in front of him and pouring its entire icy contents over his moussed-up, bitch-ass head.

Cory had her hand. Was thrusting those freaky gray eyes into her line of sight.

“Hey,” she said. “Hey.”

On the sidewalk outside she sputtered out what she’d heard.

Cory exploded in laughter.

“Good lord, Emma! Who cares? Who doesn’t love Tom Sawyer?”

Her badass leather motorcycle jacket. The one she’d bought the year before at the local consignment store and never once worn.

She slipped it back off. Threw it on the sofa. Went quickly out the front door when she saw Will pull up in front of the house.

Imagine her *runwaying* that crazy thing on the sidewalk. In the movie-theater aisle. Everyone staring. Thinking fuck you.

“So what’s the anxiety about? And don’t say you don’t know or it’s complicated because it’s not and of course you do.”

Emma had the phone between ear and shoulder. Was examining the little embroidery scissors she held, turning them over in the bedside-lamp light. Will downstairs.

“My mother left my dad and me.”

She listened to Cory breathe.

“How old were you?”

“Eight,” Emma said.

Another pause.

“Where is she?”

“California. Last I heard.”

“Doing what?”

“Living with a guy who has a car dealership who used to hang around with the Manson Family.”

More quiet. Then the scratch, Emma thought, of pen on notebook paper.

“How did your father die?” Emma said.

The scratching stopped.

“Nine-Eleven.”

Emma set the scissors down on the comforter. “Jesus Christ. Was he a— firefighter?”

“Financier.”

The teenage girl with Down Syndrome. The one who always rushed, hands clasped, to greet her. Standing in the big window by the stack of hand baskets like she fucking *knew* Emma was on the way.

Aisle after aisle she'd stuck with her that time last winter. Chatting. Recommending cereals. Telling Emma how pretty she was. An assistant manager had finally peeled her off. Then winked—*winked*—at Emma.

She spun on her heel.

It made the orange-vested boy pushing the long row of rattling, banging carts do a double-take. Some mentally ill chick practicing drill steps in the parking lot.

“Did Will want kids when you were with him?”

They gazed off across the playground together. The College's spires jutted up over treetops a half-mile away.

“Gosh.”

“It's a shitty question.”

“Nuh-uh,” Cory said. “No. I mean—not shitty.”

They were on the swings. Side by side.

“Yes,” she said. “He did.”

A man walked a Rottweiler on the far side of a wrought-iron fence.

“We were way way way too young for that kind of talk and that's basically when I knew we were done.”

Emma's espadrilles were in the grass ten feet away.

"Does he still?"

"What."

"Want kids?"

"Yes," Emma said.

Cory lifted her bare foot with her booted one. Let it drop.

"Do you?"

Emma drew in the dirt with her big toe. "I'll come around."

Cory planted her heels. Started herself swinging. The chains creaked.

She skid-stopped herself again.

"You know that's not something anyone should come around on. Right?"

Emma stared at the ground. Kept drawing.

"People should only have kids if they're desperate to and they're a hundred percent sure they're gonna be a-*may*-zing parents."

Emma laughed out loud.

"What?" Cory grinned. Rolled her eyes like I-amuse-you?

"The whole species would be extinct in a century!"

"Emma."

All her mirth dissolved in an instant. Who knew why.

She rested her head on the swing's chain.

"Who cares?" Cory said.

She didn't answer.

"You see the sun?" Cory said. "The trees? The hills?"

She rubbed her head against the chain. "Yes."

"The birds and clouds?"

"Yes."

"Beautiful. Right?"

She didn't answer.

"They won't be any less beautiful without people here looking at them."

The man and the Rottweiler had U-turned. Were walking back the other way.

Cory stood. Pulled Emma up out of the swing.

“You could’ve been the mother of my children,” Emma said.

“Not me.”

“No. I mean—Will knew she was moving here. A college friend of his told him last spring. But it was a total freak he came in and spotted her.”

“At the gallery talk.”

“Yes.”

He was writing in his legal pad. “And she’s—a professor?”

“An artist in residence. A one-year thing.”

He nodded. Wrote. “A writer.”

“Yes.”

Everyone she knew’s name went in the pad.

He wrote for a while. Rob. “Spoiled bitch” over and over for all she knew.

He finally set the pad and fountain pen on the table beside him. Smiled at her.

“Will’s old girlfriend,” he said. “There’s a fun wrinkle for a new friendship.”

She laughed halfheartedly.

“It’s barely a thing. I totally forget ninety-nine percent of the time.”

“Yeah?”

“The fact she’s—queer now kind of takes all that tension out of it.”

He nodded. Let some quiet seep into the sunny room.

“Well that’s terrific, Emma,” he said.

She felt herself paste on a smile.

He fingered the cleft in his chin.

“And she has a partner?”

“In New York. Yeah.” She cleared her throat quietly. “A kind of older woman.”

“Lots older?”

“Almost forty,” she said. And immediately felt stupid because no way Rob wasn’t her father’s age.

“Long way away,” he said.

“I think she’s gonna go spend winter break with her.”

He put his cheek on his fist. It was his tell: he’d shift the conversation into a higher gear, if possible.

“You happy about that?”

Immediately she was crying.

He stood, tall gangly man, and got a box of tissues from his desktop. Set it in on the coffee table in front of her.

She didn’t take one. Just palm-wiped her face, mouth-breathing.

“Friendships have intense phases,” he said, sitting again. “Right?”

He picked up the pad again. Not yet the pen.

“I don’t really do friendships,” she said. “I just fall in love with people and then they hurt me and that’s that.”

She wiped her nose on the back of her hand.

“It’s just the thing with my mother over and over.”

Funny. He usually gobbled that shit up. Now he just reached for the fountain pen again. Started writing again.

“Core-ree?” he said.

“Yes.”

He nodded as he wrote. “And she’s here in town.”

“She’s out on the College’s preserve land, actually. There’s this old house they put visiting artists in.”

“Ohhh yes,” smiling as he wrote. “Someone interesting lived there once.”

“All right, dude. Let’s get some latex happening.”

He had that glassy-eyed look that meant the end was near.

He kissed her neck above her T-shirt collar. Right on her carotid.

“Why don’t we live a little dangerously?” he said.

“You okay?”

She blinked. Shook her head. “Getting a migraine.”

“Yeah? How do you know?”

“A bright spot. Wherever I look. Soon it’ll be this long snaky light.”

“Holy heck.”

“With these pulsating Mondrian patterns in it.”

Cory shoved some books aside. Scooted over.

“Put your head down,” patting her lap.

Emma did. Lying on her back. Looking up at her.

Cory stroked her brows. Insides to outsides, thumb and middle finger. Over and over.

“Sleep,” she said.

“I want to pet your hair.”

She lowered her head. Emma ran her palm over her skull. Felt the inch-long hair sift through her splayed fingers.

She slept.

When she woke again she was on her side, facing the sunset-orange windows across the room.

“I drooled on your leg,” she said.

“Uh-huh.”

“My eyes are better.”

She didn’t move.

“How long did I sleep?”

“Mmm. An hour,” Cory said. “More.”

She rolled onto her back again.

“Have you just been sitting here?”

“Mm-hmm.”

She stroked Emma’s hair.

“I can’t believe I forgot to tell you this.”

“You have morning breath. What?”

“Rob told me who lived in this house.”

“Rob?”

“My therapist.”

“Oh oh oh,” Cory said. “I can probably beat you to the punch. Two Amish sisters. Before the Civil War.”

She lay awake. Will snoring blithely beside her.

4:15 a.m.

She rolled onto her back. Stroked her own brows. Insides to outsides. Thumb and middle finger.

“Sleep,” she whispered.

“First bear sighting this morning.”

“No way. Where?”

“Edge of the woods. Out back. Nice chubby black bear. The authorities have been notified.”

“Is someone gonna come shoot it?”

Cory looked up from her notebook. Baffled.

“Emma. No one’s gonna kill anything.”

She got to the fourth floor. A little winded. No strangers, mercifully, in the stairwell.

Cory’s office was at the end of the winding corridor. As she neared she heard crying. Female.

She slowed her walk.

Cory’s T-shirted back was visible through the ajar door. She squatted in front of a seated person whose face was hidden by doorframe.

“Why the fuck does he get to grade me?” the crying student said. “He didn’t even get my Kathy Acker reference!”

“Tashi,” rubbing a kneecap. “In all seriousness. Okay? Are you listening? Why do we care what other people think?”

“I were you I’d make a million bucks modeling,” the Alabama-accented student told her. “Then every day the rest of my life I’d eat peanut butter right out the jar.”

A sudden thunderous clang from somewhere deep in the woods.

“Workmen,” Cory said. “Some sort of tower is all I know.”

“Cellular tower,” Emma said. “Will’s company. Wait. It’ll look like a huge artificial tree.”

“Good lord. Julianna, you’ve got that giant pick-up. Drive up there and crush them all to pulp and guts under that thing’s wheels.”

The kid stood up from the cane-back chair, squirming and tugging up her jean tops like ready-to-go.

Cory laughed. “Jules.”

“What? You want me to?”

“I stood up at the end of class today and blood everywhere.”

Emma’s hand was over her mouth. Her eyebrows in her hairline.

“Don’t make that face,” Cory said. “I’m a woman. I bleed.”

She’d escaped to the other side of the terrace, at least, before Cory ripped the paperback in two through its spine, tossing half away to the lawn, half in Emma’s general direction.

The pony-tailed student sat bolt upright in front of her, watching her half-fascinated, half-terrified.

“Nothing changes just because you tear up a book.”

“What are you talking about?” Cory answered. “There was a whole Philip Roth novel here a second ago. Now half of it is over there and half is down in the grass with the ants. The world is different.”

Emma, breathless, snuck another look. The girl was still rigid-backed. Cory, elbows on splayed knees, leaning toward her. Folksy. Bristly hair shining in the sun.

“Katie. Never underestimate materiality. Sometimes things don’t change until things get shredded.”

“Holy Jesus.”

“What.”

“Is there a book I can drop on this thing?”

Cory stepped out of the spare room. Followed Emma’s eyes.

A wolf spider on the living room floor by the radiator.

“Gosh,” she said. “Big one.”

She went to it. Squatted by it. Then Emma watched astounded as she nudged it with the fingertips of one hand up onto the palm of the other.

She stood again, knee or ankle cracking. Examined the thing on her flattened hand. It moved one quick step and froze.

“Come look,” she said. “She’s carrying her babies.”

Emma stared wide-eyed. “Her *what?*”

“Come see.”

She approached cautiously, eyes moving back and forth between Cory’s face and the spider.

“Look. All over her back, there.”

Emma stretched her neck. Tiny black pinheads covered the spider’s bulbous abdomen. One of them shuffled minutely from one side of its mother’s body to the other, scurrying over its siblings. Burrowed back into the crowd.

“You hold her,” Cory said.

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m not crazy.”

“Yes you are. I can’t.”

“Emma.”

“I *can’t*.”

“Of *course*, you can.”

Emma looked at the spider. A whole lot of real estate it covered on Cory’s palm.

“Emma,” Cory said. “Emma. Look at me.”

She did.

“I love you and I would never hurt you. All right?”

Emma studied her. The gunmetal eyes. Then raised her hand up slowly. It was warm and sweaty, she knew, alongside Cory’s cool and dry one.

Cory nudged the spider so it climbed over. Its footsteps were feathery on Emma’s outstretched palm.

It sat there placidly, seemingly looking up at her. Its several largest eyes shining dully under the ceiling light.

“Take it,” Emma said.

Cory scooped it back into her hands. Crossed the room and squatted again. Nudged the spider back to the floor planks. It vanished immediately under the old cast-iron radiator.

She stood. Turned back to Emma.

“Hey hey hey,” she said.

Emma sobbed howlingly, heels of her hands in her eyes.

“Emma Emma Emma.”

She sobbed and gasped, bent over.

“Emma,” pulling her back up.

Cory got her hands off her face. Wiped her eyes and nose sloppily with her shirt cuff. She pried open Emma’s balled-up, ringless right hand. Lowered her face to it. Kissed the wet palm where the spider had been.

“We don’t kill things. All right?”

“Do you talk to Anna about me?”

Cory gazed at the apple she’d bitten into. Wiped her mouth on her T-shirt sleeve.

“What do you think?”

Emma felt her own face burning. “Is she jealous?”

Cory turned the apple in the sunlight, inspecting it. Chewed a long time. Mouth open.

“I’m not gonna lie.”

An email from her aunt.

“Doug and I sure miss hearing from you. Any chance you and Will could come down for Thanksgiving?”

Doug. Her father.

She startled. Jabbed with a socked foot.

“Hey. How about you actually eat some actual food?”

She blinked at the bowl in front of her. “I think I’m off meat.”

Cory's jaw dropped. "You can't think there's meat in this house."

"Stop."

Cory had her elbow.

A big doe up ahead. Looking at them.

It loped across the trail. Fawn behind it.

"You're very I-don't-know-what today," Emma said.

They walked. Cory watched the trail under their feet.

"I'm working on a story so good it scares me a little."

She didn't even know he'd put the traps out in the basement. Yet to her it felt to discover that tiny animal with its head smashed. Wet spatter of gore under its nose.

She found him on the third floor.

"Do not let me see shit like that! Do you want me back on those fucking meds?"

His hands were up. Eyes wide.

She jabbed a finger at the floor. "The fucking—blood and brains everywhere!"

It was getting chilly out, nights.

For warmth, they came in.

She turned smiling. Then saw where Cory looked.

She yanked the edge of her sleeve back down. Hand-knocking Cory's. Mouth-breathing instantly.

Cory got behind her. Wrapped her arms around her shoulders. Pressed her mouth to a spot behind her ear.

"Emma," she whispered into her hair.

She didn't answer. Just breathed.

"Emma. Nod if you hear me."

She thought about it some. Then nodded. The tiniest bit.

"You're never, *never* doing that again," Cory said, her words hot on Emma's scalp.

She kept breathing. Panting.

“It’s one hundred percent over,” Cory said. “Right this minute. I mean forever.”

She panted.

“Relax,” Cory whispered, squeezing her.

The trees outside the window were yellowing.

“Deep breath,” Cory whispered to her.

“Another one,” she whispered.

Such a strange thing. The sun. Warm. Bright. Alive. But unsettling, too. The overexposedness of it. The too-muchness. The feeling she could never shake it marked the exact spot in the fabric of her mind where some awful truth too pulverizing to confront had made a nest.

“Emma.”

“Uh-huh?”

She’d just stood, purse slung over her shoulder. About to go.

He capped the fountain pen.

“Maybe I’m not the kind of doctor who should ask.”

She smiled. Waited. Scared rabbit.

“Are you eating enough?”

“So what are we drinking?”

“Water,” Cory said.

He looked at her across the table. Face thrust forward over the top of his menu.

“*Get* the fuck out.”

“Years now.”

“Ho-lee hell.”

Emma was silent. Couldn’t think of a single thing to say to either one of these strangers. That plus drinking being out of the question meant dim prospects for a fun evening.

Will leaned back. Menu down. Studied Cory.

“Well good for you,” he said.

“I concur.”

He nodded. She stared back at him. Amused-like. Hands jammed in the pockets of the surplus-store peacoat she hadn’t bothered taking off.

“And the writing,” he said. “And the whole new look. And the whole new”—he urged the word forward with a spinning hand—“lifestyle.”

There was a semi-scary edge to her smile for him. It made Emma realize she’d never seen her interact with any male person. Except for Will himself. And that way back on museum day for like three polite minutes because what choice.

“I’m a walking case study in impermanence, motherfucker.”

Will leered delightedly, doing that thing Emma hated of exploring a favorite molar with his tongue.

“Funny,” he croaked. “Emma’s apparently on the wagon, too.”

She and Cory looked at each other and Cory had a mildly crazed look on her face and she couldn’t even guess what expression was on her own, but when she turned back to Will again she saw he’d just seen something well-nigh flabbergasting.

They hugged after dinner and Cory’s hand got in her jacket. Pressed her ribcage.

“Do you know how much I love you?” she said to Emma’s ear.

It was quiet in the car on the way home.

Will reversed into a spot in front of the house. Killed the engine. Stared a while at the VW’s dark instrument panel.

“You’ve got a little bit of a crush on Coryn,” he said.

She burst into tears.

“Do you hate me?” she said.

Stunned silence.

“Do I *hate* you?” He’d twisted part-way in his seat. “I mean—are you, like—in *love* with her?”

She had the heels of her hands in her eyes. Mouth-breathing.

“I don’t know,” she said.

More silence. The thunderstruck kind.

“Well do you know whether or not you’re sleeping with her?”

She dropped her hands. Looked at him. Knew her face was all tears and snot.

“You can’t think I would *do* that to you!”

His own hands were up: who-me-what?

“Well, I didn’t think I was married to someone who’d—feel—whatever about a woman!”

She stared blankly out the windshield. No neighbors out on the sidewalk, at least, to witness this.

“I figured she’d take you to poetry readings,” he said. “Take you out drinking with—intellectuals and shit.”

She stared out. Glad, insanely, she hadn’t let Cory pierce her ears because that was full-on sex and what could she possibly have said here tonight?

An opossum waddled in the street in front of the car, nosing the curb.

She knew his next sentence would feature Rob’s name.

She was unlocking the front door when headlight beams swept through the bare trees below the driveway.

She froze, exhaling fog. Watched until the red taillights disappeared around the next bend.

She stepped inside. Shut the door against the cold. Stood in the little parlor, they no doubt called it back in the day, breathing the familiar musty air.

Radiators thunked and gurgled.

It took her a minute to find the stairwell light. When she did she climbed the twisting, creaking staircase.

On the second floor, she reached into the near bedroom. Felt the wall for the antique light switch. Its loud click echoed through the rooms.

The little iron-framed bed was in the corner. Like a relic from a Civil War hospital. Neatly made. Pillow atop patch quilt.

She went to it. Sat down on it, coat still on. Heard its springs complain.

She leaned down and inspected the pillow’s surface in the ceiling bulb’s dim light. Kept looking until she found one of Cory’s now two-inch-long hairs. Picked it up carefully with middle finger and thumb.

She put the hair in her mouth. Clasped it between chapped lips, feeling its minute touch on her tongue.

She lay down. Pressed her face to the pillow. Smelled Cory's skin and hair and sandalwood perfume.

She cried.

Quietly at first. Then less so.

She stroked her own hair when she felt her diaphragm spasming. The side of her own face.

When it was over she lay mouth-breathing, feeling the cold, wet flannel under her eye, her cheekbone, her nose.

She wondered which runaway Amish sister's bedroom she was in just then. The one who put the axe in the renowned local slave catcher's neck or the one who fled the farm and went meekly back to Pennsylvania.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

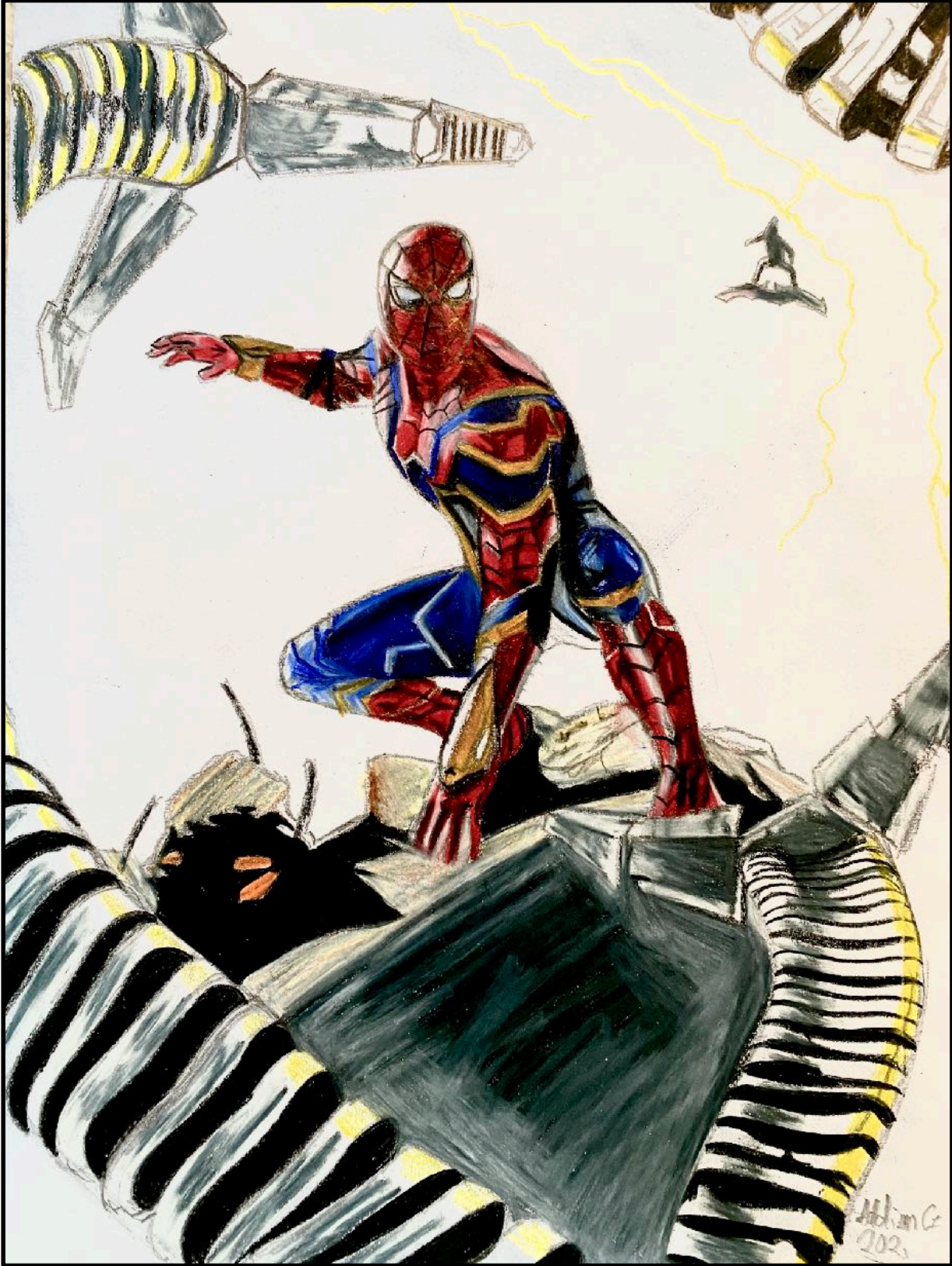


Stevie doCarmo grew up in Alexandria, Virginia, and lives in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. He teaches literature and writing at Bucks County Community College in suburban Philadelphia and holds a Ph.D. in modern American literature from Lehigh University. His fiction has appeared at *BULL*, *The Squawk Back*, *Literally Stories*, *Out There Literary Magazine*, and in the 2022 edition of TulipTree Publishing's *Stories That Need to Be Told* anthology.

FATHER FIGURE

A poem by William Gensburger

*I looked for God in the hills of my youth
And the sky of my infancy
And in the turbulent waters of adolescence
Amidst the heaviest of rainfalls and
The despair of my loneliness.
I listened intently, then,
Certain that I could hear someone singing
A pretty tune I'd heard before,
Yet couldn't recall enough to sing again.*



This was done by 18 year old Addisen Gensburger, son of William Gensburger. He has started a graphic arts business as he attends college to obtain a graphic arts degree. You can find his official bio-flyer at <https://addisengensburger.myportfolio.com/> including his Instagram portfolio.

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