



Missing Stories: **An Anthology of** **Hardly20/20 Flash! Fiction**

**by Peter McMillan
& Adam Mac
Maku Miran (ed.)**

Missing Stories: Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction

Books Published by the Authors

Flash! Fiction (2012) by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction 2 (2013) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 3 (2014) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

The Brain and the Vat Stories and More (2014) by Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 4 (2015) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Collected Essays on Political Economy and Wartime Civil Liberties, 2002-2008 (2020) by Peter McMillan

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Adam Mac

Maku Miran (editor)

2020



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Dedication

To the indefatigable Maku Miran

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Foreword

Included in this thin volume are 50 previously-thought-lost stories written by McMillan (39) and Mac (11) from July 2010 through February 2015. They are sequenced by date written. Your editor discovered them in a long-forgotten Google Books dustbin. The current volume, along with *An Anthology of 20/20 Flash! Fiction* published earlier this year, comprises the totality of published flash fiction to date by these authors.

It is with some not inconsiderable chagrin that your editor acknowledges a mistaken attribution to the story, 'The Dissertation,' which appeared in *An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction*. That story was never meant to be published. Mac had been told to withdraw this story because it "exhibited blasphemous and treasonous ideas" and "poked fun where it shouldn't." A subsequent version of the story, radically altered, was published in Mac's now out-of-print "Brain in the Vat Stories" and is contained herein. Incidentally, your editor finds nothing particularly untoward in the earlier version of the fiction.

Before leaving the reader to peruse this supplementary collection of stories and miscellany, your editor feels it incumbent upon him to provide some explanation for the inconsistency in spelling and punctuation in McMillan's writing. That author, perhaps divided between Canada and the U.S.A., often switches between American and Canadian English, though rarely in the same piece. It can be unnerving to the attentive reader.

With the recovery of the authors' final few stories, your editor's personal and professional interest in their work is concluded, as hereupon he will be exclusively occupied with the excavation of non-English mystical and metaphysical writings gone missing from the early years of the Internet.

Maku Miran, editor
Toronto, Canada
April 2020

Holding things together is what I was meant to do. But here I am just lying around, unused with a bunch of other No. 2 silver look-a-like do-nothings. At most we get shuffled around once in a while when they are looking for something, and every now and then, one of us gets plucked out, and it's then I imagine what it must be like to be useful even if it's just keeping together a short stack of paper. It might be photographs; it might be newspaper clippings. It might be a report or even a short story manuscript; or it could be bills. But it could also be business cards, coupons, credit card slips, lottery tickets, etc. All the possibilities, and yet none of us gets to know what actually happens out there. I still believe it's exciting. It has to be. It can't be like living in a box.

I was the last of a 100-count box, and I just couldn't wait for that drawer to open again, because that's when it sometimes happened. I knew that I had to be selected soon, and I had a feeling, which I kept to myself, that it was going to be something big, something special, much more special than what any of the others had been singled out for. It had to be. I was the last, and I had been saved for a really important purpose.

The time that passed seemed to be without end. I don't get tired and I don't sleep, but I know that time passes. The drawer opened 35 times since the last one of us was taken. That's a record. I've kept track, and I'm good with numbers.

What distressed me most was the sudden appearance of another box. This one was much bigger — maybe four or five or ten times bigger — than mine. Its many layers were visible

when the label was turned the other way. Time after time, when the drawer opened, the little coloured paper clips were lifted out of the large round box, while I waited for my turn — the turn that I'd been waiting for for so long.

Then one day it seemed all my waiting was going to pay off. The drawer was opened, and I was pinched between thumb and forefinger and pulled from the box just before it was tossed into the waste basket. My premonitions were confirmed. I was being saved for something big. Within seconds I found out how big. The fleshy pink forceps dropped me into a vast transparent cylinder filled with hundreds of vinyl-coated, coloured paper clips.

First published on The Short Humour Site, 2011.

I'll have the fish and chips. Hmm— Could you change that to a chicken steak sandwich with extra onions and fries on the side? No, better make that a salad. Or coleslaw, but vinegar, not mayonnaise. The sweet potato fries look good. Yes, cancel the coleslaw. To drink? Let's see. Sweetened iced tea? Don't have any? How about Coke? I'll have Diet Pepsi, then. Is it caffeine-free? On second thought, water's fine. If you've got one of those fruit-flavored waters — yeah, strawberry-kiwi sounds good. I think that'll do it. Oh, wait. You know what. I could really go for some red meat. Would you mind changing the sandwich to a rib-eye steak? Rare. No, medium rare. No, make that well done. I hate to do this, but I think I'll have the fish and chips after all. Halibut though, not cod. The chips, are they thick fries? If you've got fresh catfish, I'll have that instead, and can I substitute potato salad — German style, of course — for the chips? You know, I think I'd like to try the blackberry-pomegranate flavored water. Sorry for taking so long. I see you're busy. Won't keep you, but could you leave a dessert menu? Don't have one? No problem. How's the pecan pie? Never mind, I'll have a piece of blueberry cheesecake and a cup of coffee, black. Better make that a decaf ... with one cream and one sugar. That's it. Well, maybe an extra napkin if it's not too much trouble. Thank you for your patience. Really, you've been terrific. *Ab-solument!*

#

Excuse me? Would I mind sharing my table? Uh ... no, I guess not. You mean with the giant in the tattoos and black leather who's headed this way? Boyfriend? And a handsome

gentleman he is, but I don't think — I mean, isn't there a free, er, more private table — over by the rest—

Good day, sir! Your timing is impeccable. I was just leaving. The table is all yours. I'm sorry about the order, Miss. I just remembered I have a ... oh, yeah, I'm having some tests run down at the hospital — colon-something or other — and I'm pretty sure they said no food or drink. Memory's like a sieve, you know.

Ah, well, since you both insist, maybe I'll have a small bite to eat. They always exaggerate this fasting business. You're absolutely right, sir, I SHOULD change my order. *Carpe diem!* You can say that again. Surf-n-turf with baked potato and all the fixins and a pitcher of draft beer? Splendid choice. Same for you? And Miss, I'll pick up the check. My pleasure, sir. No doubt about it. But maybe I should phone the hospital. There's a pay phone just outside. No, you're right as rain. That would be rude. What was I thinking? You have a favor to ask? Go right ahead. You name it. Whatever you want.

OH MY!

I take your point, and I promise, or better still, as all these people are my witnesses, I won't say another—

First published in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, October 18, 2014.

Inside the frame there is always movement, something to watch: this time of year, a leaf skittering down the street, naked tree branches bouncing around in the wind. At certain times of day, lots of people pass through my frame. When they walk from right to left, they always walk faster. It doesn't matter from which direction the weather is coming. The run-down row houses are mostly dark and empty during the day. Diagonally across the way, there is one however, 704, that always has someone home, sitting by the living room window, just a shadow behind the white sheers. So even when there is nothing to look at on the street or on the sidewalk or in the trees or on the utility lines, there is always 704. Apart from repositioning to get a better look at someone or something passing by, the shadow shifts around only very rarely. And it never leaves. It's incredible that it stays there, more or less stationary, for hours at a time ... until yesterday.

Shortly after midnight, the shadow disappeared, and within what seemed like a matter of seconds, I heard sirens ... very close. It became very dark and quiet, like during a blackout. Even so, I'm pretty sure I could still make things out. When it got light, that's when I saw the difference. My frame had been moved. The street was still there, but the view wasn't the same. Now, outside my window, in a courtyard, was the lonely statue of Our Lady of Perpetual something or other—the one I used to walk past every day for 37 years as I rushed by to catch the subway downtown or trudged home at night.

The nurse who just came by to check up on me is someone I recognized right away. I'd watched her walk by in front of my

window every day for I don't know how long, and I remembered that she sometimes looked up and waved. Edith, she introduced herself as, told me that I was very lucky to have such a good neighbour. She said I'd had a seizure and that the old man across the way had called 911 after he had seen me disappear from view.

First published in *Eunoia Review*, December 26, 2011.

Alright, little mouse, I've got a special treat for you tonight — a big chunk of stinky limburger. You'll love it. Here, I'll set it out in the middle of the room. Don't worry about the propped-up shoe box. Think of it as a ... drive-in. I'll turn off the big light so you feel more comfortable. I'm going to bed anyway. Big meeting tomorrow with the new boss.

#

Good morning, little mouse! Anybody in there? Finally! Listen, I don't have a lot of time—

You're such a smart little mouse. Here, give me a couple of minutes. You can't see it right now, because you're still in the box. Soon you'll be inside a maze. A maze I made myself. Sixteen cardboard dividers. It's the most I could fit in this one-room apartment. You could say you're gonna have the run of the place today.

When I raise the shoe box, you'll have to find your way out. Only two exits, and one will get you killed. If you go this way, you'll have to walk across a sheet of glue paper, which sounds harmless enough, except that I'm leaving the window open a crack for Felix.

The other exit takes a lot of patience, but I think you'll appreciate how much time I put into it. If you find this exit, it'll get you home safely if you can move faster than Felix. As a special reward, I've got a fresh block of old cheddar — non-toxic, I promise — waiting for you in your mouse hole.

Either way, you'd better move fast. Remember, the window will be open, and I'll leave a can of Whiskas on the fire escape to get Felix's attention.

Gotta go. Can't be late this morning. "It's going to be a big surprise," he said yesterday when he clapped me on the shoulder as he passed through the cubicles.

#

In winter the winds rush through the towering partitions of the financial district piercing the openings in your clothing right down to the bone, so I often walk backwards into the wind. Sometimes, in a hurry, like today, I misstep. After slipping on black ice, I just about followed one of the orange cones into the open manhole. It was a nasty fall.

Lying there on my back, my head throbbing, I have the feeling that something has slipped my mind. Did I finish opening the path for the second exit? Yes, I'm sure I did. Must be something else. Oh my God! I think I got the wrong cheddar out of the fridge! Unable to move, it doesn't matter that I am torn.

First published in *Daily Flash 2012: 366 Days of Flash Fiction*.

Dreams

... a moral conscience — what if no one was looking? [ed.]

For some time he had dreamt what people dream when they grow old. The recurring theme — death ... and his death. Dreams of facing a vast lightless emptiness. Always ending with his getting swallowed or blotted out. Of being removed entirely from the world and from other people's memories.

Oddly, he didn't hide his dreams. Sometimes he joked about his 'dark epiphany' and its 'interminable rerun.' At one family gathering — his Aunt Katy's wake — he said, far too loudly for the small room, that he'd love to break into one of his night-time silent movies and yell "Fire!" No laughs. Subsequent failures on similar occasions moved him to give up on black humour.

As he'd gotten older, he'd turned into an unpleasant, bitter, mean person. He didn't seek company, and it didn't seek him. He begrudged the money solicited by charities. Resented people who exploited their disabilities to get to the front of the line. Hated minivans, SUVs and shiny poser pickups — he still drove his orange Carmen Gia convertible — for the way they blocked and the people they cocooned. Caricatured everyone, and basically, found fault with everything.

His dreams, weighty and unrelenting, gradually worked changes on him. Indeed, coming around to accept them as a personal revelation and wake-up call, he decided to focus on assuring the most favourable circumstances on his death.

His wife noticed it first — the change — and one evening at a French restaurant celebrating her birthday, she commented

that it was as if he'd been reborn. As soon as she said it, she wished she hadn't, fearing that particular image might trigger a reversal. But he didn't slip back. In fact, he praised her "charming way of putting things."

Downtown on workdays, he sought out opportunities, and being cheerful and kind energized him. During lunch breaks, he walked through the financial district, getting to know the regulars — the panhandlers, the buskers, the food vendors. He even visited a couple of shelters for the homeless and for abused women but wasn't welcomed with the gratitude he'd expected. Undeterred, he continued to circulate among the people.

In a dramatic concession to his wife, he now accompanied her to the upscale retirement home where Mother — his wife's mother — lived.

Weekends got busy as he and his wife went out to parties, the theatre, the symphony and even opera, and, for the first time in their marriage, began to host parties of their own.

Then, one hurried Wednesday afternoon in heavy traffic on the way home from the train station, he swerved sharply to the right to avoid a pothole and ended up forcing a motorcyclist off the road right into a telephone pole. In his rear-view mirror, there was no movement on the ground. Seeing that no one was looking his way and the light was still yellow, he floored it.

He couldn't be late. Jason Ripley, Sr. of Applewhite, O'Donnell and Ripley was reading Mother's will at five.

His old dreams never bothered him again.

First published in *thickjam*, No. 288, June 4, 2013.

The Fly

... not a fan of ubiquitous surveillance ... say it ain't so [ed.]

I don't really mind the cameras out here. It's not like there's an omniscience — good or bad — behind the ubiquitous electronic eyes that watch over us. But then, I outgrew believing in omniscience long ago.

Occasionally, I do feel those eyes following me on my way to the office, on the train, at the station, in the subway, street side, behind the green glass and steel walls of the office tower, 57 storeys up, through reception, and finally to the sanctuary of my office.

When I imagine all those eyes — and I do this a lot less than I used to — I try to picture a random scattering of buzzing, annoying, but mostly harmless houseflies, each outfitted with thousands of ommatidia to receive and filter infinitely more visual data than a fly could need, especially since it ends up in the filth and rot.

I used to work in video surveillance in the lower 7th precinct. That's the area from the PPG complex down to the Coliseum and east to the Lincoln Projects. There were always four of us on duty. It was a 24/7/365 operation. We were the overnight crew.

The PPG block has more cameras per hundred square meters than any metropolitan area in North America. From the subway and maintenance tunnels underground to the 85th storey of the centre tower, there is no place to hide *in camera* (Walt, my partner, took online law classes at the community college) in this vast vertical city block.

From a bank of 25 monitors, Walt and I could see every part of PPG every five minutes. It was very hard on the eyes and the nerves to watch the monitors loop through feeds hour after hour. By the time I left, I think I must have observed every square inch of PPG 600,000 times. But that's nothing compared to Walt who claims to have viewed the PPG loop more than a million times.

Like the PPG complex, the Coliseum was high profile, meaning all its cameras were functional and regularly monitored. They all had to be in good working order to track the crowds that came pouring out after games and concerts. These were the feeds that attracted the police detectives, their tattered warrants waving about, directing the forensic investigation as if this was the first time.

On paper, the Lincoln Projects were important, too, but in reality watching the Lincoln cameras is where most surveillance rookies got their feet wet. On any given day, only half the cameras in Lincoln were live and pointing in the right direction. But those that were working frequently showed what even veterans like Eddie found difficult to stomach and marked the end of more than a few surveillance rookies' careers. Eddie's partner, Nate, was an exceptional new recruit whose guts were made of iron. He was truly gifted for Lincoln.

Technicians went into the Lincoln quad every day that police escorts were available, but the backlog of malfunctioning or vandalized CCTV equipment was permanent. Nothing could change that. Maintenance priority was given to the perimeter, and there remained large swathes of the Lincoln interior where we were virtually blind.

There was one camera in the middle of Lincoln, Unit #39, Level 14 SW, that had been programmed to play reruns of the Andy Griffith's Show all day, every day. It was too dangerous to go in that sector even with a police guard. So, for the past five years, our monitor loop just bypassed that camera. If you knew the code and password, you could access the camera, and Eddie and Nate regularly watched the show after lunch between 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning, a statistically slow hour according to Walt.

Me, I preferred Russian novels, at least until my headaches became too severe. My family doctor advised me to spend less time at the computer and see an optometrist. I started listening to books on tape and soon became addicted to spy thrillers. It actually made my work more interesting, and, aided by my new bifocals, I was able to focus on details much better during my watch.

It wasn't long however before this new state of affairs turned dicey. I saw something I shouldn't have seen. Drawing on my newfound spy instincts, I decided not to tell Walt, Eddie or Nate. I told only one person who I knew would tell only one other person, THE person in the footage. Within a week I was promoted to a top secret project that is so hush-hush I can't talk to anybody. I miss Walt and Nate and Eddie, and the daylight still bothers me.

First published in *Danse Macabre*, Volume 6, Number 4, May 2011.

Just a Passing Thought

... heartfelt sentiments of the nouveau gentry [ed.]

Michael, I saw old Mrs. Kravitz this morning. I said hello, but she just mumbled something and went back inside. I feel so bad after reading about that poor old couple.

That's just her way, hon. She's a cantankerous old—

Yeah, Mom. She's just a mean old witch always muttering and spitting from her toothless, gummy mouth.

Tristan, enough! And Michael, you shouldn't encourage him. Here, I've got dinner. Gyros, from this new place downtown. She's not the most agreeable person, but—

But nothing! Don't you remember Goldie's getting so sick. She poisoned him. Said he was always digging up her flowers. Weeds more like.

Now Tristan, we've discussed this. Goldie's got a very sensitive stomach, and it doesn't help that he eats garbage. I'm not particularly fond of the old woman either, but I don't think she'd poison a dog. Honey, these beef gyros are delicious — not dried out like Niko's — and the tzatziki's just right.

You know, I remember last fall when her husband was so sick — I didn't know he had died — and I stopped by with that expensive Thanksgiving flower arrangement. She didn't even open the storm door. But before she closed the front door, I caught a glimpse of the oxygen and other supplies lined up in the hallway. I was so embarrassed.

Look Mom, don't let this guilt thing make you crazy. She's not worth it.

He's right, Beth. We've had our disagreements, but she's never met us half-way.

Like the permanent shadow on her Florida room?

Come on, I thought we agreed that if the city approved our building plan, we weren't obligated— I mean her house is too close to the property line anyway, and besides, like I told her, she could always put in skylights.

Michael, you didn't?

Why not? Obviously, it was before the foundation went in. The developer asked me to come along and try one last time to get her to sell, so we could build out instead of up, remember? Her husband was there. The only time I ever saw him. But he was asleep in his wheelchair, covered in tubes and didn't add much.

Good God, Michael! I can't believe you—

Mom! You can't be serious. How can you even think of taking her side? Don't you remember when we first moved in, I offered to mow her lawn? She just snorted and slammed — not shut, but SLAMMED — the door? And how about the time she screamed at Catherine for parking on her driveway. "Get the hell off my property," she said. Remember? And Goldie. She did hit him once. I saw it.

Well, I think both sides have their grievances, but like I said before, we've tried to be good neighbours. Sometimes it just doesn't work out. But it's not our fault. I mean if she were to die like that old couple — God forbid, of course — no one could blame us.

I know. You're right. But I just can't help wondering how that old couple could have been there for 12 days. Oh my God! Look at the time! Gotta go. Michael dear, your dry cleaning's in the walk-in. Give me a call when your plane lands, OK? Tristan honey, I'll be late, so please don't forget to walk Goldie before you go out tonight. Love yah!

First published in One Million Stories Writing Project's *The Sharp End*, March 2013.

I didn't know much about them. We'd only met three weeks before, a couple of miles north of campus on 147. One of the girls, Beth — the cutest one — had a flat front tire and was steering her bike away from the road's edge. Her roommates had already topped the hill and were out of sight — a scene that was to be repeated over and over again on our four-day trip to D.C. along the canal.

I was no expert on bicycles. After all, I had a 10-speed racer to do a trail that was meant for mountain bikes. But I did know how to do minor repairs and got fast quickly.

Beth and Griff often rode ahead, leaving Abby, Lee and me to ride together. On the first day, after a two-day drive to get to the trailhead, I, myself, had taken off and left everyone behind. I was the odd man out and the drive had been suffocating. They all knew each other from some on-campus fellowship I'd never heard of. Around the campfire that night and again during the Bible reading in the tent, my sense of 'not belonging' was exacerbated. It wasn't unfamiliar. I'd been in the Charismatic Movement in high school and knew what it felt like to belong, but not anymore. Now, enlightened, I was a skeptic. I was also alone.

After embarrassing myself the first day, I picked up the rear from then on, assisting whoever fell behind, and I got to where I could fix a flat or a broken spoke or a broken chain in under five minutes. The rest of the time though, it was like an after-dinner bicycle ride through the park. In my arrogance, I'd kind of predicted this from the beginning, packing Woodward's new book on the Supreme Court, which, in addition to the identity I tried to

project, I'd wanted to ready anyway before taking Con Law in the fall. I finished the book easily by Harper's Ferry.

It was rhythmic — my staying with the pack and then falling back and then rejoining and then falling back. No one made wisecracks or slighting remarks. They weren't the passive-aggressive sort, unlike me, and they simply accepted me. That made me feel even more an outsider, like when they prayed before bedtime in the tent, all of us squeezed into the two-man — er, two-person — tent because of the mosquitoes.

The praying I was coming to tolerate — barely — but I couldn't stand the closeness and the odors and noises and restlessness. So after 20 minutes, I scrambled out of the tent and up a nearby ridge where there was a light breeze. It was so much more comfortable up there at the top, and I slept on the bare ground until the stench of burning meat wakened me. I couldn't spot the source, so, more curious than tired, I followed the smell. At the bottom of a narrow valley that paralleled the ridge, I saw naked figures in masks, dancing and groping one another around a bonfire. In the middle of the fire, the charred husk of an animal was bound and staked to a spit that was patiently turned by an old man or it might have been an old woman.

The smell was unfamiliar, but the form could have been that of a pig — not huge, but maybe a hundred pounds or so. But this wasn't pork. Back home in the small farming town where I had grown up, there were stories about devil worshippers. They held us in sway for a time, but in a remarkable group gestalt switch, devils and UFOs lost their hold on us when we discovered girls. What I was seeing was debauched, but likely nothing more ... I wanted to believe. I found my way back to the

top of my ridge and moved upwind of the fire and tried to sleep some more.

At first light, Abby heard me scampering down the hill and turned towards the woods. She didn't hide the Bible she'd been quietly reading but put it aside to ask how I had slept. I answered that the incessant buzzing of mosquitoes had freaked me out, so I had to get away and slept great except for a really bad dream. She turned back to the canal and asked, "Do we frighten you?" "Of course not!" I said, in an obviously contrived tone, wondering what she might be talking about.

We were interrupted — thankfully in my view — by the others who were just pulling up on their bicycles with breakfast in hand. It turned out that Griff and Beth's riding ahead had paid off. They'd met the tail-end of a Boy Scout troop yesterday and got directions to a little community with a coffee shop, general store and B&B that was no more than a mile off the towpath. It was a relief to know that we weren't as isolated as I'd felt last night on the mountain. But that had to have been a nightmare.

Breakfast was a treat and there was nothing uncomfortable about the conversation, although grace did seem to go on without end. Ahead was a long day. We had to cover close to 100 miles including a stretch through a tunnel, which was supposed to be so long and dark that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

There was no one else on the path with us, and in fact only Griff and Beth had seen anyone since we'd started out. We'd sort of hoped to meet someone going in or coming out of the tunnel, but we were alone. Just outside the tunnel, we strapped our flashlights to our bicycle frames, switched them on and

rode into the darkness, watchful to avoid bumps and ruts and debris that could catapult us into the canal. We couldn't see it, but in the damp blackness, we smelled it and felt how close it was.

Only half a mile or so long, yet it took us a good half an hour to get through. Abby's flashlight came loose and fell into the canal, so we all decided to get off our bikes and walk the rest of the way with her. The funny thing was that it was completely quiet in the tunnel, and except for the flashlight episode, no one said a word. There was nothing but the crunching of the ground underneath and an rhythmic dripping from overhead.

We re-emerged into the brilliant blue and green canopy and a cacophony of forest sounds. The sounds of our voices resumed immediately, too, as if a glass bell had been lifted. The lost flashlight was dismissed as a minor inconvenience — after all there must be other towns ahead. And within an hour, Beth and Griff were out of sight again. Meanwhile, I dropped back, keeping an eye out for a comfortable spot to read another couple of chapters.

By sunset, Abby and Lee and I had reached our destination about 15 miles west of Harper's Ferry. I had rejoined them around mid-afternoon on Lee's second flat of the day. We set up camp and waited for the others to come back for us — that being the unspoken agreement, I thought. Dusk came and went, dinner came and went, but there was no sign of Beth or Griff.

The girls weren't concerned — I couldn't understand why (was it this faith thing?) — but I was, so I volunteered to go out looking for them. The blackness of a so-far moonless night

swallowed all but the small ball of flickering golden light emanating from our miserly fire. As I refastened the flashlight to my bicycle frame, images of the fire last night came back, sending chills through me. I couldn't leave, but I couldn't go either. But I had to go, because there might — must — have been an accident or something. More importantly, I couldn't show my feelings. I wasn't going to be a coward.

When I rode off, I could see in my mirror that they were reading by the fire. I couldn't believe it, but I was a little jealous that they could take this so calmly — not stupidly or carelessly, but peacefully. Yet, it was so foreign to me, and I rejected their tranquil resolve, instead summoning the anger I needed to go out searching the woods for our irresponsible companions.

If I hadn't been so smugly angry — and a tiny bit afraid — I'd have appreciated the gorgeous rising of the moon. The moon's reflection in the canal, the shafts of light piercing the forest were spectacular, though it's only after the fact that I recollect that beauty. There were sounds in the woods that weren't heard in the daytime, and to make it worse, I relived the previous night multiple times as I sped along the towpath. In the moonlight, I checked my watch periodically. By 10 o'clock, I was ready to give up. I was furiously self-righteous to the point that fear had little grip on me, and by the time I got back to camp, which was still minus our comrades, I was in a completely-justified foul mood.

On the face of it, I wasn't in such a bad predicament. However, there was something about these people. Later, my roommates couldn't believe I spent the night in the woods with two very attractive young women and nothing happened. Nothing except, of course, we — they — prayed out loud so I kind of

participated, and afterwards, we slept together — but quite apart — in the tent, because outside the tent, the mosquitoes were unbearable.

Next morning, our lost party woke us up at sunrise with coffee and donuts. There were so many things I'd wanted to say to them, especially Griff, but my anger didn't have the edge it had last night. I just managed to say that we were really worried about them, though Abby contradicted me by saying that she knew they were alright. From my own personal sacrifice, I added that I must have ridden 80 miles up and down the trail looking for them, to which Lee and Abby nodded quietly.

It turned out that one of the scouts Griff and Beth had met the day before had broken his leg. Griff and Beth, both pre-Med and also high school sweethearts, I finally learned, rigged up a stretcher for him and took him to the nearest road leading to Harper's Ferry. They caught a ride and went with him to the hospital and stayed with him until one of the scout leaders arrived. It was so late; they stayed in a motel, and headed back for the canal at daybreak. They were apologetic for staying in a motel. They seemed to feel guilty about that.

By mid-morning, we'd reached Harper's Ferry, an important stop for Lee and Abby — Lee because she was a post-grad student researching the Civil War and Abby because she was a freelance photographer. It was a long, long day for me. I had finished my book. However, the food was much better in the tourist restaurants than on the trail, and I actually got to where I found the view from above of Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia separated by the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers to be almost worth the trip itself.

The last day was drizzly — the first wet day we'd had. We reached Washington by lunchtime, found a hostel downtown, and ate at a Thai restaurant around the corner. That was it. We'd done it. Four days. As planned.

The next day Beth's parents brought the cars to pick us up with our bicycles. Beth and Griff were going back home to Morgantown. Abby and Lee were staying with friends in Georgetown, and I was driving back to school. In my rear-view mirror I saw them one last time as I waved goodbye, my arm fully extended out the window. Beth and Griff were walking hand in hand in the other direction, while Lee and Abby were giving directions to a group of students from the hostel. By the time I crossed the Potomac for the last time, my impatience and anger and priggishness had dissipated into an emptiness. My little white '77 Corolla now seemed much bigger. Outside, instead of one path, there seemed to be infinite paths ... and people, lots of them, everywhere. But everything felt more remote now. This was the part I always hated.

First published in *Midwest Literary Magazine*, June 2011.

I couldn't tell you exactly where this is going. I'm not even sure how I got to this point. All I think I know for certain is that I'm in the middle of it and I seem to be following a script.

It's all in my head, I'm told. But there's such a vastness that I can't get out of my mind, and my memory is such an awkward and unsteady navigator There does appear to be a theme though — conflict.

As far as I can tell, it always ends in some sort of resolution — one side becomes dominant. However, another conflict is never far away. So, this cycle or succession — circular or linear or both — has no end in sight.

Right now I'm aware that I'm thinking and that I'm thinking about my interior head space. I'm also thinking that you are there reading what I'm writing about what I'm thinking. From previous experience, I'm expecting you soon to express your views in a way that puts our head spaces in conflict. It happens more often than not, I find.

Obviously, I'm pretty good at this or I wouldn't still be here. I felt I had to be upfront with you about that. I haven't always done that. I used to be cunning, even sneaky. This forthrightness is recently acquired.

You have to understand that our encounters are especially perilous for me. You have the advantage. You get to see all my moves and react accordingly. I, on the other hand, can't anticipate yours with anything like the same certitude. I can hint,

suggest, direct your attention, or lead you along, but I can't predict or control what you will do.

I can only guess how you got here, what you had to do to get here, how many times you've done this before, and what you will do next. You probably number them as conquests — reading them and consuming them. I suspect you must either have an elaborate filing system or a prodigious memory.

Either way, you, reader, are like some kind of monster, ingesting everything you meet with. And, if you continue, you will perpetuate your monstrosities and monstrosity beyond your flightless imagination.

Best let me bear that burden, dear reader. You will forever be in my thoughts. Trust me.

First published in *thickjam*, No. 425, September 23, 2014.

Do you remember when you were a kid and you thought that all the dead people were up there (or down somewhere else) watching the living, kind of like in a coliseum? I heard that in church ... many times. That's the image I had when my parents, my teachers and other old people started on about what "They say." 'They' was a tricky concept for me, but I caught on and learned that these 'they' were just too remote for me to know personally.

I was a spirited, often unsupervised little boy, on the eve of integration in a small south Alabama town where summer vacations went on forever. I wasn't especially clever for my age and was for the longest confusing words like 'lion' and 'line.' In our backyard, 'the clothes hanging on the lion' was an invitation to a real adventure. In school, I remembered they taught us "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again," so I did, several times. Each time I got a whipping.

In church, my dad, the pastor, used to say "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." One Sunday after lunch, I asked my oldest sister — she did the crosswords — what intentions were and she told me it was what made me want to play lion tamer with the clothes. From that day on, I ceased lion-taming. Hell was the scariest thing I knew. And I could see all those people in Hell watching me.

There were lots of rules I ran into. So many I couldn't keep track. Besides most of the time, my head was filled with all sorts of other little boy thoughts. And my writing was 'ineligible' Mrs. Martin said and my spelling atrocious. In my final spelling

test I wrote "Q-E-S-S" when the teacher sad "dress." Diphthongs were an issue for many years.

Anyway, about that time the rules about crime not paying, honesty being the best policy, and truth always winning out were the big ones for me. That's because in addition to the coliseum, which I'd seen on TV once when O.J. Simpson played Notre Dame, there were people closer by watching to see if I did wrong. And at that age I didn't know the distinction between felony and misdemeanor. Jail was for a while a nightly terror, ever since I overheard my dad talking about the jails he visited. Once I was so afraid I returned a half-eaten candy bar I'd pilfered from the little green store where I bought my baseball cards.

One day near the end of August, I got caught in a real mess. A few weeks before, I'd made one of my neighbors, who was one grade ahead of me, angry by saying his girlfriend was ugly. He didn't do anything at the time, because we were in the fellowship hall in the basement of the church. His beet red face showed he would not be turning the other cheek for long.

On this particular hot and sticky late summer day silenced by the drone of the cicadas, he was standing alone at the top of a small hill on the large front lawn of the Baptist Assembly. It looked down over the railroad tracks to our single downtown street in the middle of which my little green store sat squeezed between Harrington's Mens Store and Miss Glad's flower shop where Mom worked Saturdays. He called me over and said we should let bygones be bygones. I complied. He was not alone.

When I finally dragged in, my older brother, who was getting ready to cut the grass, took one look and growled, "Who

did that?" One thing I liked about my big brother was that while he beat me up every now and then, he wouldn't let anybody else get away with it.

"Don't tell Mom and Dad," he said as he washed my face and arms with the garden hose. "Just tell 'em you had an accident on your bike."

"Remember what I told you about General Stonewall Jackson." He was a hero to my brother, and by association, a hero to me. The association was made closer by the fact that one of our distant cousins up north in Virginia was supposed to be a distant relative of the General.

"Never give 'em the high ground" was the last thing my brother said before he sped off on my bike. I was beginning to get confused. What he said — and partly the way he said it — made me feel strong inside. But it somehow didn't sit well with what they said in church or around the dinner table. It felt like butterflies in my belly when I imagined all those ancient faces staring down into the arena to see what I'd do or think or feel next.

First published in *Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal*, Volume #36, October-December 2011.

From grade school on, Benedict Arnold is the name we Americans are taught to hate more than any, Satan included. Everybody, from five or six up, knows the name is synonymous with traitor though many get some of the details, like century, wrong.

Several artifacts recently recovered during the excavation of a long-abandoned farmhouse in Connecticut have just been authenticated by New Have scholars. Among the pieces discovered are fragments from the journal of someone named George. Not much is known about this person, but he appears to have been close to none other than Benedict Arnold. Even more interesting to scholars is that some of the entries, dated in 1780, mention things that appeared in Arnold's "Letter to the Inhabitants of America," published in October of that year. Early speculation has it that this discovery could lead to important re-understandings of American Revolutionary-era history, which would, in turn, require years of research grants, peer review, and re-education.

For instance there are references to the dangers of an "entangled alliance with the enemy of the Protestant faith" on one hand and "a precipitate declaration of independence" on the other. In addition, and most importantly for the New Haven community, we see evidence for the first time that Arnold may have been guided by mystical influences. Given to bouts of excruciating pain from a war injury to his leg, he reportedly saw things during his tortured sleep. Until now, none of this has been corroborated. But with George's journal the historical re-

cord now contains three separate occasions when Arnold's nightly visions were documented.

The dates for these particular entries are April 30th, June 15th and July 14th. The April 30th entry, which inexplicably contains the Faustian line, "*Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust, Die eine will sich von der andern trennen*" suggests the profound inner turmoil that Arnold must have felt and provides valuable context not only for the other two nightly episodes but also for the fateful decision that exposed Arnold's treason and which he ultimately came to understand more fully and defend vigorously.

George's notes from June 15th and July 14th are notable for their prophetic geopolitical references. On the night of the 15th of June, Arnold, delirious and troubled, "Under the tyranny of usurpers another George will come, and he will betray you and you will see that I was right to try and return to the bosom of our familial Britain, where the monarchy protects us from an insidious enemy disguised as friend who avows the greatest affection for the liberties of mankind."

On July 14th, George's notes reflect great passion and anxiety in Arnold's words. "The prisons ... take care ... the prisons are thrown open and the vile and dirty creatures emerge from the dark, stripping away crucifixes and trampling them in the dust, massing and surging through the streets and shops and villas until all is laid waste to the accompaniment of the metrical rising and falling of the guillotine."

A gap of nearly five months breaks the continuity of George's journal, but the existing historical record is helpful here. In September Arnold's bold plot to surrender the strategic

American fort at West Point to the British was foiled and Arnold defected. On October 11th Arnold's famous open letter in defense of his changing sides was published in the *New York Royal Gazette*. In light of the farmhouse documents, it is now much clearer just how much he struggled with the decision that he now elaborates with great conviction. Once justified he never seemed to turn back. Two months later George's journal picks up with Arnold, by then a brigadier general in the King's army, leading successful campaigns against American forces in Richmond, Virginia and New London, Connecticut.

Arnold's visions, as recorded by George, appear to be sufficiently detailed and interesting to authorize grants for a diverse group of academic departments — Psychology, Philosophy, Political Science, Germanic Literatures, and Anglo-French History come to mind — as well as for the paranormal research community.

Long held in disrepute, Arnold's image among Americans will not likely be rehabilitated as a result of these findings; however, for Arnoldian scholars in New Haven and beyond, there will be a comfortable supply of work for at least another generation.

First published in *The Copperfield Review*, Volume 10, Number 4, Autumn 2011.

Our Haunted House

... an innocuous slip into xenophobia? [ed.]

We had a haunted house when I was growing up. It wasn't even a block away, over on State Street next to the Catholic Church, which had its own graveyard. From the gate in the rusty, hooped wire fence, the house was mostly hidden by Spanish moss hanging down from the live oaks' enormous branches and by overgrown bushes and vines that covered the walls all the way up to the second story. Abandoned and run-down and full of all sorts of evil and danger, so everybody said, it was the scariest place in town. Out back, the pine woods we used to explore came to an abrupt end after stretching all the way down to the railroad tracks and out beyond the integrated elementary school at the edge of town.

My friends, except Charlie who lived near the elementary school, all lived on the same block as me. We had everything in reach. The high school, on the west side across the street from my house, had a ball field and two basketball goals, like a real basketball court, only on asphalt. St. Thomas and the haunted house were on the south side. The Baptist Church, where my dad was a preacher, was on the north side. It had a pecan orchard, and we used to get paid a nickel a pound. On the east side was the strip of stores we called downtown. We spent a lot of time in The General Store looking to buy baseball cards, army men, toy cars, and firecrackers. The stores on Main Street faced the railroad tracks, which were laid out on an embankment just in case the creeks rose.

All of us were born and had lived our entire lives here. Charlie was the most foreign one. He had a strange last name that must have been 10 letters long with only one little vowel

squeezed in. His father's father had been in the German cavalry in WWI and his sabre was mounted on the wall in their den where we sometimes watched the Saints play. World War I didn't matter a whole lot to us. We didn't know anything about it. All we knew about was the second one — the one with the Japs — and that was from the movies.

Lane and Cory lived next door, and we had a secret tunnel between our yards lined with pine straw. They were Methodists and their dad owned the hardware store. Lane, the oldest, was expected to take over the business one day. Cory was quiet.

Earl, twice our size and age, protected us from the bigger boys. He was especially hard of hearing and spoke funny on account of it. We figured he was deaf since his momma was always screaming at him, inside the house and outside, too. He never talked about his father.

Bobby was the fastest kid in school, and the girls all liked him best. He lived with his grandma and ate sandwiches covered with mayonnaise, didn't matter whether it was a ham sandwich or a banana sandwich. Gross me out. He invited me for lunch once, but I never went back a second time.

Most days after school we did stuff together and didn't go home until dark or later, depending on how persistently we were being called home. Every day was spontaneous — homework rarely kept us home. One day we'd ride across the tracks and go through the other part of town looking for Lucius and watching for Eddie. Lucius we liked, Eddie we feared. Another we'd play football in my side yard. It was like a magnet for the high school boys who got out later than us. It never failed — well, sometimes in the rain it did — but what 10-15 guys would

stop by to play. We were still in elementary. They were big. Usually they made us watch, but sometimes they'd let us play if we promised not to cry. Cory was known to. Earl and Bobby were the best. Earl wasn't afraid to tackle anybody, and Bobby could outrun or fake off every one of them; we knew these guys weren't as good as the high school football team, but we never let on.

In our last year at Lott Elementary, we faced a new challenge. A new kid — frail and freckled wearing ugly black glasses half the size of this face — moved into a trailer in the vacant lot where we used to go and hide in the waist-high grass when we were younger. Billy was sickly-looking and no good at sports, but he had great toys and once Bobby and I got caught playing with his train set while they were out. Billy covered for us telling his parents he'd told us it was OK.

Well, after that we had to let him in. Lane said we should give him a test though, an initiation. Charlie said we should make him go in the Anderson house. He meant the haunted house. No one could think of anything worse, so we agreed. None of us had ever gone in.

"I once got as far as the front porch, but heard something and ran," said Bobby.

"It can't be that bad, since it's next to a church — my church, that's where I go," put in Charlie.

"Yeah, but your church has a graveyard in the back," said Earl.

"Our dad told us the house has been empty ever since he was a kid and that it used to belong to a family from Mobile," said Lane with authority.

"I heard the father killed everybody and then himself," I chimed in.

"They got a divorce, and the mother died of leukemia. The father was long gone, so the two little girls moved to Montgomery to live with an aunt," said Charlie.

"But I heard that the two little girls never actually left," whispered Bobby, as if someone might be listening.

It was agreed that Billy would have to go inside. Earl offered to go and stay on the front porch, but we all said that Billy had to do it alone. I said he'd be alright, that we'd all be at the front gate and besides the police station was only two blocks away, and Bobby could be there in 15 seconds flat. Bobby nodded.

The next day we got Billy to come along to the Anderson house. We told him our plan — that he had to go inside and stay for one hour if he wanted to join us.

"Why?" asked Billy.

"Because we said so," answered Lane.

"Why this house? Is it haunted?" asked Billy again.

"Of course it's haunted. If it weren't haunted, why would we ask you to go in?" I said, stating the obvious.

"Have you been in it?" he asked, looking first at me then at each of the others.

"I've been there," answered Bobby, which wasn't quite true but got us past that awkward question. And when Billy asked whether he'd seen or heard anything scary, Bobby said "I didn't see no ghosts or nothing."

"Enough questions, just get going, will you?" said Lane, getting impatient.

"Just one more. Where you gonna be if I call for help?" asked Billy.

"Right here, Billy," answered Charlie, patting the top of the gate with both hands.

"Ok, it's 5:30. It'll be getting dark soon and we don't have a flashlight," said Lane, cutting off any more questions.

"I have matches," said Billy.

"Just don't burn down the house," said Lane.

Billy was on the front steps in two minutes. We were staring, eyes fixed on the front door, ready to run. Billy bounced on the loose boards a couple of times making a hideous groaning sound, and then he gently opened the screen door and knocked politely on the wooden door.

"There's nobody there. Just go in," yelled Charlie.

Billy looked back at Charlie and waved, then he turned the door handle and walked in, closing the door behind him.

"Why'd he do that? Why'd he close the door? Now he's trapped," said a panicked Bobby.

This went on for a full hour. We couldn't see or hear Billy. We didn't know what had happened to him. Was he still alive? Had the ghost of the father or the little girls or somebody else taken him? Bobby was ready to run for help, but Charlie kept telling him to stay calm. Earl said we should go in after him, but like a chorus we answered "Not me." Cory swore that he'd seen something in one of the upstairs window, but he couldn't say whether it was Billy.

All of a sudden we saw a small round light approaching from the side of the house. That light burned out and another was lit. Billy was coming. He had gone out the backdoor. We were all standing there shouting "C'mon, hurry up. Run!" And he kept walking. When he got to the gate, the house was in complete darkness, and he had his back to it.

Until then we'd never had a leader.

Billy reached in his pocket and pulled out a small gold chain with a locket on the end.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It belonged to my mamaw," he said. "She lived here a long time ago." Then out of the blue, he shouted "Boo!" and Cory and Earl and Bobby nearly jumped out of their skins, and I felt a

chill down the middle of my back. Even Lane twitched and took a step back.

After a moment, Billy stifled a chuckle, wisely, and apologized. "My daddy's gonna buy this house and fix it up so we can live here," added Billy. Charlie almost smiled, then tried to look inscrutable like his father, the principal.

Billy had pulled one over on us, but much as we wanted to give him a good pounding, we couldn't because he had the goods on us. After that we thought of Billy more as our mascot. As for our haunted house — it felt like another Santa Claus shock. But there were still youngsters who believed, and Halloween was just around the corner.

First published in *Dew on the Kudzu - A Southern Ezine*, June 14, 2012.

It all started with a little old woman who refused to leave her apartment. The city had condemned the apartments and the tenants had been forced to relocate.

I work for a demolition company as a project manager, and we'd been contracted to take down the South Side complex. It was high-rise, low-income housing that was already falling apart 20 years ago. But now real estate was booming, and there was real interest in the property. A development company bought the land to build an upscale condo village with 5,500 units. It was a critical piece in the city's multi-billion dollar urban renewal program.

Everybody was supposed to be out, but one my guys came running up yelling that there was a crazy old woman in 229 South.

"Me, Marty and Joey was makin the rounds one last time — like you said — when we come on a strong smell, like somethin burnin. It was on 17, an apartment at the front. I knocked and yelled if anybody was in there. There wasn't no answer so Joey busted down the door. And inside, there's this little old lady wrapped up in a blanket. Puttin strips of newspaper on one of them small charcoal grills. Place was cleared out except for the stacks of papers up against the wall."

"We tried to talk her out but she hissed and spit and clawed like some kinda wild animal. She looked real sick and smelled like she hadna seen running water in weeks. We didn't wanna catch nothin from her. Let the police take care of it, that's what I

said. Funny thing about those papers though. They was all the same date — tomorrow. And on the front page headline it said "Gas Explosion Kills 46."

Pity he hadn't thought to bring me one of those papers. Some of these guys can tell some tall tales and they like to spook each other. It goes with the job. I don't mind as long as they keep it off my site and in the tavern where it belongs. They're damn good at bringing down high-rises, but they don't have my responsibilities — responsibilities for life and death. I warned him — he being the leader — that if he was shitting me, he'd regret it way past his natural life.

Still, I couldn't ignore the possibility that there might be something to what he said, so I called my police liaison and asked for a sweep of 229 South — the entire building. We had officers on the scene, but it wasn't protocol to go outside the chain of command. Going through my liaison officer was. The hierarchy of a large organization, like a big city police force, is just as complex as the structure of a high-rise. If you don't respect it, you might find it falling on top of your head one day.

Just to be doubly safe I contacted the gas company to confirm that we were good to go. They sent out two trucks to check over everything. All lines in were safely disconnected, just like the dozens of times I'd done this before. The police sweep was completed in under an hour and nothing turned up — no little old lady, no apartment filled with newspapers, no burning smell, and no ashes.

We had our go ahead. Buildings clear, gas shut off. I'd like to have had my guys sweep 229 South one last time, but that would have risked offending the police, and I'd sworn never to

do that again. The gas— I knew the guys. I'd worked with them many times before. Besides, the developer and the mayor's office — three calls from each in the past hour-and-a-half. Was I going to wait another half-an-hour? No! I might fire this son-of-a-bitch but not until we'd demolished these buildings. Crazy as he was, he was still one of my best demolition guys.

The charges were all set and all of our guys were accounted for and on this side of the 8-foot chain link fence. I wanted to have one final visual — to spot any movement, anything whatsoever. I got my binoculars from the front seat of my company truck. Standing on the running board, I pointed the binoculars towards 229 South and focused on the 17th floor. There she was.

First published in *Flashes in the Dark*, February 3, 2012.

A Drifter's Tale

... an original derivative of Steinbeck? [ed.]

Two drifters huddled by their campfire, just down a piece from the railroad bed. Johnny, a scrawny, restless kid not more than 18, and Sam, a shrunken head on a lumbering, creaking six-foot-five-inch frame.

No more trains til morning, and this was a familiar stop, on the county line between two small towns. To the east was the sheriff neither wanted to tangle with again. A couple of years back, they'd been rousted out of an old widow's barn, robbed, bound in ropes, and dumped in a livestock car filled with hogs. The sheriff hadn't actually taken part, but he made no effort to discourage his boys.

Best to get on the other side of Calhoun County as quickly as possible. Tonight, on the county line, it was safe enough but still a good idea to keep the fire low and out of sight.

They were down to one can of beans. That was dinner and breakfast and probably lunch. There wouldn't be any more hunting til they got past the sheriff and his boys.

Overhead, the new moon made the stars stand out brilliantly against the blackness, and though it wasn't overly cold if you were sheltered from the wind, you still wanted a fire nearby to help you get to sleep, especially if you were under the weather like Sam was.

It was Johnny that saw it.

"See that, Sam? That's the first shootin star I seen since August— I think it was August. Must've been when we was comin into Oklahoma City."

"So what?" muttered Sam

"So, make a wish. You know. We always make a wish," said Johnny.

"You go right ahead, then. Makes no never mind to me," said Sam coughing, his joints popping as he lay down, his back to the fire.

"Sam? You know how we always make one single wish and it just about never comes true?"

Sam grunted.

"This time I'm gonna be real smart, Sam. I'm gonna get my wish cause I'm gonna wish I could wish forever."

"That's mighty clever, Johnny boy," said Sam with uncharacteristic sarcasm.

"Here goes. I wish I could wish forever and ever. Know what that means, don't you Sam? Now, I can wish for somethin, and in half an hour I can wish again, and I can keep on wishin tomorrow, and the day after ... until the day I die. Why don't you make a wish, Sam? I'll give you one of mine."

"If I do will you leave me in peace."

"Sure thing, Sam. Your wish is my command," said Johnny chuckling.

"Okay, I wish I had one of them great big Willy burgers we had back in Odessa and a pitcher of cold beer to wash it down. Even with this damned cold, I could go for one with all the fixins — onions, bacon, cheese, tomatoes, pickles, mustard, and that hot sauce. You remember, they're so big, no bun can hold em? Damn if I wouldn't be in hog heaven. I'd eat that thing in four bites and swill that beer in one go. Now ... look wacha gone and done, Johnny. Got me all hungry and ain't nothin round to eat. Now, leave me be."

#

"Sam! Sam! Look! It came true! Your wish. It came true! It's a miracle or somethin."

Sam raised his heavy lids and rolled over part way to see what Johnny was on about. Sam's eyes nearly sprang out of their sockets.

"Good God o'mighty! This cain't be real."

He sniffed, reached out to touch, then jumped up, kneeling in front of the plate Johnny had pushed over his way. Before Johnny could get in another word, Sam had licked the plate clean as a whistle.

"I wish you hadna done that, Sam. That was damn greedy."

After a thunderous belch that frightened a small animal out of hiding, Sam said, "You said you could wish for anythin you want anytime it suited you, so wacha need my wish for?"

"I guess you got a point, Sam. Wish I'd thought of that first," answered Johnny.

"Why don't you just wish up somethin for yourself?"

"Nah. I guess I kinda lost my appetite. Sam, I wish I could see things the way you do."

"Well, you lie down beside the fire and get some sleep, Johnny boy. You can wish us up a great big ole breakfast before the 5:50 comes through," said Sam.

"Wish I could."

"You're just nervous bout the sheriff and them boys. Don't fret none bout it. It'll be fine. In one of them boxcars, nobody'll ever see us," Sam said, lying back down.

"Wish you was right about that," answered Johnny. "Fact, I wish we never met them people to start with."

"You just keep on wishin, Johnny boy," whispered Sam repositioning himself.

Johnny ran his finger around the inside of a the blackened can and tossed it back into the fire.

First published in *Dew on the Kudzu - A Southern Ezine*, July 21, 2013.

Fred was urinating over the side of the boat again. Not that it mattered to him — though it did to Dick — but they were alone in the middle of Coleman Lake. Dark gray clouds hung heavy and low and the wind was driving a steady rain and stirring up waves twice as high as their small aluminum fishing boat. Only a couple of intoxicated 15-year-olds would have been out in the water in this kind of weather ... and without life jackets.

A giant heave followed by a sudden collapse into a deep trough was enough to send Fred catapulting overboard into the choppy black water, still unzipped and unfinished. The next crest brought him back in view, his wide-open mouth swallowing more water than he could spew out, his eyes bugged out and mostly white, and his face as red as a freckled-face could get.

Dick, still in the boat and seated astern next to the small Evinrude, could hear Fred blubbering what sounded like "Help me, dick head!" over and over, and he was suddenly back in 6th grade tormented by the boys in his class, with Fred in the lead. Dick heard himself yell out, "Can't Fred. Not anymore."

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Three years before Dick's family had moved to this small town in peanut farming country, and his misery began when he was placed in the 6th grade 'remedial' A2 class, just temporarily, they said, until he could be tested. For the first time in his young life, Dick was an outsider, someone who didn't belong,

and the teasing and taunting using his name in sexually explicit ways, intensified his loneliness and low self-esteem. Making matters worse, his body's newfound interest in girls was frustrated by the public tormenting.

Wanting to belong more than anything, Dick had tried to win over Fred and the other boys. When the school told him his test scores were excellent and asked if he wanted to move up to the A1 level, Dick said "No." Nevertheless, Fred and the boys remained a little mistrustful, until it sank in that they now could brag about having the smartest kid in the 6th grade.

Dick even went so far as to participate in the ritual whipping contest. Fred and Robert were the leaders by far. They were whipped, spanked, or beaten every day of the week they weren't sick at home or playing hooky. In time Dick got to where he provoked as many lickings as any of the other boys, and he won great respect for that.

In 7th grade, Robert's parents pulled him out of public school to attend the all-white private school. Their experiment with integration was over. With Robert gone, Fred was incomplete. So, he turned to Dick, and from that point on, Fred stopped harassing Dick and even stuck up for him on occasion.

Dick never let on that he still bore a grudge for the humiliation he'd had to endure. He had sacrificed the advanced A1 class and three years later, he had been kicked off the football team for smoking dope — just one drag on a joint he'd had at a party at Fred's — and he'd been embarrassed in front of every girl he liked. Fred hadn't given up anything. He was headed for the same paper mill job that had killed his old man.

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"Swallow this you bully bastard," screamed Dick, shoving the handle of the boat oar towards Fred's open mouth. Biting into the handle, blood filling his mouth, Fred grabbed the oar in the middle with both hands and yanked hard pulling Dick into the lake. Dick splashed into the water and was immediately swamped by a wave. He went under and when he came up, Fred smashed him on top of his head with the flat end of the oar. Dick went under again, but this time when he came up he wrapped his arms around Fred's legs and pulled him under where they struggled until they couldn't breathe any longer and had to go up for air.

Back on the surface, gasping for air, they rode the waves, scanning about for the boat. A hard rain had begun while they were under. There was no sign of the boat. It might have been only 100 yards away, but it could have been 100 yards in any direction. The shore was nowhere in sight. Exhausted from fighting and too much alcohol, they bobbed less and less with each passing wave, swallowing more lake water than they could cough up. At spitting distance, the boys might as well have been miles apart.

First published in *Left Hand of the Father*, Issue 2, 2013.

The heaviness weighing him down was no greater than usual, but Edwin still had to crawl out of bed and wriggle along on the floor to the pile of clothes he'd peeled off the night before. Days like these were why he wore sweats. Even so, getting dressed while flat on your back is for contortionists, he thought.

There was no point in going to the bathroom yet. He had to work up to it and in the meantime he had to tighten his muscles to hold back that uncomfortable pressing feeling. Either that or resign himself to dragging his smelly, squishy self around the apartment while he tried to find a way to get on top of the heaviness.

He'd found different ways, but none permanent. Alcohol would have brought him numbness, but he wouldn't, not again. Sometimes he would sit in his dark apartment and obsess, fixating on what had gone wrong, until eventually he wore himself out. Hours, sometimes days, later he would wake up with the heaviness lifted. Once he had accidentally stabbed himself with a pair of scissors while opening a package from his wife, Muriel, and although he discovered that the intense pain displaced the heaviness, he was too squeamish ever to self-injure. In recent weeks, he had had some success getting out from under it by mental focus. Today, he sensed, was one of those days.

He slithered over to the bookshelf where he kept pictures of his children, a boy and a girl, 8 and 10. The two picture frames had been moved from the bottom shelf to the top shelf and

back many times. Lying there prone between a coffee table littered with newspaper classifieds and a lumpy and soiled futon, he saw the photos of Charlotte and Charlie on the bottom shelf. And today, unlike many days when they provoked regret and self-loathing and resignation, they stirred in him a powerful desire to get over it — the heaviness.

He couldn't see the clock, but judging from the familiar early morning sounds of the apartments on either side and above, he guessed it was before eight, so he had time. Today, he had the kids all day. He was supposed to pick them up at 9:30. They wanted to go to the amusement park once more before school started. Charlotte wanted to ride the Ferris wheel and the water slide and go through the haunted house, but not alone, and Charlie had to do the Bullet, the Mixer, and especially the Particle Accelerator, again. He'd promised the kids they could eat all the cotton candy and caramel apples they wanted as long as they didn't make themselves sick and didn't tell their mother later.

Edwin was now standing upright, stretching his limbs in all directions, eyes on his kids' happy faces. Before setting off for the bathroom, he reached down and picked up the picture frames and put them on the top shelf, eye-level. He was afraid next time they wouldn't help.

First published in *Free Flash Fiction*, August 19, 2012.

Last night it had looked like good cover. Now, first thing in the morning, people, lots of them, were crunching past, not more than a couple of feet from where he'd slept. Luckily, no one seemed to take any notice. Even so, like a shot, he jumped to his feet, grabbed the backpack, and scooted out of the bushes falling in with the first current that swept him along.

The night before, after being dropped at the campground, he'd searched the pitch blackness in vain with a AAA flashlight, unable to locate a vacant camping site. On both sides of the road for some distance into the woods it seemed, there were tents and campers and sleeping bags. And the signs were abundant warning of the consequences of not having a permit, but it was long past office hours at the ranger station, which was way back at the park entrance.

Too tired to be picky, he had found a spot under a clump of bushes. It appeared private. That was important, because the fine for no permit was more than he had and there would be complications.

He'd been lucky his first night in. A new place and all that. Things had seemed to work out, mostly.

Now he just needed the washrooms ... badly. The bushes were off limits. The woods were mostly pine and cedar, not a lot of undergrowth, so you could see and be seen pretty far in. He figured there had to be facilities nearby regardless of which direction was taken, because all these people ... they had to be accommodated.

He was carried along in a sea of bright colors and cheerful talking and laughing, and the narrow swath of sky was clearing, fast-moving white clouds making way for a clear blue sky.

It was already feeling warmer. He hadn't been cold overnight thanks to an extra layer, but now it was getting warm. Partly, it was the heat from all the bodies. They were so close and there were so many and they were all in motion. He wished he could slip out of the overlarge flannel shirt, but there was just no place to stop. There was only room ahead if he kept walking.

In a clearing with a heavy, low-lying mist — from the Merced, he heard someone say — he got his first view of the vertical walls of granite that bounded the narrow, wooded valley where he and hundreds marched along the park trails. It would have been his first photo op, but the camera was in the pack and even if he could get to it he wasn't sure he'd know how to use it. It wasn't his.

Eventually, he saw the sign to the facilities, and he got out, and so did many others. After an hour and 15 minutes, it was his turn.

He had to break out ... to get away from all these people. He found a map that showed him trails he could follow to get to the top of the valley walls. There was no climbing gear in the pack, but he was all set for hiking, however far and high might be required.

Early on, the cortege of hikers was thick and stayed that way until past the first waterfall. The waterfall was the turnaround point for many. Lots of souvenir photos were taken

there. He continued on, still in line but a skinny one now, no one to the left and no one to the right.

Hiking the narrow path was fairly safe even on the switchbacks. However, every now and then, some guy — it was always a guy or guys — tried to squeeze by, never failing to take the inside track. It was bumper to bumper except when the shutterbugs stopped traffic while they scanned and focused on the perfect vista. Tempers were for the most part held in check, even though everyone's vacation was slipping past. A Canadian's speedometer consistently gave readings of less than kilometer an hour.

That was the beautiful trail to the top where it was no less crowded than below. He was just in time to squeeze onto the last bus back to the lodge.

He hoped dusk would give him enough light to hitch a ride out of the park. Nature was more elusive than he'd imagined and people — they must all be crazy and so many of them. Besides, if he came back on his own and after only one night, maybe they'd be lenient. He could hope, but it didn't matter, because he couldn't stay out ... not without meds.

First published in *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, February 2013.

The Boss

... getting lucky in the workplace ... ah, not so fast [ed.]

She was dead, finally. All of us went to make sure. We still couldn't believe it. We skipped the memorial service and went straight to the cemetery ... and waited. With steely eyes, jaws and fists clenched, we watched every last piece of dirt drop to fill in the hole, as if every speck of dirt was needed to hold the coffin in place.

Dirk, Paula, Aurelio, Stephen, Valerie, Alex, Ryan and the rest of us stood there until the gravediggers, or groundskeepers as they preferred to be called, had left. The grave was now a mound in the midst of rows and rows of headstones, crosses and other markers. We stood there until dusk — almost expectantly, so not quite satisfied.

The groundskeepers finally came to usher us out. The gates closed at dark. Vandalism and debauchery had long plagued this cemetery, and overnight the groundskeepers became security guards.

We all went out for a drink, just like we said we would, but somehow it was missing the jubilation and relief we had all expected. So we just drank. Three or four or five rounds, I can't remember now. Numbness was pretty much the common feeling, both emotionally and physically, for we literally stumbled down the stairs to the subway platform where we helped one another get on the right trains ... more or less.

All night long, I must have half-slept, because I kept hearing her voice, though I knew it couldn't be. "It's quite straightforward, really." How many times she'd said that to me

when I was new on the job. And after me it was someone else. "It's quite straightforward, really." And there was the "Please and thank you" benediction she spoke every single time she gave you that little extra assignment that made you late leaving the office.

"Please and thank you."

"Really, it's quite straightforward."

"Please and thank you."

"Robert, it's quite straightforward, really."

"Please and thank you, Robert."

When the alarm went off at 6:00, I was up like a shot. The voice was gone.

Thanks to a wretched night, I was up, dressed and ready for work a full hour early. I phoned Ryan and Paula and we met for breakfast at the restaurant around the corner from our office building. Ryan and Paula looked even less perky than I felt. We kept our conversations on the food and the front page. Paula started to smoke but we stopped her before anybody saw. Ryan was fixated on his phone. Neither seemed to notice, thankfully, but I was self-conscious and distracted by my excessive sweating. I felt like I'd been splashed with a bucket of my own sweat — my forehead, my scalp, my armpits, my hands ... were dripping.

In the elevator, we punched different buttons. I would be the first to meet her replacement, and they wanted me to phone first chance I got.

Still worried about my perspiration wetness, I towed off in the men's room before cautiously making my way to her office. Her— The door was closed, so I knocked, and a voice invited me in. It was a huge relief to find a man sitting behind the desk.

Subconsciously, I had feared that I would open the door and find her still there. I paused for a moment to take it all in, and he said, "Would you close the door ... Robert, isn't it? ... please and thank you."

First published in *thickjam*, No. 254, March 7, 2013.

He lived on the second floor of an old run-down rooming house in a small farming town. The landlady had the first floor on account of not being able to climb the stairs anymore. The Baptist Church had rented out the upper rooms for migrant families and, during the winter, vagrants.

No one begrudged him the huge second floor overlooking the town square, for it was in these rooms that a family had been savagely murdered by a relative whom the father had had committed some years before.

The old lady told the story proudly whenever she found a fresh pair of ears to listen. She'd been a little girl back then and had awakened to the screaming. She wasn't afraid of the rooms. On the contrary, after her parents passed, she'd lived there herself until her hip started acting up. And the folks on the third floor likely as not had seen and heard worse and wanted to keep a distance.

So, he had the rooms to himself, undisturbed. Not even a repairman was let in, not that the old lady ever called one. The windows were closed — probably painted shut — and the red velvet drapes in the front room were always drawn. It was reported that he carried in lots of stuff, usually in bags or boxes. But nothing came out. Nobody recalled seeing him take out the garbage, which was peculiar but not unique. There had been old Miss Livey, too — her and her cats.

One day, little Maria escaped from her mama up in the tiny attic and was playing on the first landing. The front door

crashed open and in came the man from the second floor with a cardboard box half his size.

He knocked on the landlady's door and the bespectacled face that emerged from behind the door was gray and wrinkled and came to an end in a pointed little nose thrust out over a patch of untweezed whiskers. The little girl was mesmerized as she watched between the balusters. One at a time, the man reached into the box and pulled out one shiny object after another and handed them over to the old lady, whose long yellowish nails scraped across the smooth surfaces as she tried to get hold.

After the inspection, the man took the box up to his rooms. Twice he carried the box up. Little Maria, hiding behind a tall empty vase, thought she heard a voice coming from the second box. Later, her mama and her papa told her it was just her imaginings, but they never let her out of their sight again, and they left town two days later, after payday.

First published in *MicroHorror*, December 4, 2012.

The dining room was unevenly lighted. The two candelabra couldn't replace the immense chandelier that hung dark and silent overhead, and the wall sconces created more shadow than backlighting. The serving dishes were stationed on the sideboard. there were four empty chairs, but the settings were left in place ... just in case.

Henry sat at the head of the table as he had for 27 years. He couldn't feed himself since the stroke. His role was strictly formal. Only his wife, Eloise, knew about his hallucinated cuck-oldry, though the accusations had nearly driven her to file for divorce. But Henry didn't let on about his other fantasy.

From the other end, Eloise presided over the table as she did with everything. She was not inclined towards business, preferring the gardens, the church and the children, in that order. However, she had proved exceedingly competent in handling Henry's business affairs, including the partnership that managed the family's land.

Henry's younger brother, Cecil, was a life-long bachelor and the dashing black sheep of the family, so it was with no little irony that he attended the Christmas dinner faithfully every year. Not having any legitimate heirs, his interests in the partnership were more immediate than his siblings'. However, without the support of one of them, he knew he'd never cash in fully from the land. Two nights a year he harbored at the family house and then was gone again.

Diagonally, across the table was Catherine, the eldest of the three, and her companion, this year a middle-aged but gor-

geous Italian actress. Catherine's two children, both unmarried and in their late thirties, rarely came, neither expecting anything financial to materialize from yet another long, drawn out Christmas ceremony with the ancient relatives. Catherine came, not for tradition, but to check up on the family and the land.

Henry and Eloise had two sons. Reginald was a local real estate broker, and Archie was a medical missionary in the Congo or thereabouts. Reginald actively followed and studied the goings on of the partnership as he happened to be professionally associated with its legal and financial advisors. Archie wrote once a year — his annual Christmas letter — but otherwise he wasn't heard from.

Harold and Elizabeth, Reginald's children, represented the third generation. Harold was studying law, in keeping with his father's long-range plans. Elizabeth, the apple of her grandfather's wayward eye, was a graduate student specializing in tropical diseases, who had more in common with her Uncle Archie than her father. Neither child took after or took to their alcoholic mother, who stumbled in at last and was escorted to her chair by Great Uncle Cecil.

With everyone seated and the servants standing at attention, Henry slurred through the Christmas benediction once again.

First published in *The Story Shack*, December 25, 2013.

Emil liked our vampire movies, particularly the black and whites. They were different from movies back home, and their vampires weren't supernatural. He liked our vampire movies, he said, because in Hollywood endings, the good, in some form or other, always won. Of course, he got to learn that couldn't be said for all our movies. Snuff films for sure, discovered accidentally in his late night, early morning wanderings. They traumatized him but drew him in like a moth to a flame.

Emil struggled with English as a fourth language, but when he talked about the past at home or what he'd seen in our underground movie parlors, his face expressed it all. Horror came from his eyes, his breathing, his intonation, and his exsanguinated face. Although his words were too monochromatic and his phrasing too convoluted to accurately depict what he saw in his mind's eye, non-verbally he transmitted his terror all too well, and it gave me the shivers.

After a few weeks, I broke my cardinal rule and Emil and I started spending time together once or twice a week. He was a chess player and a good one. No secret. He carried his own hand-carved pieces around with him, always game. When it wasn't raining, we'd sit at an outdoor chess table and play for a couple of hours. I also introduced him to some of our comedies, from the Marx Brothers to Robin Williams, and gradually he seemed to lose his macabre interest in the vampire genre.

One early spring afternoon, we were walking along the row of consulates and embassies, when a black Mercedes limo came to a sudden stop in the middle of traffic. A heavysset, sil-

ver-haired main in a double-breasted black mink coat burst out of the back of the car and waved his arms dismissively at the cars that were honking at him. He looked our way — longer than I felt comfortable with — and spat out something that I gathered wasn't well meant.

Emil had shrunk behind me and was muttering a prayer, a chant, anyway something repetitive and committed to memory. The large, expressive, and well-dressed passenger shoved his way through the pedestrians, scattering men, women, and children as if they were chickens. Before the limo drove off, I caught the plates. Diplomatic. Emil shivered and chattered away. Looking into his fear-stricken eyes, I asked him to talk to me, to tell me what was wrong. He said one word in English, "Vampire," then he returned to his litany.

First published in *Free Flash Fiction*, February 27, 2013.

"Daddy, why are there boots on the edge of the road?"

"I don't know, son. Listen don't talk to me right now, OK? This is some pretty hairy driving. Rain, rush hour, slick tires."

"I think the man got knocked clean out of his boots."

"What man?"

"The man whose car was broken down."

"What car?"

"Umh, I dunno."

"Well, don't bother me, son. I'm really trying hard to concentrate here. Can't afford to have another accident."

"They looked like roofer boots. Me and Billy watched 'em put the new roof on his house, and they had boots just like that."

"Like wh— I thought I asked you to stop talking."

"Maybe they fell off the truck, you know, like after work, they change. I wonder if he had to buy a new pair. Are they expensive?"

"Are what expensive?"

"Roofer boots."

"What's a roofer boot?"

"I just said."

"Well, cut it out, OK. Wait til we get out of this traffic."

"Maybe it was a robbery. The boots guy stopped to help a sports car. Then he stole the car and the man's shoes, leaving the boots behind."

"Robbery? That's just silly. Now, hush."

"I think he took the girlfriend, too."

"What? Whose girlfriend? Now, would you please— "

"I think he got tired of roofing and wanted to drive down to Florida."

"What's in Florida?"

"You know, Disney, old people, Canadians, bikinis and stuff."

"What Canadians?"

"Old fat white ones. Snowmen! Get it?"

"Yeah, I got it. You've really gotta stop talking. Just for the next couple of miles, OK?"

"Daddy?"

"What, son?"

"Do you think Mommy will be OK?"

"Yeah. She's in a good place. They have the best doctors and nurses in the city. They'll— Yeah, son. She'll be fine."

"I hope so. I don't know what I would do without her."

"Me either, son. Me either."

"Daddy, I think I'm finished talking for now."

"OK, son."

On the inside shoulder of the freeway was a second pair of boots, but these were ignored.

First published in *The Story Shack*, February 9, 2013.

Poker Night at Papa G's

... dogs playing poker — too bad there's no illustration [ed.]

Lou was agitated in the beginning but he gradually settled down. He drank like a fish and that always improved his outlook. He had been a little worried about his poor sick wife, but now he was looking forward to swinging by little Alice's on the way home.

Papa G dozed, off and on, through most of the game, and since he wasn't allowed to smoke at the table anymore, he wore an unlit stogie stump in the corner of his mouth. The others were all to glad to help him out where they could, though. After each deal, Papa G's cards came to him nicely ordered from low to high or high to low depending which friend, Lou or Ozzie, had lent a hand.

For no apparent reason, Mr. Chance frequently leapt up in the middle of the game and paced about, then just as suddenly stopped and ran back to check his cards. No one could hail him, because Mr. Chance was deaf as a post. Unlike Papa G, he was too unpredictable for his neighbors to assist him. And when it came to tricking Mr. Chance, Ozzie, on his left, was a little jumpy, and Roscoe, on his right, was just too well-mannered.

Ozzie barked whenever Mr. Chance went on tour and he even barked at Papa G to wake him up, but every time Lou's great big furry mitt reached around behind the forward-slumping Papa G and grabbed Ozzie by the scruff of the neck until Ozzie submitted.

Roscoe was the new guy, and he played the waiting game. He simply wanted to watch, enjoy his scotch and cigarillos, have a good time blowing smoke rings into the green lamp shade ... and, of course, leave with his shirt.

Frankie was the other loudmouth, and between him and Ozzie, there was enough racket to wake the baby next door several times, each triggering a howling contest. Frankie was well-connected so nobody said or did anything to him lest he get his nose out of joint. Although he had a keen nose for business, at cards he was hopeless, so he kept a low profile at the table, paging through the girly magazine in his lap.

Lemuel was the oldest and he didn't play. After he finished his steak tartar and a six pack of Becks, he was snoring and making sundry other noises on the couch the rest of the night. Later, Frankie, who knew Lemuel from way back, slipped Lemuel a few of his winnings and told him that he did pretty well for an old guy. Next day, Lemuel had a spring in his step.

Despite the neighbors' complaints, the super didn't bust up the game. It wasn't necessary. Everyone, even Lou, was sound asleep by 10:00.

First published in *The Story Shack*, March 22, 2013.

The Recluse

... this one's almost scary— Do the girls foreshadow something? [ed.]

Longing drove him out of the house for the first time in ... well, he couldn't remember. He lived alone, stayed home, had made arrangements for the groceries to be delivered and for the kid across the street to take out the trash and cut the grass.

Books, radio, and painting filled his days for many ... well, a long time. The windows in his upstairs garret afforded the best view for his palette, and whenever he was so inclined, he could listen to the radio to find out what was happening outside. At first that was all he needed.

Although he knew the current date, that didn't help him calculate the duration of his solitude. He'd forgot when it started, when he'd withdrawn. However long it had been going on, his isolation had become suffocating.

Behind the panes of glass and distanced by static radio broadcasts, he needed out of his aloneness. To see the trees again, the houses and people, up close. To smell flowers and perfume and even the paper mill. To feel the warmth of the sun and the embrace of the wind. To touch the sturdy metallic body of a car and the flesh of someone's hand.

He might've chosen to go out in broad daylight, but he had reservations — mostly fears. Too much too soon. The risk of failure and a devastating return to seclusion warranted a deliberate and gradual re-encounter. And so he ventured out in the middle of the night, in the middle of a great storm when he knew no one else would be about.

The cold rain and the gusting wind made themselves familiar right away. And the violent thunderclaps and jagged lightning bolts made their re-acquaintance no less forcefully. Everything he'd come out to see and feel and breathe was overwhelmed by the storm, and he fled, back to the safety of his rooms.

He convinced himself that he hadn't failed, and in the following days, he debated whether to stick with the original plan of easing back into the world or pluck up the courage and jump in and swim in the fullness of experience that had grown so remote. He chose the latter.

The day he chose was bright and sunny and very warm, so he knew it would be busy, especially since it was near the noon hour. His house, set back from the road a bit, gave him a chance to take everything in slowly as he made his way down the stone path from the porch to the sidewalk.

A large pine had come down during the storm. Thankfully, the neighbor's fences were intact. They could be difficult — the neighbors, that is. A crotchety, old skinflint with the lungs of a mezzo soprano on one side and a snooty young couple, the woman with a DAR-birthright, on the other. Picking through the splintered and sappy debris of the old tree that had warned of its demise for years, he reached the front gate.

Out on the sidewalk, he turned and headed down toward Main Street. The clapboard-sided Catholic Church hadn't changed — still a couple of vacancies in the cemetery. The fire station was still dwarfed by the hideous drum-studded cell tower.

He smiled at two teenage girls walking in the opposite direction. The smiled back shyly, but once they'd passed they giggled loudly. If he wasn't mistaken, one was the pharmacist's daughter. The other? Looked like she belonged to that house down the street where there were always so many cars.

Considering how long he had been away, things seemed to be pretty much the same. For sure he recognized the fat guy in the Speedo who was pushing a gagging, wheezing lawn mower through a cloud of blue smoke. That, he would like to forget.

The minute he walked into the barber shop, Joe shouted out "Mr. Lawrence! Everything OK? You're not due for another three weeks!"

First published in *Aardvark Press*, May 29, 2014.

On the way home from the library, I passed an alley where it sounded like two guys were pounding a third guy.

They must have seen me looking, because they shouted in my direction. First reaction: run. But I couldn't. It's the wheelchair.

I wheeled across the street towards a figure who was making haste down the empty sidewalk. I called and then yelled to her, but she didn't answer, didn't even look my way. Probably the same b_____ who deliberately closed the elevator door in my face when I was leaving the stacks.

On the other side of the street, I felt a little safer, since no one was in sight. However, when you're in a wheelchair, things in the distance are a lot closer than they look.

I started to phone Sally, my girlfriend. Girlfriend in the sense that she's a female friend. She's normal. She's been very patient with her paranoid, handicapped friend. On more than one occasion, she offered to give me a lift when I was working late on my research. Except for a couple of times when it was raining like hell, I routinely declined, partly to manage my mental IOUs and partly to assert my pathetic independence.

Tonight was a matter of pride though, so I stuck the phone back in my jacket pocket and rolled on — my anti-Samaritan lady out of sight save for that bobbing head of hers.

It occurred to me that I should call the cops and report the incident. I hesitated. Those guys could recognize me. For God's sake, I was in a wheelchair on a well-lit sidewalk, and they were in the shadows.

Besides, what kind of idiot gets caught up with a couple of thugs like that? Probably just a family dispute among criminals anyway. And if the cops did ... well, these guys might be off the street for a night but they'd be on the lookout the next.

And what about Ms. Door-in-Your-Face? Why didn't she call? She could at least run.

And why don't the police at least patrol this area once in a while?

I don't ask a lot, and I don't expect charity, pity or any of those other self-indulgent sentiments from others, so why shouldn't I expect not to be expected to show them to anybody else?

For Sally, yes I would. Definitely!

For a stranger, why? It was a stranger who put me in this damn chair. What do I care — why should I care — about a stranger if it means risking my own—

It was Sally's ringtone. As soon as I answered, she noticed a difference in my voice and immediately asked what was the matter.

By this point, I was fully committed to the belief, reached more or less through systematic *reductio ad nihil*, so I answered, "Oh, nothing. It was really nothing."

"What? What was really— "

"Nothing. I'm just real tired, that's all. Think I could cash in that rain cheque?"

First published in *The Release*, July 1, 2014.

Splitting the Lottery

... where do these bizarre characters come from? [ed.]

As soon as the numbers flashed on the screen, I screamed and dashed out of my cube to the elevators. 13-40-63-2-18-39, 13-40-63-2-18-39, 13-40-63-2-18-39, those were my numbers, alright. But I had to get home, fast ... and find my ticket.

Ever since Leslie moved in, I've had to find a different hiding spot each week. We get along, I suppose, mostly because we never see each other. But there's something about Leslie I don't trust. Recently, my browser history has been erased twice that I know of, and I never do that. Somebody's also been going through my mail. I have to keep an eye on Leslie. All my meds are now locked up in my desk at work.

I grabbed the first cab, bright yellow with 1340 painted on the side. What a coincidence! 1340, 1340, 1340 stuck in my head, and it took me a minute to remember to give the driver my address — 1839 Lawrence West. All of a sudden, the middle numbers were coming up blank.

1340, something, something, something, 1839 — the swarm of possible numbers swirled in my head. A deep breath and I leaned over the front seat to see how much further, then Cliff — and he looked like a Cliff — barked into the rear-view mirror, "Hey, putcher seat on or I'm gonna pull over. Wanna make trouble or somethin? Cop sees that-n-I'm— "

That was enough distraction to get to my place, where I pulled a fifty from my wallet and dropped it cavalierly on the front seat — magnanimity, I was going to love it — jumped out of the care, and raced to the front door. I'd left my key in my purse at the office ... stupid! But old lady Smithson was always

home and she'd buzz me in. She lived for the buzzer and often heard it.

When she answered, I shouted into the speaker. I always say it's Leslie. She likes Leslie, and it's kinda funny, because she thinks I'm saying, "Wesley." That's her son she hasn't seen in years. Not my problem though.

This time of day, the ankle biters and slackers are napping, so I caught an empty elevator to the 7th floor and was at my door ... *sans* keys. Duh! Luckily, I hadn't left my cell at work either, so I phoned the super, who, more good luck for me, was on 6 finishing up with Miss Rossi.

After agonizing minutes, I was in my apartment trying to recall where I'd put that damn ticket. Couldn't be in my *Play*—No, first place Leslie would've looked. The Hemingway — Mariel, not the other one — under the TV guide? No, that was last month. Taped to the back of my dresser? Hadn't tried that yet. In the freezer behind the ice-cube trays? Done that. Underneath the bottom plate in the kitchen cabinet? Not sure, so I checked. Nope. Inside the vent cover behind the headboard? Too much heavy lifting and way too dusty. Wouldn't have bothered. The bathroom? Maybe, but where?

When I opened the door to the bathroom, the toilet was lying on its side. On the mirror in red lipstick, "13-40-63-2-18-39" with "63-2" double underlined. Sixty-three square feet — the area I counted every morning after too much dairy. Now, I remembered. But how would Leslie have known? And that red ... that wasn't Leslie's. It was mine and it was in my purse this morning.

First published on the Short Humour Site, April 4, 2014.

He nearly missed the bus to Montgomery, because the summer final went long. Jesse was a third year student majoring in everything.

Finally, a break — two weeks out west, roughing it.

Forty-eight hours to get there — northwest Wyoming — and the final eight it was just him, the driver, and some guy chanting in the back of the bus.

At the bus station in Salt Lake City, the ticket agent had chattered on and on about the bear attacks and the rescue helicopters and tried to get Jesse to go to San Francisco instead.

He didn't. In a general store two blocks from the entrance to the park, he met a girl from the BSU. She had a summer job there. Jesse wasn't looking for anyone or anything familiar, so he pretended to be in a big hurry. Besides, he was embarrassed to be seen with that accent.

Back on the road, he hitched a ride with family. The girl, a high schooler, had got her parents to pick him up. In her high-pitched, precocious tone, she explained it was because he was so "cute and interesting and hardly dangerous looking." That made Jesse feel uncomfortable. He let on he needed to throw up, and they pulled over right away. He motioned for them to keep going.

After that unpleasantness, Jesse decided to take the next trail into the backcountry. It was narrow and empty, probably because it was off to the south away from the big tourist attractions.

About five miles in, the path split and to the right it was marked by a red-lettered sign that read, "Bear Activity." Images from the graphic warnings flooded his head. He froze. All he had was this silly string of bear bells. Weapons weren't allowed. the clerk in the store swore that the bells worked. Jesse put them on and jingled down the left track of the trail, still anxious but curious enough not to turn and run ... yet.

The woods got closer and closer, and denser. He couldn't see more than 20 feet in. More and more it seemed like an ambush at every turn, and that feeling peaked when he found himself standing in a small grassy field full in the sun, ringed on all sides by dark forest. Out in the open, he was vulnerable, and he knew he was being watched.

Keeping calm, he walked backwards to blend into the wood. Bursting out of the silence behind him, a powerful embrace grabbed him and held him firmly. "Relax. Just relax. You're okay." Jesse nearly fainted, but he did wilt and slip out of the embrace, landing hard on his tailbone. "Water?" After a few long, deep breaths, he took the canteen and drank greedily.

The man, Harry, was a tracker and guide from Las Vegas who said he was bushwhacking his way through the park from south to north. It was illegal to do that of course, but he was hunting bear, not to kill, just to track. Harry was wearing a

leather vest and a khaki fishing hat. No guns ... no rifle for sure, but that long scabbard at his side ... maybe a Bowie knife?

Harry didn't say much more but led the way back to the road, and Jesse was happy for the company and the direction. It didn't last long. Back at the fork with the bear warnings, Harry turned left and kept going. Jesse watched until he disappeared and then double-timed it back to the road.

He got another lift. This one uneventful. He got out at a very popular trailhead. This was more like it. A wider trail and plenty of people around. Made it easier to relax and enjoy hiking in the woods.

Jesse walked with purpose and an explorer's curiosity. He covered miles, judging by the time and his pace. By late afternoon, he'd outwalked everyone. When he finally realized how low the sun had sunk and how alone he was, he turned around and set off at a trot, jangling as he went.

Coming around a blind corner, he almost tripped over someone kneeling down to take a picture. No harm done though. Turned out the man, Tony, was a chef and a freelance photo journalist from San Diego.

They joined up, and first thing, Tony insisted that Jesse take off the bells. He didn't want Jesse to scare everything away. On the way back to the road they took a side trail that led to a small waterfall where Tony hoped to photograph more plant life, and with a bit of luck, wildlife.

Across the rolling terrain, scattered with thick underbrush, they marched. Out of the stillness, a thunderous crashing

sound came from a small copse ahead. Jesse thought, "BEAR!" Tony took his lens cap off and got ready to shoot. In a split second, a bull moose was running right at them with his rack lowered. They dived — Jesse left, Tony right. The camera was crushed.

Jesse got to wear his bear bells after that. For supper, Tony made his special recipe for scrambled eggs with sunflower seeds and a dash of something that looked like oregano. Whatever it was, it mellowed them out, so when the heavy rains came late in the evening, they didn't freak out but matter-of-factly crawled between a couple of fallen trees and pulled their ponchos over the top. Next morning, Jesse headed back to the public areas, while Tony stayed in the woods compiling his notes.

After making the circuit and taking in the postcard sights, Jesse caught a ride up north. It was red Cadillac convertible with four guys in beards, bandanas, and sunglasses who were smoking pot and blasting Lynyrd Skynyrd into the big, blue sky. On the dash, a hounds-toothed bobblehead bounced mesmerizingly with the curving mountain highway.

First published in *Dew on the Kudzu - A Southern Ezine*, March 13, 2014.

The Game

... a bit pretentious or was that the point? [ed.]

I hadn't been back to the cafeteria since, but today I needed something substantial to tide me over because I had three straight exams in the afternoon.

Sitting there alone with my meatloaf and mashed potatoes, I remembered bumping into Willard just two days after we'd met. It was meatloaf then, too, though I think it was chicken or turkey meatloaf. He had salad.

#

Willard was going on about what separated him — us, as somehow I got included — from the rest. Late lunchtime in the dining hall and the *rest* was a group of diehard linemen, 300-pound guards and tackles from the football team who were clearly eating from a different menu.

"Orwell, Golding, Huxley, Beckett, Kafka, Koestler, Ionesco, Solzhenitsyn, Borges, Camus, Miller, Sartre, Pinter — these and probably another 40 are the authors that every freshman should have read before coming to college," he said.

I didn't dare tell him that I had only heard of a couple myself. Our English teacher doubled as a PE instructor, and his repertoire was limited to a couple of works each by Shakespeare and Dickens.

Afterwards, I tried to remember some of the names so I could look them up in the library.

#

Willard was the first person on campus I met. We'd literally been thrown together at the bookstore when I tripped on a fold in the carpet and spilled my entire first semester on the floor at his feet.

I readied myself for the abuse of an upperclassman, but he didn't yell or laugh. He looked at me, then at the books, then back at me. It was as if he was fascinated by the collection — an unusual one, I suppose: Western Civ, Physics, World Lit, Zoology, Economics, and Latin.

"That's quite a load you're carrying. First semester?" he asked.

"Yeah. Haven't decided my major," I answered.

"I hope you're just as eager your senior year. I'm Willard."

"That's the challenge, isn't it? I'm Gray."

"You get kidded about that, don't you?"

"Yeah. But it's like water off a duck's back ... sort of."

"One day it will be. I get the same thing. Anyway, let's get your pile of books together and go to the checkout. We can grab a coffee next door. I'm meeting a friend, and I'll introduce you."

He had only one small volume — Wittgenstein.

"Wittgenstein, huh?" I asked. "I don't know ... *him*?"

"*Him*, Ludwig. I'll give you a crash course in linguistic philosophy sometime."

"Never heard— "

"Never mind. Later."

#

Seated at a table by the window was Mildred, polite but not effusive so she stood out. Willard showed her his purchase, but she wasn't overly impressed. Business studies and languages — French and Spanish, were her fields, and law school was next.

That didn't sound like Willard, but then what did I know about Willard?

With a nod in his direction, Mildred proceeded to fill me in a bit. They had met in a club — not a bar, but an organization. the strange thing was she didn't name the club, and, in fact, went to some effort to avoid speaking the name, so I didn't feel comfortable pressing. We had some of those at home, too.

Although he had started out in architecture like his father, he had switched to film studies in his second year. Once a month, Willard hosted a special screening of a *film noir*, an experimental film, and once in a while one of his own. He and four others shared an historic old two-story house two blocks from campus and downtown, and there was easily room for 30-40 people but the audience was more select.

Willard and Mildred made me feel young and ignorant even though they were only juniors themselves — so only two years older than me.

I listened as they talked about campus politics. It never occurred to me that student politics could be worth the time to think or talk about. World events, national politics ... that was the stuff that interested me. In high school, I'd even written essays on current events, drawing from the town library's collection of *Time*, *Newsweek* and *US News & World Report*.

But deans and department heads and faculty senates and trustees were a whole different world. What gave it life for me was the football program angle. Of course, I'd read about allegations of gambling, drugs, and prostitution but had dismissed it as likely the rule and not the exception. Sports were tainted even in small towns.

What I was hearing was that there were people like Willard and Mildred who were taking this seriously. But I wasn't here to be a campus activist and with my course load and this being my first semester in college, I wasn't going to be recruited.

"I have to be going. I've got six classes and two labs tomorrow, and I still have to unpack some things, so I'd better take off," I said.

"It was nice meeting you, Gray. I apologize for all the shop talk, but we'll do this again, and, uh, next time we'll nix the local politics," said Mildred.

"How about Saturday?" asked Willard. "There's a home game and it's at night, so the restaurants will be empty from 6-10 p.m. Unless of course you're going."

"No, I won't have time for any games, but there's a pizza place near the library. Do you know it? I could meet you at, say, seven."

"Yeah, Carmine's. Their deep dish is famous. Okay, seven it is," said Willard.

"Not me. I'm going to the game," said Mildred.

"But you were just saying that— "

"To protest."

#

"Did you know that Chicago eliminated its football program after the war?" asked Willard, nosing through the menu which he must have known by heart.

"The Bears?" I asked.

"No! The University of Chicago. The president said it interfered with the academic standing of the university."

"I didn't know that. Why did you bring that up?"

"There are some people who think that's the way we should go."

"Do you agree?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do. Don't you think those giants we saw in the cafeteria the other day are out of place in a university, kind of like dinosaurs in Manhattan?"

"Well, I guess, but— "

"Consciousness raising. That's what I mean. We — and I mean everybody — need to have our consciousness raised. Not to exploit the theatrical, but it's evolution — evolution we can direct. Maybe, in our local situation, more like nudge."

"That sounds a little like social engineering, and isn't that why you thought we should read *1984*, *Brave New World*— "

"You have to read them in context but also in retrospect. The striving for perfection which was justifiably satirized and criticized by these authors was still primitive and barbaric at the time."

A familiar face on the big TV screen behind Willard caught my eye.

"Mildred! Oh my God!"

Willard turned around and looked up at the TV. Indeed, it was Mildred, in handcuffs, being escorted by campus police.

Willard jumped up, said he was going to the police station, and asked if I would cover the check.

Dazed by the combination of Willard's pronouncements and Mildred's arrest, I simply nodded.

I finished one pizza, packed the other, and went back to the library until it closed. I never saw Mildred again, and Willard I saw a couple of times, but each time I managed to be in a hurry someplace or other.

#

I'd hardly touched the meatloaf when my watch alarm went off. I had 10 minutes to get over to the auditorium for my Physics final.

First published in *Aardvark Press*, February 16, 2014.

Doc Baxter had been our family doctor going on 50 years. On Momma's side anyway. Daddy was from the city.

The first time I remember going to the doctor was right before I started first grade. Just a checkup, Daddy said. He took me because it was Saturday.

The waiting room was huge and square. Hanging on the blue pastel walls were bright paintings of the town and set against the walls were heavy wooden chairs that couldn't tip over. On the large coffee table in the middle were neatly arranged copies of *Southern Living*, *Field & Stream*, *Reader's Digest*, *Sports Illustrated*, and the weekly newspaper.

It was the end of summer and it wasn't crowded. There was a skinny guy with a thick black beard and a cast on his left leg. I asked Daddy why he didn't have any names on his cast like my older sister Tessie had when she broke her arm climbing a tree in our neighbor's backyard. He said it was probably a new cast and he just hadn't gotten around to it.

There was an old woman with sunglasses who seemed to stare right into me. When I told Daddy, he whispered, "She can't see you, son. She just hears your voice. Don't talk so loud."

Up at the reception window, a shaky old man with thick, white eyebrows was taking small bottles of pills out of a brown paper bag and handing them over to the lady. That seemed odd. Daddy saw where I was looking and anticipated my question.

"That's Mr. Paul. His wife just passed, and I expect he's bringing back her medication in case someone else can use it."

"That's sad, Daddy."

"Yes, it is, son, and that's why Momma's baking a pie to take over later this evening. Mrs. Paul was one of her favorite teachers."

There were two other people. A young girl and her mother who looked real tired. The girl had been crying. The mother held her daughter's hand and stared straight ahead. I looked up at Daddy, and he said very softly, "Some things aren't proper for us to ask about, son."

Just then the front door opened setting off the tinkling sound of the bell. You couldn't sneak in here, that's for sure. It was a lady from the bank. She was sneezing up a storm, and when she moved her hanky away, I saw her nose was as big and bright as an apple.

"Hay fever," said Daddy.

"But there's not hay yet. Daddy, when do they start making those rolls—"

Before I could finish, the nurse called us to Doc Baxter's consulting rooms in the back.

Doc Baxter welcomed us.

"Well, well, young man. I see you're all grown up and ready to make your mark in the world. We've gotta make sure you're fit as a fiddle. We're gonna give you a checkup, and I betcha you'll pass with flying colors. It'll be just like going into the Army."

"But I thought you were in the Navy?" I asked.

"Yep, now stick out your tongue and say 'Ah' ... again. Now hold still. I'm gonna look in your ears. Now your eyes. This may tickle a bit. I'm gonna tap your funny bone to check your reflexes."

He didn't talk about the Navy, but there were pictures on the wall. I saw them up close when I got on the scales. One was a framed letter with a medal, and next to it was a wide photograph of a bunch of men in green uniforms, 'fatigues,' Daddy called them. I was confused.

"But isn't Navy blue, Daddy?"

"Doc Baxter was a surgeon in a field hospital not on a ship," he answered, and of course he had to explain that one to me, because for me a field was either a corn field or a football or baseball field.

Meanwhile, Doc Baxter had been going over the paperwork at his desk. Before I could ask any more questions, he was congratulating me and patting me on the back.

"You're a healthy and inquisitive young man. Hang on to those two things. And be sure to say hello to your momma for me. You know I was her doctor when she was your age?"

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine*, Issue 2, March 2014.

I Definitely Need That

... don't mock, this might be a customer for your book [ed.]

You may laugh, but late night TV commercials do fill a void.

That's what my shrink said, and up to a point, I think he's right. But he didn't stop there. He called it a dependency, like nicotine, alcohol, or crack. That was overstepping the bounds, I thought. It was clear what he was really up to. He wanted me to be dependent ... on him. Kind of a customer loyalty thing for shrinks. Well, that was too much, so I dropped him and switched to a phone shrink.

#

Everything in my bachelor's apartment *sans* view has a place, and everywhere, there are boxes, opened and unopened, containing things that I needed, things that seemed necessary in the wee hours of a recent or long ago night.

Some of the older boxes I've re-purposed. Take my entertainment center, built for my TV. Second most prominent on its shelves is the serialized *History and Future of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, its colorful spines tastefully arranged. All the nooks and crannies are plugged with smaller boxes of snow globes, gold and silver photograph frames, onyx sculptures, a Rubik's cube clock, a perpetual pendulum, authentic uncirculated coins from the USSR, Rhodesia, and Kronos, a mint condition set of stamps for lunar mail, and what have you.

In the middle of the room is largish square *faux* glass coffee table. On one side is a stack of brochures, prospectuses, etc. explaining how to play the housing bubble, how to profit

when others are going under, how to get rich without changing out of your pajamas, why every investor should own gold, and so on. All absolutely necessary, not least because of my limiting disability allowance.

The rest of the table is where I keep my mini-library of miracle diets, and health cures. There are protein diets, carb diets, eat-all-you-want diets, take-a-pill diets, drink-your-meal diets, purgative and detox diets; cures for eczema, psoriasis, arthritis, insomnia, flatulence; and a self-testing kit for schizophrenia, an instructional video for diagnosing and treating OCD, over-the-counter nutraceuticals for depression, bipolar disorders, manias, phobias, and so forth.

Underneath are boxes of CDs and cassettes and a select few mint-condition albums featuring reproductions of the biggest hits from the past 50 years, leaning mini-towers of DVD buttressed by other leaning mini-towers of DVDs, and a 42-hour VHS series on how to build your own boat to sail around the world. The plastic packaging is completely intact on everything, although a couple of discs, one by the Captain and Tennille and another by Lionel Richie, did suffer some damage post transit.

On the counter between the sink and the bar fridge, I keep a miscellany of gadgets — juicers, choppers, slicers, dicers, blenders and teflon pans, electric grills, woks, waffle irons, espresso machines, a state-of-the-art solar-powered coffee maker, toasters, ultra-thin microwaves, and self-sharpening stainless steel knives — all still in their original boxes. There are extras, just in case, in sealed boxes on the floor along with boxes of miracle cleaners, magic cloths, and specialty cleaning brushes.

There are even more boxes in the bathroom with supplies of soap (bars and liquid), monogrammed and commemorative towels and sheets, an electric razor with 18 attachments and a rechargeable battery, a manicure/pedicure set, and an eclectic collection of motel art to cover the windowless walls. (I'm still deciding whether to go with a water or forest motif in the bathroom.) The bathroom's so full that several times a day I have to move boxes off the toilet seat and put them into the leaky shower. Naturally, this depends on the diet *du jour*.

#

For several weeks now, an exciting new commercial has been running between 1:00 and 3:00 a.m. It couldn't have come at a more opportune moment. I'm embarrassed to say this, but I had become indifferent and bored.

It's as if the advertisers can read my mind. They guarantee freedom from all the products I had once really and truly needed but now am ready to move beyond. Unlike my former shrink, they're nonconfrontational and nonjudgmental about it, and they're right on the mark.

Not only have they struck the perfect tone with someone like me who has dedicated so much time and plastic to teleshopping, they also offer the personalized service of coming to my door to remove everything I no longer need, AND they'll write me a check on the spot.

And the GENIUS — the genius is that I can start all over again!

So, when I say "I DEFINITELY need that," what I mean is that my 'needing to have' has reached the highest possible level, the peak, the apex, the summit, the pinnacle, the zenith, the apogee, the fin de siècle. Umh, forget the last one.

I really and truly NEED that, and I can't wait to tell my telephone shrink what a positive step I've taken on my own. What I wouldn't give to thumb my nose at my former shrink.

First published in *The Story Shack*, February 3, 2014.

Going My Way?

... perfect part for someone like, say, Morgan Freeman [ed.]

"I'm sorry sir, but this is the last car and this gentleman has already rented it," said the agent.

"But I had a reservation ... to Danvers. My secretary booked it yesterday," complained the man at the counter.

"Unfortunately sir, that car was involved in a traffic accident. Head office is sending a replacement car first thing tomorrow morning."

"Well that's not good enough. You can't be telling me that you don't have any other cars to rent. What kind of operation is this?"

"It's a small airport, sir, and it's the busy season. You might try asking the other gentleman to share a ride."

"The 'gentleman' in the cowboy hat? You're kidding?"

"I'm going through Danvers. Heard you say that's where you're headed," said the other man as he shouldered his way through the glass door, luggage in each hand and an unlit cigarette between his lips.

"You're sure there's no other car on the lot?" asked the man turning to the agent.

"Nothing. He's your best bet until tomorrow."

"Damn it! I can't wait til then. I've gotta be there tomorrow," said the first man. "Hey there. I don't smoke," he shouted, turning to the second man who was paused in the doorway.

"No problem. Trying to quit anyway."

#

The first man was going to Danvers on family business. The second, his ride, was going to a small community — not even incorporated — south of Danvers. A funeral, he said.

For 20 minutes they rode with not another word between them, only the radio. Chris broke the silence when he heard an ad for a personal injury attorney. "Damn lawyers. Ruining the country. My Economics professor used to say were the pallbearers of society."

"Could be. Did your professor have a bad experience?"

"Well, I don't know. We didn't ask. We just assumed he was talking theoretically. Why? What difference does it make?"

"Maybe none. Couldn't say."

"Well, I can say. From my personal experience they're ambulance chasers. A drag on the economy and it's a sham that they protect the underdog."

"May be."

"Our family company has been in business since the '20s providing good jobs for the people of Danvers, and now we're in the middle of a class action lawsuit that could destroy us."

"You don't say."

"You mean you haven't heard about this? I thought you were from nearby."

"Yep. Grew up in Four Corners. Went to school in Danvers. I remember — it was back in 3rd grade, the first year of integration — me and one of the white boys used to race to see who was the fastest. He was used to a flat asphalt track and swore I had an advantage running on ground that was half grass and full of rocks."

"Charlie!"

"Yep."

"Don't you remember? Christopher! My parents— "

"I know."

"You said you were going to a funeral. Was it— "

"Yep. My nephew."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you. He was a good boy. His mother and father are taking it real hard."

"How— "

"We don't have to talk about 'how' just yet. There'll be plenty of time for that. By the way, I should tell you I'm representing the plaintiffs."

"What?"

"Actually, I'm on the litigation team, Christopher. They wanted me because of my community connections."

"Swear to God it wasn't me, Charlie. I'm just a silent partner. Haven't been hands-on in years. Get the engineering report. But that's between you and me, Charlie. I won't repeat any of this in court."

"This isn't a criminal case, Christopher, but if it comes to that — just for old time's sake — I'd advise you to cut a deal quick as you can."

First published in *Writers Haven Magazine*, Issue #15, Micro Fiction Special.

The Reading Room

... we've met Glover, philosophically speaking, that is [ed.]

Ernesto came by it accidentally. It was in the basement below the Cat's Meow. Impaired and heavy-footed, he tumbled down the steps and landed on his rump facing a different kind of red door.

It was open — just a crack — and he was curious, so he went through. Then on second thought he turned around but the door wasn't there.

Dim lights at ground level lit three narrow corridors. Ernesto chose the right since he was already leaning that way. After a few steps, he glanced back. Now, the entrance to the corridor had vanished.

So, forward he walked like a landlubber on a ship in stormy seas. Straight, then left and straight again, and there in an alcove, a young poet was speaking.

Welcome to our room fair stranger.
Though thou be drunken to excess,
Thou mayest progress by words,
But thou wilt stay til ALL be read.

The words spun through his already spinning head. He steadied himself against a wall. It seemed important, so he asked the young woman to repeat what she'd said.

Thou knowest the drink consumeth.
Nay, the room consumeth more, you shall see.
Thou wilt remain til ALL be said
'Twill be the end as I have read.

Ernesto, captivated by the magic of her voice, made to approach, but a seamless wall suddenly appeared where the poetess and the alcove had been.

From further down the corridor, a theatrical voice beckoned. A sturdy, white-haired man with a ruddy complexion was in the midst of a reading. Ernesto's snatches of attentiveness were mostly unintentional.

... have become the anthropologist who fills with copious notes his notebooks and ... who sees but ... is not questioned who judges but is not ... exposed ... our primitive selves ... with ... the nearsighted ... perspective of absolute ... gods.

George Glover, the sign said. An obscure philosopher reading a handwritten page — the corpus of his scholarship. Recalling the thwarted encounter with the poetess, Ernesto drew near and watched with satisfaction as the professor disappeared in the middle of the second reading.

In the distance, a familiar, stern voice proclaimed, "In the beginning." Ernesto tottered hurriedly down the corridor but in his inebriated exuberance he overran the alcove and smashed face first into the far wall.

Flat on his back, Ernesto raised his head, blinked at his fractured wristwatch, then collapsed, his head plunking down hard on the floor. Unable to move, he lay there captive to the endless repetition of a word only vaguely understood and then only through its tone — *SELAH*.

First published in *thickjam*, No. 363, February 6, 2014.

The End

... topical once, perhaps again some day [ed.]

He really couldn't say how he'd go there — 160 storeys up on Vancouver's SinoCanAm Oil Building — on a typically cold, wet night in late December. There were no explanations, only a few clues.

He was wearing a bright red mac that he said he'd found on the street during the city's latest occupy protests. It was a good fit and warmer and drier than his raincoat.

SCAB, its nickname in some circles, was the tallest building on the West Coast. No wonder it attracted crowds. Up there, you could see the snowflakes before they melted into an ugly spitting rain. Not a good enough reason to be there though.

The sounds of sirens were funneled up the concrete, glass and steel walls, but they could have been for anybody, or everybody if you believed some of the people on the street ... so not a good clue.

Behind him was a coiled rope with some rappeling gear. He knew the gear. It was for mountain climbing. Beside the rope was a tightly rolled-up banner, white with red lettering showing through.

He turned aside to get more light so he could check his watch — a Rolex. Odd.

Close to the edge, but not close enough to get a good look over. As if afraid of falling. Also odd.

#

"Why were you up there, Mr., uh, Sebastian?"

He told them he was an activist and had planned to unfurl a huge banner on the side of the SCAB. Inexplicably, he'd got cold feet, so to speak. He was alone. There was no one else. The Rolex? His parents were wealthy, but he had rejected their lifestyle and money. Why did he keep it? Why not.

"We know someone else was up there. Who was it?"

This time he explained that he was planning to rappel down the building far enough to unroll a banner but had been held up, in a manner of speaking, by a guy in a gray Italian suit. They had scuffled, and Sebastian thought the guy had left, but while Sebastian was checking his gear, the suit came up and lunged at him. Sebastian ducked aside just in time, and the guy sailed over the edge and down — 1600 feet, more or less.

"A guy in a suit, eh? Why do you think he didn't just call security?"

Sebastian now conceded he'd seen the guy in a red coat on the roof emptying a large hockey bag and had gone over to find out what he was up to. The guy stood up and started to throw a punch, but he slipped and fell backwards over the edge and into the street below.

The Rolex again? It was a bonus from the firm. Yeah, SCA. No, it wasn't a family gift. He must have been confused — the late night questioning, the tragic fall, the whole thing. And the red coat? Well, when he tried to grab the guy — to save him really — he only managed to catch hold of the sleeve of the coat, and the guy just slipped right out of it and over the edge.

Yeah, of course he put it on. Hadn't he already said it was really cold and wet, and besides he was in a state of shock.

"May I see your watch, sir? You see, we found another one — just like yours — on the deceased behind the SinoCanAm Building. But here's the strange thing. It was inscribed on the back. Inscribed to— Here, let's have a look at yours, sir. Same inscription, 'Gemini,' only yours is not inscribed to Sebastian but the deceased's is. Do, uh, did you have a brother — a twin — sir?

First published in *thickjam*, No. 390, May 13, 2014.

Skin-Deep

... another risky move ... writing from a feminine perspective [ed.]

I was afraid I'd find out it wasn't true, at least not in the way I was thinking. I was also afraid they might think I was just being a silly girl.

I couldn't ask my older brother and sister. They'd make fun of me. It doesn't help any that they tease me in front of other kids. Daddy's too busy buying, selling and fixing up old houses. Mama's the only one I can ask about things. Besides, I know she knows, cause she's a doctor.

My teacher thinks I'm real lucky to have doctor mom, but at recess and lunch, I hear the kids laughing at her — the way she does her hair in a bun, her fuddy-duddy clothes, the way she walks, like she's got a book balanced on her head, and that old, old car she drives. Sure can't talk to her. That's all I need is to be a teacher's pet.

I heard about it the first time at the makeup counter in Macy's. Ellen took me — she had to — and she made me spend three hours shopping ... for her. The lady behind the counter was a chatterbox, Ellen said. She talked about one thing then another til my head was spinning like a top. Reminded me of Aunt Vivienne who was fussy about the way people said her name. Russ called her Aunt Vivi-End — not to her face of course — and he and Ellen laughed out loud about that. I didn't get it. Still don't.

She said something real interesting — the lady at the counter did. I asked Mama about it that night, cause I thought if

anybody would know she would. Like I said, she's a doctor and they're supposed to know all that kind of stuff.

I told her I wanted to be different ... so that people wouldn't pick on me. She told me the same old thing.

"There's nothing wrong with you, Amy. You're a beautiful little girl, you're healthy as a horse, and you're very bright."

"I know Mama. You always say that."

"You're my daughter, so, of course it's true. I've told you before, and I meant it then and I mean it now. So, what's this about your wanting to be different?"

"But is it possible?" I asked.

"Is what possible, darling?"

"Can someone be different, like become different?"

"There are lots of ways people change as they grow up. Boys and girls become men and women—"

"I'm not talking about that," I said.

"What then, dear?"

"Well, me and Ellen — uh, Ellen and I — were in Macy's and this lady at the makeup counter was talking about how everybody gets new skin every seven years. The old skin cells die and get replaced and after seven years, the skin's all new."

"Well ... yes, there's some truth to that, but how does that—"

"I was thinking if I had new skin, I might look different. And if I looked different, maybe I wouldn't get teased and made fun of."

"Umh, I'm not sure— "

"If I could speed it up, and maybe change some things."

"What do you mean, honey? What do you want to change?"

"Like this mole on my face. You and Daddy call it a beauty mark, but nobody as school says that. And these freckles. Shirley says I look like I've got the measles. And my hair. Why does it have to be so red? The boys in the playground chant '9-1-1, fire on the head, 9-1-1, fire on the head.'"

"Are they still doing that? I spoke to the principal, and he said he would put a stop to it."

"That doesn't help, cause then the boys know I've told on them and get even meaner."

"Well, Amy, I know you'll find this really hard to believe, but one day you'll be extremely proud of your lovely red hair and not all people are lucky enough to have freckles. You know your father and I first met in a huge crowd of people at a college protest, and it was my fiery red hair that first attracted him."

"But why can't I have Daddy's hair? It's so ordinary. Nobody bothers people with his color hair."

"I know what you mean, but let's keep it our little secret, huh?"

"OK."

"Oh, I almost forgot. I have a new patient. Actually, it's a family that just moved here, and the little girl is your age, and she doesn't know anybody. I was wondering how you'd feel about walking her to and from school — just until she gets settled in. Their house is right on the way, about three blocks from us. She's very attractive and intelligent, just like you. And she has a good sense of humor. She made me chuckle once or twice."

"I guess so."

"There's one more thing. Vanessa is in a wheelchair. She had a riding accident a couple of years ago. She's had a difficult time, but she's a strong young lady, kinda like you, Amy, and she's learned how to play the flute and paint with watercolors. But she's still quite lonely, and I thought you might— "

"OK, Mama, but I'm doing it for you."

"I know you are, sweetheart."

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine*, Issue 4, June 2014.

I was taking my lunch on the Common, and I overheard a conversation. Normally, I don't eavesdrop, but I have this new cell phone with a stealth sound amplifier, and I really wanted to try it outdoors.

It was incredible! I could hear everything ... 50 feet away! On a bench facing the fountain was an old couple. He was snoring and she was muttering something to the pigeons. A young woman was chasing three little boys who were chasing geese and then being chased by the geese. Then, there were these two ... from the college it looked like.

One spoke agitatedly. He was a graduate student ... in Philosophy and Neurophysiology. The other one had that professorial look about him — elbow patches, bifocals hanging around his neck, wispy white hair and a raspy baritone.

"Brain in the vat," I heard quite clearly, and that got my attention. I'd studied it when I sat in on one of those night school courses you see advertised in the subway. Sounded like mad science sci-fi not Philosophy, but all us guys in the class thought it was kinda cool — in theory. What if the 'external world' IS created by our minds or brains and what if we could create one of our own choosing?

"We have to do this. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said the student.

"It has to be carefully thought out. We can't be rash and take needless risks," said the professor.

"But you said yourself, Professor, there's never been a better time."

"Granted, modern medical technology will ensure that the experiment is painless and reversible, at least in theory."

"And even if something goes wrong — God forbid, um, sorry Professor — it will be impossible to prove— "

"Ethically, we are beyond reproach. Legally, we will be beyond reach. National security's on our side, too."

"That's a double-edged sword though. I still have to defend my dissertation and to do that I have to go public."

"And I still think I, uh, we, have a shot at the Nobel. We just have to work out the details."

As they talked, I recalled the image of a human brain being surgically extracted and placed in a vat where it sucked in nutrients and then was subjected to endless combinations and permutations of electronic impulses. I'd had to write a paper from the brain's point of view, but I couldn't get past the images that the envatted brain would never know. I flunked.

"We still thinking along the same lines then?" the student asked.

"They deliver the subject. We conduct our experiments and give them their results. Then we experiment on a second subject — a chimpanzee brain would work — so we can publish our research. We can use the results as long as we don't mention the first experiments."

"Do you really think they'll go along, Professor?"

"Absolutely. According to the Director and the Chairman, they need this, but for the time being they have to fly under the radar, so to speak."

"Do we have a schedule?"

"End of the month," answered the professor. "Everything and everyone should be in place. Of course, we'll never know where ... ever."

"Should we meet again before then?"

"No, We'll be contacted."

"Did you hear something ... from over there?"

"That direction?" the professor said, pointing in my vicinity. "I thought I heard it earlier, too."

"Sounded like feedback from a cheap amplifying device."

"Hey, it wasn't cheap," I said under my breath, not cluing in.

"I'd better phone it in," said the professor. "It's probably nothing, but it might be one of those needless risks that could screw this up for us unless we eliminate it."

Eliminate. Needless risk. Screw up. That's ME they're talking about! I slipped over the back of the bench, got up but ran low to the ground all the way to the subway entrance.

No black SUVs, no men in black. On the northbound platform, all was clear ... until the Peter Gunn theme startled me. It was just my ringtone, but it was so LOUD underground. I didn't answer. "Brian, Inuvit." Northwest Territories, really?

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Library Magazine*, Issue 5, July 2014.

When 'Bri-an, In-u-vit' showed up on my cell phone display, I thought it was a wrong number. Probably an American in the Northwest Territories. Then, a sinister interpretation got my attention.

This wasn't geographic illiteracy. This was intentional. After what I'd overheard in the Common, 'Bri-an, In-u-vit' was without a doubt a simply-coded message for 'Brain in a vat.' That meant they were on to me. What's worse, they wanted me to know it.

When the subway train arrived, I stepped back to let people on and off, and as the doors were closing, I tossed my cell in — my brand new cell with the stealth sound amplifier. Gone too, was the recorded conversation in the park. My ringtone went off again, and a colorfully tattooed teenager held my phone up to his unpierced ear — actually his only ear. The train was pulling out, but his eyes met mine, and I immediately took off to get street level, snatching an old man's Red Sox cap as I catapulted up the down escalator.

They had to have pictures of me by now with all the CCTV cameras downtown, so I ducked into a barber shop with an American flag on the barber pole and got a serviceman's special.

Down the street at a thrift store, I picked up some jeans, a reversible jacket, some grease paint, and a pair of aviator sunglasses. Not unexpectedly, my rushed job applying the grease paint in the tiny thrift store washroom was splotchy up close

and I forgot my hands, but as long as I kept my hands in my pockets, it was passable.

For a moment, I felt sorry for the kid who thought he'd hit the jackpot with my phone, but it passed. I had bigger worries.

My apartment. They'd be waiting. My roommate. Too late. She'd never believe me anyway. I couldn't warn anybody. My father in the Saint John Fire Department back home and my sister, a medic in Afghanistan. They wouldn't go after first responders, would they? God, what kind of hell had I fallen into?

Out on the sidewalk in the bright sun, I could have sworn the subway entrance was surrounded by black SUVs and men in black with bad haircuts, like mine. And the marquee across the street read "The Life of Brian." Obviously a taunt. Everybody knew Monty Python was dead.

Having escaped the hot zone, it occurred to me that once they had the kid and the phone, they wouldn't need me and they'd stop chasing me. Without the audio, I'd be just another wacko conspiracy theorist. I mean, who's gonna believe a brain can be taken out of a living person, kept alive in a vat, tested by tens of thousands of electrical impulses, and then reinserted? Really?

"Hey buddy, sidewalk's closed. There's construction overhead. How'd you get through the barricade?"

It took a firm hand on my shoulder to stop me. The words — I didn't think he'd been talking to me. Would've been ironic I suppose if a steel beam had fallen on my head.

Maybe not, going back to my original train of thought. Maybe they wouldn't stop chasing me if they found the teen and my cell phone. How hard would it be ... to create an accident? Wouldn't it make sense to tie up all the loose ends?

Meanwhile, if I had a good option, I sure couldn't think of it. Not a chance of happening on a futuristic laser weapon to neutralize the bad guys like in a cheap video game. Pity this wasn't fiction.

The sudden simultaneous slamming of heavy car doors jolted me back to the here and now. It happened behind me, but I didn't dare turn and look. I ran, turned a corner, zigzagged through overflowing dumpsters in a urine-soaked alley, ran through several narrow backyards, climbed a balcony and looked out on an empty apartment.

Crashed on the living floor, I followed the lines on the ceiling that evidenced numerous floods. All around things looked pretty normal, in a low-income sort of way. Must be awful to live without ever knowing when it's gonna happen again though. In a dry corner, safely distant from the ceiling stains, was a computer ... a fairly new model and likely hooked up to the Internet. That's when I remembered that the default setting on my phone automatically uploaded pictures. Maybe audio, too.

If they hadn't already found it, I could download the files and go to the *Globe* or *Times* or somebody. The system came up fast and was ready and waiting while I scrambled around trying to find a flash drive. The audio was there. I knew they would be tracking access, so I spoofed the IP address and downloaded as fast as I could.

There wouldn't be sirens, so I couldn't count on a warning. The grease paint came off slowly. I dabbed on some rouge, put on a dirty blonde wig and a beige turtleneck, dumped my stuff in the garbage chute, and left by the elevator. Sure enough there were two black SUVs parked out front with a woman in the passenger seat scanning the grounds and building with a telephoto lens.

Bernie, an overweight beagle, put in my charge by the nearsighted Mrs. Pritchard who thought I was Brigit, gave me cover and an excuse to change directions and walk away. A few blocks later, I handed the leash over to a dog walker who seemed equally capable of managing six as five.

Yet again, I had escaped their net, though as I was making my circuitous way to the newspaper, I sensed that a much bigger net was about to drop.

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The graduate student and the professor were alone with the brain. They didn't and wouldn't ever know where. It was underground but how far, they had no idea. Now that the first phase was complete, the Sponsors' researchers and scientists had returned to their offices.

High resolution CCTV cameras covered every angle of the lab, and the brain in the vat was centrally located behind an invisible protection screen.

Do you think he's noticed that we made him a Canadian, Professor?

No, I don't think so. We've blocked selected regions of his biographical memory, and the results indicate that our synaptic repression has succeeded. He believes he IS exactly what we've input — father a fireman in New Brunswick, sister in the Army in Afghanistan, female roommate—

And is experiencing what we input — a cell phone with a Peter Gunn ringtone, a one-eared teenager, a water-stained ceiling in a low-rent high-rise apartment building. Bernie, Brigit's beagle, all—

Markers, that help us track his perception of his new and unfolding reality — his attempt to escape — from us and our Sponsors.

And he thinks he CAN escape. How ironic.

Yes, it is, but it's better that way. I don't think a brain, or a mind, I should say, could possibly endure the thought of its own surgical extraction and placement in a laboratory vat for scientific study.

Thank God, uh, sorry Professor. Thank goodness this process is reversible.

It is, in theory, but since it's never been tested, getting that answer will be a key part of our research.

Since the subject isn't aware of the experimental context, don't you think his paranoia is—

It's not paranoia. What's happening to him is real — the black SUVs, the men in black, the escape. It's as real to him as your are for me or I am for you.

Of course, you're right Professor. I misspoke. The subject has effectively demonstrated the ability to distinguish between the real and the unreal. He even alluded to it on one occasion, when he mentioned the futuristic laser weapon as something he wished were real so he could "neutralize the bad guys."

Yes, that was truly remarkable.

Wasn't it? It's turning out exactly as I'd hoped when I started this dissertation. And it's only now sinking in that we've already gone far beyond the philosophers' brain-in-a-vat thought experiment.

This will be our legacy — yours and mine — to science and philosophy, but we can't forget our sponsors. They have a different set of priorities in mind—

So to speak.

Indeed.

One thing troubles me. Why the cloak and dagger? Why not simply stimulate the subject to be compliant and cooperative?

Our Sponsors' methods of interrogation are hardwired, and our Sponsors are not easily persuaded to change their approach. That's why they proposed the fugitive scenario as a demonstration of the envatted brain's susceptibility to an induced mental reality.

They have to be satisfied so far though, right Professor? The subject is definitely on the run and all because we created the necessary and sufficient conditions for triggering his flight response.

Absolutely. And it's all documented and usable in our research, with the exception of the identities of our Sponsors and the brain. That's non-negotiable.

So, our next step is to parachute a character into the brain's mental world, and this character will persuade the subject to give up running and turn itself in. Any complications that we may have missed?

It's inevitable that there will be complications. We have to be ready for that.

Of course. The first phase we expected to be relatively smooth, since creating fear reactions in an envatted brain — albeit not human — has been successfully achieved in previous experiments. Replicating trust — that's where we anticipated having some challenges.

As far as the Sponsors are concerned, that's the crucial experiment. Our success hinges on being able to prove that the envatted brain can be made to trust just as effectively as it can be made to fear. In their language, we have to turn the brain.

The grad student scanned the bank of terminals on the wall, pored over the latest half dozen or so pages of the experiment log and transcripts, and announced incredulously that the brain in the vat was exhibiting signs of autonomous behavior.

Impossible!

But look, Professor! The feedback in these transcripts indicates that the subject's fear has dissipated. But how? It's as if it thinks it has escaped, but it can't possibly feel free from danger. Not until we modify its perceptual inputs. We should—

We've got to intensify the stimulus pattern, try an accelerated algorithm, and re-establish a stable level of fear in the brain. We have to bring this under control before morning and without surveillance. The cameras ... can you—

The professor was interrupted by a sudden power surge. The backup power failed, except in the case of the vat, which had a dedicated line with power supply redundancy. But the vat's backup reservoir sprang a leak that quickly turned into a gusher flooding the lab with a foot-and-a-half of water and brain nutrients. As suddenly as the lights went out, they came back on again giving the grad student the professor time to witness the spectacular arcing across the water's surface. It came from the vat.

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At the Globe, his fantastic story about being hunted down by mad scientists and men in black because of what he knew about their brain-in-a-vat experiments didn't raise an eyebrow much less get a laugh. These were serious times, and there were real threats to the city.

Turned away from the city desk by one of the editors, he was taken aside by a grizzled beat reporter who told him to look up a stringer by the name of I.V., so-called because in his younger days he was always poking his nose where it didn't belong. I.V., he said, was usually posted, more like pasted, in a place called the Noodle on the docks.

It was a dark, rank-smelling saloon, which probably had never seen better days. In the darkest corner was what could have passed for an enormous wharf rat — grayish-black, bristled snout, bulging eyes and disproportionately small arms — staring down a cheap bottle of scotch.

Are you I.V.?

Who's asking?

Old guy at the *Globe* said I'd find you here.

O'Rourke?

Didn't get his name. Just that you might be interested.

Gotta be Rory. He's the only one left who remembers—

Envatted brains?

What?

Have you ever heard of it?

Maybe. Why?

I'm being chased.

Go on.

No, really.

No, I mean continue.

They're following me.

Who?

That's what I hoped you could tell me.

How'd you get involved?

Overheard a conversation in the Common.

How'd you manage that? It's a pretty big place.

I had a stealth phone.

Why the hell would want to eavesdrop? You got an unhappy girlfriend or a death wish?

It wasn't what I planned. I thought it was going to be an ordinary conversation that I'd delete before leaving the park.

Did you?

No.

Where's the phone now?

I threw it in a car on the northbound subway, and an odd-looking kid picked it up and answered it.

How odd! I mean, how was he odd?

I don't know — tattoos, lots of red and yellow ink, and he only had one ear.

Left or right?

What difference does it make?

Just filling in the—

It was unpierced.

Ah!

Have you ever seen him?

No, but if he has your phone and is still alive to talk about it, he's more likely to end up here than in a police station.

The phone's not necessary.

Why not?

I downloaded the audio.

From the Cloud or whatever they're calling it now? Did you bring it with you?

Course not!

Good man.

Listen. Meet me later on the harbor tour. Don't bring it but you can fill me in on the details.

Which one?

Which what? Oh, tour. Keep your eyes peeled for a bald guy who can't keep his toupée on.

But you're not—

It's a disguise. You're gonna need one soon, too. Not tonight though, okay? Might not recognize you.

#

Aft on the upper deck of a crowded tour boat filled with tourists hoping to view the city at dark, two men in lightweight khaki windbreakers were talking not looking, but since everyone else was looking at the cityscape set against a gorgeous sunset, no one paid them any attention.

Black SUVs. Guys with bad haircuts — like yours. That's pretty nondescript in and of itself, but I think your professor is Dr. Smart, with one 't.' And that's an alias.

How do you know Professor Smart?

He's been doing extra — uh, ordinary research on the human central nervous system for years.

For who?

The Sponsors. Not much known about them.

So, this isn't the first brain-in-a-vat experiment?

No, but it's the first involving a human brain.

Can they be stopped?

Depends on who you mean, Professor Smart or the Sponsors?

I guess I mean the Sponsors. And will I ever feel safe again?

Hard to say.

Can you, uh, would you help?

Has to be something in it for me.

Like what? An exposé, a book?

Something like that. Means you're gonna have to give me everything I need, like that recording.

Sure. I could've brought it tonight.

No. It has to be done in a roundabout way. Are there copies?

No. Just the original. I only had the one USB stick, and I've been on the run.

No problem. After we've done the exchange, I'll make two copies, one for you and one for me. You don't tell me where and I won't tell you.

Okay. Sounds like you've done this before.

Yep. Give me two days, and I'll have a plan how we can flush these guys out.

What next?

First, get a locker at the bus station. I'll give you some money. Take the device, wipe it down, put it in a duffel bag filled with old clothes — there are lots of donation bins around — and shove it in the locker, and then wait for the last bus to Baltimore.

Baltimore? Why— ?

There's a friend you can stay with. Don't worry, she's an old hippie. Loves the underdog.

What about the locker key?

All taken care of? She'll courier it to me ... via a mutual friend.

#

Two whitecoats entered the secure area of the 8th level in the underground facility, and heavily-armed men guarded the door. The floor was wet and brownish stains indicated that there had been a flood. Two other whitecoats, soaking wet, lay contorted and inert on the floor.

Well, according to these most recent logs from the brain, it seems our boys did manage to parachute in a confidant before their untimely—

And this guy, this stringer, he'll get us the proof we need. The brain is wonderfully demonstrating an attitude of total compliance based on a synthetically-generated feeling of trust—

Now, we just have to get the audio. If it falls into the wrong hands—

Well, I'm pretty confident we can take it from here. It's simply a matter of making the brain retrace its steps, as it were.

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On the run the first day, the urine-saturated alley he'd escaped through had seemed like a good hiding place for a small electronic device. There were lots of cracks and crevices in the brick walls where the mortar had fallen out. Now, the challenge was to find the right one. He retraced his steps over and over, trying different gaps until it seemed there weren't any left.

"Twenty bucks," said a sticky voice beneath a pile of cardboard and plastic. "Gimme twenty and it's yours."

"What's mine? What are you talking about?"

"This computer thingamajiggee here," said a man rising out of his improvised abode.

"That? It's not worth ten. It's just a replaceable part, worth nothing by itself. I'll give you five."

"Ten. Last chance."

"Give it here. Here's a ten. You made a killing."

"Wasn't me."

"What?"

"Nothing."

With the USB device secure, the fugitive picked up a duffel bag from an Army Navy store and then found a Red Cross bin and stuffed the bag full of donated clothing — men's, women's,

children's, it didn't matter. About 15 minutes later he reached the bus station, where he found a locker and stowed the bag. Outside the station he was grabbed brusquely and tossed headlong into a black SUV.

In the meantime, the stringer, who'd blended in by standing on the opposite sidewalk with a hot dog in one hand and a handful of yellow- and red-stained napkins in the other, hadn't anticipated this interception. He should have seen it coming — the double cross. After all, he was double crossing this fugitive fellow, and time was when he would instinctively have been on the look-out for other betrayals.

He'd gotten too old and slow for the game. On the spot, he committed to finding a new watering hole and leaving the good old days at the Noodle behind ... forever.

#

In the beginning, everything around was white, pure white, clean, bright, cold. Til the surgical drills and microsaws started and blood splattered on the white sheets and gowns and parts of the floor, ceiling and walls. Didn't they know that part of his brain was conscious the entire time? Maybe they didn't care. This was what he'd imagined in that crazy night school philosophy course when in class they'd discussed the brain-in-a-vat thought experiment. It made him violently ill then, and it did now, too, but he had no way to relieve himself since he'd been surgically severed and extracted from his body.

After the surgery, he — the brain — had been put in a large vat, where it (he) was connected by electrodes to dozens of wires carrying billions of electronic signals per second. Even

this volume of messaging was far below its threshold, and the brain easily managed the scientists' fear (stage one — the fugitive) and trust (stage two — the confidant) scenarios. Only 10 percent utilization? Outside the vat maybe, but nowhere near that low inside the nutrient-rich vat. The bigger part of the brain's computing capability was, therefore, left free to plot its revenge.

Near the conclusion of the stage one experiment, the brain exacted retribution against the professor and his graduate student by causing a flood in the lab and then electrocuting them with electronic pulses dancing over the surface of the water. That was payback for their doing all this brain-in-a-vat stuff in the name of Science and Knowledge.

Pre-empting what appeared to be the stage two experiment's looping back to the gruesome beginning, the brain remotely accessed the Sponsors' payroll systems via a two-way data feed and proceeded to execute a continuous barrage of hacks targeting the IRS. They were simple hacking techniques picked up from its roommate's kid brother, but the point wasn't to actually penetrate IRS security but to alert the IRS, reveal the identity of the hackers, and let nature take its course. The results of the successfully-failed hacking weren't instantaneous; however, within a day all the Sponsors' off-the-book employees had disappeared.

The brain spent the rest of its days trying to think of a better ending.

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine*, Issue 7, September 2014.

Against traffic it took under an hour to get around this corner of the lake. Jay did it every day, but he dreamed of one day not having to make the commute. Time was part of it, but the bigger part was the better-paying jobs that he drove away from every morning.

He had relatives who commuted in the opposite direction. But the ones who didn't take the train complained about the sun in their eyes morning and afternoon, while the ones on the train one-upped them with vivid descriptions of the indecencies of close physical contact and communal air.

No one, it seemed, enjoyed getting to and coming from work. Then there was the work itself, valued in dollars ... nothing more, they said. A lot of dollars they failed to mention, and that was a problem Jay thought he'd like to have.

He'd been driving his 'rut' for more than six years, and he knew all the exits, mile markers and businesses along the way. Instinctively, he knew when to yield to the big trucks as they veered left when the highway split into two highways, one heading south across the bay bridge and the other skirting the upper suburbs of the rusted-out port city before turning north.

Even focused on the news or a song on the radio, he sensed when to move all the way left after the HOV lane disappeared. And he could feel the closeness of an 18-wheeler edging into his lane or the pressure of a souped up, low-riding Honda Civic pushing him to get out of the way.

What he didn't notice were the reactions to his own passing on the right, blocking merging traffic or cutting across lanes to catch a nearly-missed exit. It wasn't personal. At 70 miles an hour, things just happened fast.

He never did get to know what happened that particular day. A BMW, 300 series, tried to enter the highway from the onramp but was prevented when Jay moved into the right lane to pass another car. The BMW had to manoeuvre sharply to miss hitting the guardrail at the end of the onramp and avoid being hit by the traffic in Jay's wake.

Over the next five miles to the bridge, the BMW chased Jay's old, gray sedan, but the driver never got a visual. At the top of the bridge, the BMW made its move to get into the empty truck lane but not before a slow-moving flatbed loaded down with rolled steel got there first. Denied the truck lane, the little BMW swung off to the shoulder, which wasn't a shoulder at all but the concrete railing of the bridge. It hit the wall, climbed it part way and landed with its front wheels hanging over the guardrail and still spinning at high speed. Meanwhile, the car immediately behind went airborne over the top of the BMW and sailed out into the bay. A 16-vehicle pileup accumulated in a matter of seconds, and within minutes the southbound lanes were shut down.

Jay was a few minutes late for work, but luckily the time clock was still running slow. On the drive home, he heard the traffic report about the morning's accident and the road closure, and he felt lucky — with a small 'L' — all over again.

First published in *The Story Shack*, December 2, 2014.

June was usually a good month for weddings at the park — not the actual ceremonies, though there were a few, but the receptions that followed. They were colourful and filled with laughter, music and singing. It could be loud. But few complained. The park was big enough for everyone, and besides it was finally summer. And for most, that was good. Personally, I adjusted a little more slowly each year. Still, I couldn't understand how anybody could be depressed in this most beautiful season of the year.

The tall thin man in the oversized black frock coat and ruffled white shirt open at the neck never stopped or sat. He walked continuously, head bent down reading a book, sometimes two or even three at the same time. His nickname was Professor Perry (the peripatetic professor), but I didn't have the foggiest whether his nuttiness was ecclesiastical or scholastic. It was a pretty safe bet that he was from the theological college next door. He could be quite entertaining to watch. While he didn't seem to pay attention to where he was going, his steps were uncannily accurate in missing the geese droppings that the rest of us unfailingly brought home on our shoes. And his movements — it was like they were choreographed.

In July there were fireworks out over the water. Magnificent, unless you lived close by. The echo from the lake amplified the explosions, and for several hours, several nights in the summer, your windows would rattle and shake as if bombs were being dropped. An outside or a newcomer might be excused for not knowing the occasion of the celebration, and likely for them and everybody else it really didn't matter

that much. Once or twice the independence days got mixed up, but that could have been simply supply and demand — everybody on the lake, both sides, was doing the same thing and that was several hundred miles of communities lighting up the night sky.

Years ago, it was in July, and it was every Saturday that a little girl with burn marks on her lower arms rode through on her little pink bicycle. Her father watched from a distance while she picked a flower, always a wildflower, then ran over to the beach and gently placed it in the receding water. Don't recall ever seeing her since, though a young woman in long sleeves did come two or three times a week last September, and she dropped wildflowers in the lake, too — more or less in the same way and in the same place, if memory serves.

If July was the summer peak for the park, August was its denouement. It was the month that everything seemed to be on autopilot. Schools were still closed, and it seemed like the town was on vacation. The park couldn't compete with the big late summer attractions like Disney, D.C., Banff or the cottage. Nevertheless, for those left behind, there were picnics and barbecues from one end of the park to the other, most evenings and weekends. And unlike June and July, there was plenty of elbow room. Of course there was plenty of overlapping and mingling at the kids' wading pool, and the amphitheater where there was a steady stream of performers, buskers from the city — musicians, magicians, mimes, jugglers and storytellers — and the beach boat rental. Boating was safe. Swimming, however, was discouraged. In summer there were showers where you could wash off if you fell out of your boat.

Ford Plantation she called it. Her husband had started back when they were still making the Pinto. Retired as VP of something or other. Don't remember or wasn't listening carefully — it was a life skill, my wife used to tease. He died — car accident — not long after their divorce. She did well by the first division. Anna got the rest and took it back to St. Petersburg. Now the Ford Plantation lady — she never gave her name I don't think — went for walks in the park on doctor's orders. She said she used to have an Irish Wolfhound (JJ for James Joyce), and they would walk together year-round except when the snow and the wind and the ice were too treacherous. The way she veered off the path to visit a tree or a signpost or a pile of wet leaves or stopped people with dogs to talk — it looked like she still had one.

Once the autumn colour had fallen and lay like a carpet as far as you could see, the park seemed longer yet at the same time strangely smaller. Longer, because it was as if the canopy had been drawn back to reveal a distant view, but smaller since there was no longer the illusion of depth hidden behind the thick summer green.

Grandpa probably reminisced, remembering or misremembering the parks of his youth. It was only a guess, or a projection I should say. Another useful life skill for a bored old man — me. He didn't say much. Didn't like speaking English, and I didn't have anything else to speak. So, we neither of us spoke. We nodded every now and then when we happened to be sharing a bench. We did sometimes — share a bench, that is — because there were only three well-placed benches — the Jessup's, the Wilby's and the Platt's — and they were in high demand most of the year. By Christmas, however, I had my pick, and I could sit there for a long time sipping from my ther-

mos and watching the cross country skiers and the diehard dog walkers. Sometimes arguments broke out over the ski trails. In deep snow they both used the same trails, but the dog walkers' footsteps punched holes through the narrow tracks causing more than one skier to take a tumble with skis pointing skyward.

In spring something new was starting to grow in the park. Grandpa's daughter told me. I didn't read the papers. Didn't have to anymore, so I thought. She brought Grandpa in a wheelchair. Stroke. He recognized me ... I think. She said the town was selling the park to pay for a new hospital and new schools in the rapidly-growing north up on the escarpment. A local developer was going to build a new marina and floating condos on either side. A small part of the park, next to the seminary, would be retained. That meant Jessup, Wilby and Platt would be gone. This was depressing news, and in spring of all seasons. The sky was blue, the sun warm, the crocus and daffodils were peeping through, and the breeze from the lake was neither too cool nor too warm but it carried the foul smell of rotting fish.

First published in *Through the Gaps*, September 8, 2014.

The Market for English

... *clever, sure it hasn't been done before?* [ed.]

Once upon a time© in English, a *groundbreaking innovation*© hit the market — *buying and selling*© phrases. Tens of thousands of phrases were *acquired and licensed*©. *Everyday speech*© was transformed as were the *business letter*© and the *student essay*©. There was a surge in *copyright infringements*©. Leveraging *human nature*©, *peer policing*© worked *remarkably well*©, because violators *lost standing*© at work or school *opening the door*© for others. An *ad agency*© *went public*© with an IPO, *cornered the market*© on licensing and saw its *stocks soar*© to *stratospheric levels*©.

Licensing was expensive, though there were different packages available *depending on use and affordability*©. There was the *platinum package*© of 10,000 phrases for *C-level executives*© and *university professors*©, and at the other end there was the *economy package*© of 500 phrases, which was often awarded with scholarships and for exemplary *performance reviews*©. Most people had to settle for special dictionaries of uncopyrighted English, and a subscription was required for *quarterly updates*©, as phrases were copyrighted daily and removed from free *public discourse*©. Dictionaries published overseas were the cheapest, but their rephrasings were awkward *at best*© and unintelligible *at worst*©.

In a *celebrated case*© of *copyright infringement*© that reached the *nation's top court*©, a *graduate student*© published a thesis that was later found to have violated the *company's copyright*©, although the student, without any support from the university or the *thesis supervisor*©, argued that the thesis' *publication date*© preceded the *copyright date*© by a few hours. However, the student's case was lost on the company's

discovery that a second essay, with the *copyrighted material*© *stricken and replaced*©, had been *published simultaneously*© with a different publisher.

Company lawyers© convinced the *panel of judges*© that the student's *prior knowledge*© was *thereby demonstrated*© and had warranted a *more cautious*© move to publication. *In addition*©, a *second line of attack*© by the *plaintiff's lawyers*© showed that the acceptance of the new *copyrighted phrases*© had been given the previous day by an official with the *Copyright Office*©, 18 hours ahead of the student's publication.

The court *found against*© the student, ordered that the publication be nullified and that the university and the *thesis professor*© *be duly reprimanded*©, notwithstanding their *heroic efforts*© to *distance themselves*© from the case. The student was *quietly expelled*©, but he became a *vocal opponent*© of *copyrighted language*© and a *champion of*© free non-copyrighted speech.

A lot of changes have been made since then. For example, there are now *fair use*© dictionaries that include *copyrighted phrases*© that can be used at *no charge*© provided it can be proven that each has been used in 100,000 *documented instances*©, *which works out to*© one written instance or verbal utterance by .01 percent of the *global English-speaking population*©. Incidentally, many of the *copyrighted phrases*© that appear in this text are forecast to be reassimilated into the *public domain*© in the *next decade*© or so©.

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First published in *theNewerYork*, November 16, 2014.

She'd been in bed for three days — the entire weekend, so it had to be serious. It was a bad flu season, though the old family doctor, still making the occasional house call, said it was nerves most likely.

Stella had just turned 14, but she'd already shown signs of being like her Aunt Audrey. Both were actresses, in theory — high-strung and self-absorbed. Stella's mother recognized the resemblance most keenly, having shared a room with her younger sister Audrey when they were growing up.

Now, Stella was auditioning — just a school play, but for the time and place it was the biggest part of her life. The play had been adapted from an O. Henry story, and Stella knew, she just knew, she had to have the main role. It was only two days away.

They didn't let on but her parents thought it might be the best thing ... for everybody ... if she didn't win. Tony, her little brother, felt otherwise. He worshiped his big sister, even though she made him fetch and carry and come and go as she pleased.

From her upstairs bedroom, propped up on two big down pillows, Stella could see the side of the old vacant house next door. It was a large, old-fashioned house — a tear-down her parents said. The garage was nearest her view, and it was unobstructed by maple leaves this time of year. Past the skeletal branches of the maple, it was an almost blank canvas of brick with a single waist-high window that didn't appear to have seen a paintbrush in more years than she'd lived.

Later in the day, shortly after school let out, she was rehearsing her lines before her parents came home. Only Tony was in the room with her, but she knew he'd never betray her. He was busy watching the heavy equipment being unloaded next door, when suddenly he spun around and asked what was so important about a leaf anyway. She explained that it was the difference between getting the part and failure. She was cryptic that way, so it sometimes took him awhile to figure out what she meant.

The next morning before school it was a mix of drizzle and snow flurries, but that didn't stop Tony or them. He found a big red maple leaf on the ground — bigger and prettier than all the rest — then crawled through the construction fence and taped it to the garage window. Standing back to admire his work, he turned to see if Stella was there. She was — her surprised face pressed against the second-story window. He beamed at her just as a giant orange claw descended from the sky and tore into the wall, pulling it down behind him.

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine*, January 2015.

Scooter hated his name, but he loved it, too. Traffic for him was a cinch though he'd had some close calls. He worked at the Reading Fair which was a Speaker's Corner-cum-virtual reality venue with computer-generated guest speakers from far away times and places. All presentations were fictional; however, character authenticity was crucial for audience recognition.

Scooter was a fact-check — obsessive-compulsive, green, control freak-certified — and his job was to make sure that the presenters' holograms were consistent with their body of work. He was indispensable. For example, he discovered the anomaly in Albert Einstein's military-style crew cut and prevented it from going live. He also intervened to can Lincoln's "I Have a Dream" speech. Perhaps, most memorably he fixed the glitch that erroneously programmed Neil Armstrong to utter the immortal words, "And now for something completely different," as he became the first man on the moon.

Scooter didn't actually scoot around in libraries or archives. After all, in the digital age, information came to you if you knew how to call it, and Scooter did ... very effectively. He had a knack for scooting in and out of places — just a crack was all he needed — and coming back with a trove of data, which he organized with the dexterity of an eight-armed conductor.

Unfortunately, most of what he managed was easily replicated by the technicians in Bangalore. Management seized an opportunity to save costs by eliminating equipment and personnel redundancies, like Scooter along with half the

technicians who were absolutely incredulous on getting their notices.

Scooter and his doomed colleagues were kept on for two additional weeks owing to the big show the impresario had scored with the national museum. She had committed to a gallery of 25 personages, ignoring staff counsel that only 19 were fit for the occasion.

Six more had to be created. Moreover, they had to represent the fields of medicine, pop art, entertainment, business, literature, and Ancient Egypt. Scooter and his buddies set to work not the least intimidated by the ambitious timetable, all the more aggressive because two holograms had to be created for each one in the exhibit: one to pass internal inspection and the other to be triggered by a duplicate remote.

For Freud, they put in Jung Frankenstein. In place of Campbell's soup, they produced avant-garde art using Bush's baked beans. Instead of an exclusive tour of the Tutankhamun exhibit in Cairo, an effigy of King Tut was to be regaled by Steve Martin. Henry Ford's cameo was ousted by "Neutron Jack" Welsh, the brilliance of GE, who was to explain how he came to love the bomb. The world's greatest-ever footballer, Edson Arantes do Nascimento, had to step aside for Barry Bonds who was asked how he juggled being the home run king and a negative role model. The only two-time winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature refused to disclose his/her identities, so Adam Mac was added at the last minute to face the perennial literary question: how does a writer endure oblivion?

Scooter never got to know how the exhibit went off. The day before his last day at work, he was run over by a bus. Nuts

and bolts, circuit boards, and shredded metal lay scattered all over the roadway. The bus, through the bike rack mounted on the front, seemed to smile.

They managed without him. The exhibition was a rollicking success, though regrettably not with the right people. Scooter would have been pleased.

First published in *Beyond Science Fiction*, February 2015.

Couldn't stand much more of it. Being suffocated on all sides. No control over where I turned up. Constantly scratching up against and being scored by other silica. Often drowning in dampness and dark. Unceasing rolling with the waves at high tide, washing inland, then back to sea, then up and down the beach and all over again.

On shore, the sun felt good. Sometimes lasted too long, though. Hot, burning and bright. In the in-between of land and sea, it was easy to stick to the skin of the enormous beach animals. And easy to get carried away.

Got a lift all the way to a frigid place with huge plate-glass windows and a slick, tiled floor. The bright, dry, emptiness was unfamiliar. And here the crunch of silica was deafening and, on realizing what was happening, sickening.

All time is an eternity, but within a fairly short one, I got swept up by one of the beach animals. This was entirely new, meeting all these other fragments and particles who looked nothing like anything I'd ever imagined.

We got tossed outside — the heat was welcoming — and a sudden gentle breeze lifted some of us into a nearby bed of tomatoes. For the rest of the next eternity, I watched the fruit grow and ripen and saw my fellows give of themselves to make that miracle happen. Whatever little support I could give I gave. I was happy.

First published in *Postcard Shorts*, December 14, 2014.

Looks like we've got a good one here, Andromeda.

Yes, Centaurus. I think this may be the one.

Did you see the drawings he made for his new house? Three hours is all it took. Nice Frank Lloyd Wright details. And it seems to fit perfectly.

Can't understand how anyone could stand living all boxed in like that, but he's got talent. No doubt about it, though I think he could work on his mind and motor coordination. He seems to spend far too much time either thinking or drawing instead of doing both at the same time. Can't understand that.

Don't be so critical, my dear. His composition last night ... you enjoyed that.

Yes, I did, but you have to admit, darling, it was a little derivative of Holst.

Perhaps, but he's the first we've had whose skills go beyond a single niche. He can design houses, write symphonies, and last week while I accompanied him on the surface, he impressed me with his Nietzschean comedy, not just repartee, but full-length monologues from *Zarathustra*. So much passion. It was hilarious.

I think today I want to test his motivational and training skills ... see if he can do something with the others we've accumulated over time.

Just remember that he's the most all-around talented human we've had so far. And also we have to abide by the first directive to do no harm even if it's he who carries out our agenda.

Of course, darling. I know that. After all, we're NOT humans!

True enough, my lovely, but do keep in mind that they carefully follow everything they see us do.

Absolutely! I know our place ... and theirs, and I would never ever think of harming or causing harm to come to one of our little pets.

First published on the Short Humour Site, December 29, 2014.

The four of them worked hard every day, constantly monitored by men and women in white coats and black-rimmed glasses. They, the envatted brains, used to be monitored round the clock — easy to do since they were always wired up — but new regulations required 16 hours downtime each day, presumably to keep the brains fresh for the controlled experiments. Eight of those hours were designated for the mandatory sleep period.

Now, for the other eight leisure hours, Hugh and Dotty and Amos and Louis would have to figure out how to pass the time.

They tried their hands at playing poker, figuratively speaking that is. Hugh dealt. Dotty raised and called. Amos folded. Louis was holding three pairs, so he was disqualified. Hugh had a royal flush in spades, but Dotty claimed she had four aces, and she insisted her ace of spades was the REAL ace of spades.

Hugh got angry and called for 52-card-pickup. Louis picked up 53 cards, including two aces in spades. Amos folded. Dotty found only 51 cards but no aces. Hugh threw up his hands and went back to reading the newspaper.

"I know," said Dotty. "Let's play guess the color I'm thinking. OK, I've got a color— "

"Blue," shouted Louis.

"Just wait. I haven't given a clue yet. OK, it's a color that comes before sunrise."

"Red," shouted Louis again.

"No. Here's another clue. It's a color that's under-represented in the flags at the U.N."

"Beige," said Amos.

"Yes. I mean, yes, beige is under-represented, but no, that's not the color. This color is the color of an eclipse."

"Gray," said Hugh, not even bothering to look up.

"No. It's black, silly. Black like 'darkest before the dawn' black."

"That's a stupid game," said Louis.

"Not much better than poker, if you ask me," said Amos.

"How bout we try that synchronized whatchamacallit they've been experimenting with lately?" asked Dotty. "You know, we all receive the same stimulus and then compare our different responses."

"That's too much like work. Why do you wanna do work, and why do you wanna make us do work?" asked Amos.

"Seems like fun, that's all."

"So what kind of stimulus can we come up with?" asked Louis.

"Well, it can't require manual intervention ... for obvious reasons," said Hugh.

"What about lights out?" asked Dotty. "We overload the feedback converter and shut down the system."

"That could work," said Hugh. "They've engineered redundancies everywhere, but they never anticipated our working together. The power will go off momentarily but that would be enough to reboot all of our vats."

"Right," said Dotty. "When everybody's booted up again, we can share experiences."

The guys all muttered

#

With all four back and in communication, Dotty suggested they play a game ... poker. Hugh offered to deal. Amos folded. Louis had two Jacks, two Queens and two Kings. He was expelled from the game. Hugh said he had a straight — ace high — but Dotty objected since she was holding four aces.

Hugh threw up his hands, so to speak, and then swept his cards away. That gave him an idea and he asked everyone to toss in their cards. That didn't make any sense to the others. Amos folded. Louis picked up the cards — 53 of them and five of them aces.

Dotty recommended another game, and Hugh put away his paper and joined them. Nobody guessed Dotty's color and

since no one else wanted a go, they turned their attention to the stimulus-response intensifier thingamadoohickey.

This time no one booted up.

First published in *Beyond Science Fiction*, February 2015.

The Accidental Death of a Landlord by Adam Mac

... at least Mac doesn't guilt trip like Dostoevsky [ed.]

Playing in the west end theaters was *The Accidental Death of a Landlord*, a takeoff on the more famous Fo play. Travis wasn't a big fan of avant-garde theater, and he disdained what he described as the leftist propaganda which not so subtly ran through it. Nevertheless, he promised to go see Leslie perform. She played the role of an angry tenant, a particularly nettlesome detail for Travis.

It was absurd and grotesque to be sure, but it all came back to Leslie, and he thought for her sake he could endure it. In the opening scene, the audience was already provoked. The stage set depicted a low-rent, one-bedroom flat furnished with a steel cot, a cracked toilet and a kitchen sink. The tile floor was peeled up from previous floods of one or both of the water sources, the cupboard doors under the sink had large holes chewed in them, and the whole place reeked, the smell wafting far out into the audience.

Three people, one of them Leslie's character and her two roommates, were talking in raised and excited voices. The landlord was mentioned more than a few times though with more colourful language and not without a healthy round of expectorating. The audience came to learn that the room's rent was being tripled as each new occupant now had to pay the full rental price. Market value, he said. And the water was to be turned off until the toilet could be scheduled to be fixed. And, as for rats, there hadn't been any before, so why should there be any now? It came down to cleanliness, he said.

The seats in the theater, just folding chairs, were very uncomfortable, which didn't make it any easier for Travis to watch.

Around him there was laughter, but it was a kind of laughter that wanted something — something just and fitting. And that hunger grew, unsatiated.

By the third act, people were sitting on the edges of their seats as if urging on the inevitable. The landlord accommodated. Struggling with an avocado green toilet, badly chipped at the base and heavily water-stained, he tripped over the uneven floor, fell on top of the commode, the faux porcelain cracking audibly all the way to the back of the theater, and then bashed his head on the existing toilet.

The women ran quickly through the usual stages of disaster: surprise, shock, horror, then paused and considered the upside, took a pulse, and set about turning the event to their advantage. Leslie and another dragged the large body to the sink, opened the cupboard and laid the head inside. The third roommate went out to Bong's convenience store.

They covered his head in jalapeño Cheese Whiz. Whatever was left over they spread on his torso and limbs. They left and didn't return until the following morning when they found the body covered in a moving mass of short fur and long hairless tails.

Travis was ill — the only one apparently who wasn't pleased with the much-anticipated retribution, and he stumbled out of the theater into the night on the greasy streets of the west end and swore he would from then on use his real estate agents to handle his rental properties. He hasn't spoken to his daughter since.

First published in *Through the Gaps*, February 7, 2015.

Friday 2:35 p.m.

Two men in blue coveralls and Rastafarian tams installed the box in the town square. They were British but they were friendly.

"Eh mahn, wanna come try dis Speakers' Corner gadget?" asked the tall one. "All da way from London, England it is. 'Ad a terrible time wit dose customs blokes of yours up in Atlanna."

"It's da la'est ting in London," added the short heavyset one. "Dis one's on da house. Just give her a try. Nuttin to be fraid of. It's just a box dat take your picture and record your voice. No harm, dere, mahn."

The old man, a farmer by the looks of his dress and weather-worn face and gnarly hands approached the two men.

"What you fellas up to? What's this here contraption for?"

"Dey wants to market a new line in small town America and is usin dis 'ere box to gadder information on potential clientele," answered the heavyset man.

"Well, I ain't no potential clientele til I know what's bein sold."

"Dat's top secret, mahn. Even we doan know dat."

"How's this thingamajig work?"

"Just 'ave a seat in dis boot — it's kinda like an old-timey phone boot — and look up at da screen, press dat big green button dere, den talk natural into da speaker."

"What do I say?"

"Anyting you want, mahn."

"Can I hear what I said?"

"Course. You can replay by pressin dat big yellow button. Dat big red button is to stop, but I'm sure you figured dat out."

"Can I change what I said?"

"Naw mahn, you can listen to it but can't change it."

"Alright, I'll give it a go."

"Just step right on in dere, mahn."

"So, just press this here green button and start talkin?"

"Das it."

The old farmer took a seat, adjusted his position in front of the monitor and started talking.

"This here box is the strangest thing I ever seen in this town 'cept maybe when that magician fella ran off with the jewelry of half the town's womenfolk. Even my Mavis, may she rest in peace, got fleeced. But I been here 75 years — my whole life — and this takes the cake. A machine all the way from England

and they wanna use it to find customers over here in America. This town ain't ready for this newfangled advertising, leastwise us old folk ain't. Them kids, now they got that Eye disease — Eye phones, Eye pods, Eye pads and such — so they'll likely find this to their likin. Ole principal Funderdonk's the one's responsible for corruptin them younguns. Computers in the classroom. Pshaw! I never used no computer and don't much like talkin at em but these fellas seem nice enough for me to give their little doohickey a spin. How's that?"

"Das terrific, mahn. Now, les play it again so you can see it."

One of the men pressed the replay button and the old farmer looked up and watched himself, occasionally startled by what he saw and heard.

"I know I ain't handsome, but I never thought I sounded that bad."

"Doan worry, mahn. Everbody says dat."

Friday 3:45 p.m.

The Reverend Stackpole of the Third United Apostolic Church of the Imminent Divine Retribution walked up to the box, inserted the required five dollars and began recording his message.

"I don't know who is behind this box they call the Speakers' Corner, but in the name of all that is most holy, I bless this box and nullify any impure and indecent intentions that may lie with its makers or in its design on behalf of my flock here in this

mostly godly but naïve little town. There are forces of evil that would come and harm the gentle folk of my beloved town, but I have seen much — too much — of their kind of wickedness to let them pass unchallenged, and with the power that infuses our church and all its brethren I put the dark forces on notice that they will not occupy us without a grand struggle, which we as people of the light, will inevitably win. Peace be unto the townsfolk of this community, except for the pawnbroker and the banker and the Methodist preacher, who've already gone over to the dark regions, and 'OUT' to what would introduce evil among us."

Friday 4:10 p.m.

A group of four young teenage girls walked up to the box, having seen the good Reverend depart. There was chatter for a couple of minutes, then one separated off from the group and got into the box and closed the door. She started talking right away.

"Hi. My name's Kelly and I'm a sophomore at Lee High. I'm with my friends but they were, like, too scared to try this, so I have to go first. First of all, I wanna say that this town really sucks. There's nothing to do here. It's, like, filled with a bunch of old people and they're afraid of everything that's new and different. When I finish school, here I'm gonna leave this town forever. I'm gonna go live in a big city with lots of people and excitement and stuff to do. I can't wait to leave. My friends ... they'll probably stay here in this little town until they die, but I'm not like them. I have to see the world, even if it means never seeing them again. Don't tell them, like, they'd get really angry. Where's that Finish button? I wanna make sure they can't re-play this video.

She opened the door and stuck her head out.

"I'm done. Anybody else?"

No one else volunteered and unaware that they'd been dissed, the girls left together giggling and chattering away.

Friday 11:19 p.m.

"This is Blake ... quarterback of the ... Lee High Gen—Generous, er Generals. I'm a little dr— drunk. We lost. Not my fault th— though. Derek ... it was Derek. He dropped the ball. On the one-yard line. Five seconds on the clock. He fumbled. I gave it to him. But he dropped it. On the one-yard line. Said it was me. Coach said it was me, too. On the one-yard line. Even the cheerleaders ... said it was me. State championship dream is over ... on the one-yard line. Like I said I'm drunk, and I'm gonna get way ... drunker than this."

Saturday 8:03 a.m.

A line-up of most of the town's 1,052 souls circled the square several times over. People were in line to get into the Speakers' Corner box. Video from the Speakers' Corner had been running on the local cable channel all night and all morning.

A cacophony of voice rose from the town square with snatches of conversation standing out.

"D'you hear what the old man said?"

"One foot in the grave, some these old folk. Just can't accept change."

"Self-righteous prig."

"That with a 'g' or a 'k?'"

"Dark side? That's the pot calling the kettle black if you ask me."

"Who does she think she is?"

"Thinks she's better than us, huh?"

"Never could trust a man from that family— "

"Yep. All a bunch of drunks."

"It's just not right."

"It's a lie from the pit of hell— "

"Well, I'm gonna put that right, mark my words."

Monday 11:27 a.m.

The two men in blue coveralls came back to disassemble and take away the Speakers' Corner. There was still a lineup of mostly older folk who stayed to watch.

"Wacha tink 'appened, mahn?" asked the tall man. "Ain't been a week yet."

"Said it was good enough and we should try a different place," said the heavysset man.

"Doan seem dat good to me. Everbody be complainin and dissin each udder."

"Yeah, mahn. Wonder why dey run it on cable."

"Tink maybe dat's wat dey was plannin all along?"

"Wat?"

"Gettin folks riled up."

"Why?"

"Maybe it got to do wit wat dey sellin."

"Ow?"

"I dunno, It's top secret, like you said."

"Just load up da truck— "

"Ow bout dat little place we passed tru on da way 'ere. Dey got a town square."

"Wort a try. Les get lunch dere."

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Dr. Wienckell: If you can hear me, please say your name and your vat number.... Thank you. I always like to make sure that the translator is working properly before getting underway. Of course your neural gateways are open for this session so you can also communicate with one another as you're accustomed to doing on occasion. Let me know if you didn't hear everyone else say his/her name.

My name is Dr. Wienckell, and this is our first meeting of the BIV, that is, brain in the vat, therapy group. Let me welcome everyone, and before we get started I'd like to make some preliminary introductions. After I've finished, feel free to add or clarify what I've said about you.

Ted, here in vat #1, lost his body in a horrific car crash. He's here to discuss the long run. After 118 years, Amelia's body was completely worn out. She's looking for a companion — platonic of course. She's in vat #2. Kevin, in vat #3, had his body stolen and given to a look-alike high-profile senator who himself has secretly been a BIV for the past two years. Kevin's coming to terms with the whimsy of appearance and the illusion of justice. Finally, in vat #4, Mr. Caballo, not his real name, is trying to elude his would-be assassins, and he's with us to sort out matters of identity.

Mr. Caballo: Thank you, Doctor. I might not have mentioned the assassins, but since you did I have to warn everybody to secrecy regarding my situation. It's literally a matter of life and death, and since you four now share my secret that applies to you as well. I'm sure I don't have to elaborate.

Dr. Wienckell: My deepest apologies Mr. Caballo. I've never betrayed a client's confidence and I assure you that all of the members of this group hold in the highest regard the personal privacy of its members. To that end, we have all endorsed confidentiality agreements which are more binding and far-reaching than any you will find in the most top-secret organizations. Incidentally, the penalty for violation is severe, so severe in fact that I'm not even at liberty to describe it. I trust that will be to your and everyone else's satisfaction. But I should mention that the confidentiality assurance is intended to foster sharing, as this group will not function without everyone sharing equally or relatively so.

Mr. Caballo: Thanks, Doctor. I think we understand one another. But I'd like for everyone just to think of me as Mr. Caballo, the jockey. Shouldn't be too difficult to remember.

Ted: Killers and assassinations and the mafia, cartels or black ops — that's all great entertainment, but I personally am not the least bit interested in getting to know this world except in books and movies. I've got enough to deal with as a BIV with two young kids and a wife. How am I supposed to be a husband and father as long as I'm stuck in this vat? I'll never be able to make love to my wife again or play baseball and basketball with my son or watch my little girl grow up to become an astronaut. What kind of life will I have in here?

Dr. Wienckell: That's very good, Ted. Such strong, heartfelt emotion. That's a great first step. Thank you for sharing that with us.

Ted: Don't patronize me, Doc. This is just a whitewash and you're the shill the organization's retained to put a good face on it.

Dr. Wienckell: Now Ted, you seem to be having issues with emasculation and powerlessness and—

Ted: I'm in a f___ing vat, Doc. Of course I'm having ISSUES.

Dr. Wienckell: With hostility, too, it appears. Can we hear from ... Amelia, how about you?

Amelia: Well, I for one, am not so pessimistic. My body was a prison for about half as many years as it wasn't, and I'm looking forward to not having physical ailments affect my disposition. It's a whole lot easier to be optimistic and pleasant when you're not in intense pain or sedated out of your mind. I can't wait. I just hope to find some company, because aloneness is as bad as severe pain or over-medication.

Dr. Wienckell: Well said, Amelia, and thank you for those words of encouragement and—

Amelia: But Dr. Wienckell I was hoping you could put in a word and get me in on more group activities during the week. It can get unbearably lonely at times and while I have my health and am mostly drug-free, I miss the human interaction terribly.

Dr. Wienckell: Yes dear, I mean, Amelia. I'll speak to Professor Smart on your behalf myself. Now, Kevin, would you like to add something for the group?

Kevin: I don't think I have much in common with the others, except that we're all floating in vats. I want my body back, pure and simple. It was stolen from me, and it should be returned. I'm a victim of a crime and to me it doesn't matter that the criminal is one of the most important men in Washington. He committed a felony crime and he should be exposed and punished, and I should get my life back. For there's no coming to terms with forever swimming around in this chemical bath and watching movies stimulated by the whitecoats' neurological testing.

Dr. Wienckell: Thank you, Kevin. I'm glad you opened that door, because I think it's important that we, or you I should say, express your feelings about the testing. Again, the confidentiality agreement applies. What you say in here will not be shared with or overheard by the neurophysiological, uh BIV, team. There are no eavesdropping devices and there are no sub-neural feedback monitors. At least, I have requested that such devices and techniques be suspended for the duration of our session. I have been assured that compliance will be full and unconditional.

Amelia: Dr. Wienckell, there is something I'd like for you to take back to the BIV team. This pornography they show. I really must object. It's offensive and in poor taste in my opinion, and I'm sure they could come up with some alternative stimulation that would give them the results they need.

Dr. Wienckell: I'll pass that along, Amelia. Thank you. That's just the kind of comment I was hoping to take back to the BIV team. Does anyone else have a comment that they would like me to relay?

Kevin: The whole thing is like brainwashing to me. I'm not interested in being a brain in the vat and I'm not going to be a brain for their testing. Period. Exclamation mark. I want a lawyer. Surely I have rights in this place.

Ted: It does seem like brainwashing. Maybe if the testing didn't go on for so long and weren't so intrusive. It's exhausting and torturous at times. Yeah, torturous, and I feel like a prisoner in a torture chamber or someplace.

Dr. Wienckell: I'm sorry gentlemen, but you were admitted under powers of attorney and technically, though you have certain environmental rights, as for example the condition of your vats and the confidentiality agreement previously mentioned, you have no rights to initiate legal action, including inquiries. In the meantime, thank you both for highlighting a very important issue — trust, which we'll begin to address more fully in next week's session. Mr. Caballo?

Mr. Caballo: No complaints, but could you put me forward for an identity formation? Unlike some of my colleagues who feel the testing goes too far, I'd like to take the testing even further, and if I'm not mistaken, identity reconstruction is the next step. In my case, as all of you already know by now, that's why I'm here.

Dr. Wienckell: Well, lady and gentlemen, this has been a promising first session, and I look forward to our next group meeting in a week. Don't worry about the scheduling. I've already booked your time and the lab facility, so the BIV team is in the loop.

Amelia: Good-bye, Dr. Wienckell.

Mr. Caballo: Good day, Doctor.

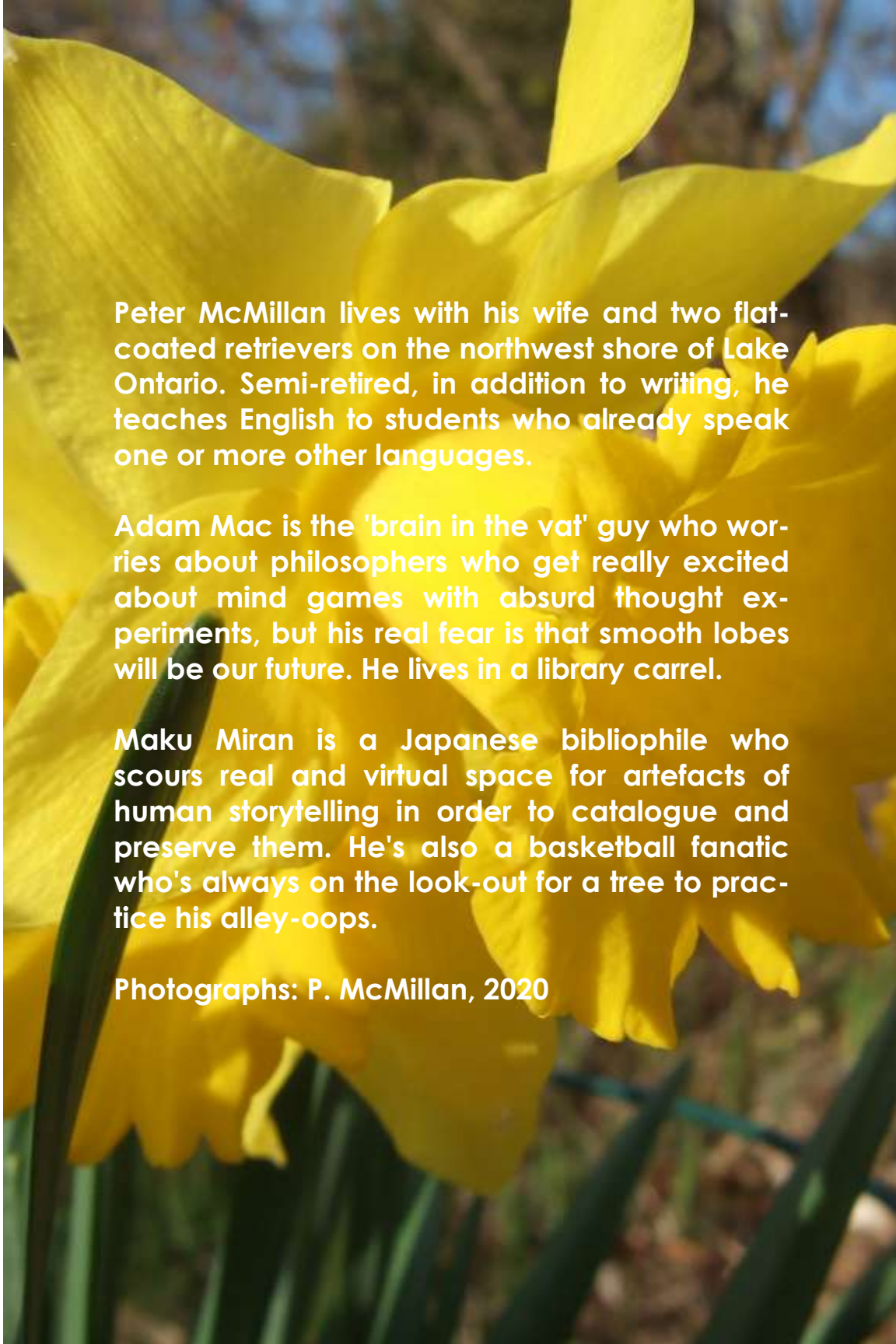
Dr. Wienckell's voice. "My name is Dr. Wienckell, and this is our first meeting of the BIV, that is, the brain in the vat, therapy group. Let me welcome everyone— "

Kevin: What was that?

Ted: Thought we weren't being recorded. I was right. You are just one of them, aren't you?

Dr. Wienckell: Uh, it's not like that. It's for my notes, that's all, and I don't share my notes with anybody. Don't worry. See you all next week.

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Maku Miran is a Japanese bibliophile who scours real and virtual space for artefacts of human storytelling in order to catalogue and preserve them. He's also a basketball fanatic who's always on the look-out for a tree to practice his alley-oops.

Photographs: P. McMillan, 2020