

All Your Stories Magazine

June 2024

Articles
Memoirs
Quick Reads
Travel Tales
Short Stories

Editor's Choice
Safari by Meredith Stephens



Welcome to the June issue of All Your Stories.

Another fabulous read with contributions from around the world.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the trouble to submit, we are amazed at the quantity and quality of work that is sent in, always enough to fill twenty magazines, so if you haven't made it this time remember we hold over all unpublished contributions to be reviewed for following editions.

Please share, purchase and review so we can continue to bring you this non-profit magazine.

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CONTENTS

- Editor's Choice:** Safari by Meredith Stephens
Sharing Food on the Train to Hikkaduwa by Meredith Stephens
- Memoir:** Living With Ataxia by David Beavan
The Piano by Seyda Eker
At My Little Desk by David I. Steinberg
My First Day Centre by Peter Street
A Gentleman Never Tells by Michael Antonoff
- Quick Reads:** Scala Sancta by Owen Thomas Christensen
The Day of The Suicides by Henry Vinicio Valerio Madriz
You won't probably remember by Bohumila Ottova
The Cinema Goer by Andrew Senior
A Woman in Distress by David Sheldon
Jonesy by Samuel Smith
Don't be Scared by Claire Jaggard
- Travel Tales & Stories**
The Futile Search for Pearls of Beauty by Roger Knight
Magical Mountains by Jun A. Alindogan
The Great British Seaside by J.A. Newman
How Far Do You Need to Travel? by Bohumila Ottova
- Articles:** The Jack and Jill of all Trades: Trials and Tribulations of a Teacher by Sarah Das Gupta
Why The Stories We Tell and Write About Ourselves Really Matter by Roger Knight
- Short Stories:** Stalked by Gary Beck
Philippe Discovered by Ernie Savage
A Second Chance at First Love James Osborne
Before the End by Lewis Whitehouse



Safari by Meredith Stephens

The Sri Lankan Safari Outside the Safari Park

“Sorry to disturb you,” the attendant warned us. “It’s not safe to sit out here at night. Elephants could appear any moment.”

Alex and I were sitting on a bench on a warm July evening looking out over the rushing waves of the Indian Ocean, on the western coast of Sri Lanka, crashing against the rocks beneath us. All was dark apart from a few lanterns along the sandy path. We reluctantly left our bench and headed back towards our accommodation.

The next morning we rose at five to go on safari. Our hut was spacious and private, with ceiling to floor windows on two sides. I would have preferred to stay in the sumptuous room.

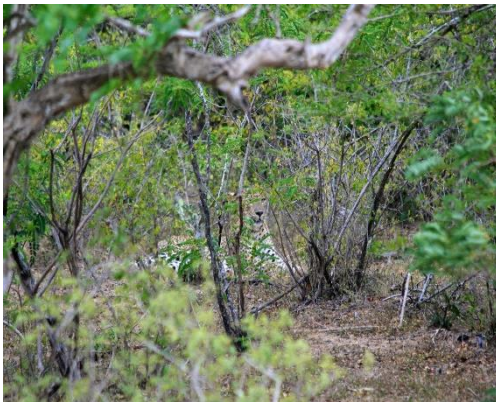
“I can’t get up at five!” I complained. It’s still dark. Can’t I just stay here and enjoy the room?”

“We are only here once,” explained Alex. “Once you are up it will be all worth it.”

I lay awake that night, worried that I would not be able to rouse myself at 5 am in the dark. The familiar phone alarm sounded with its dreaded melody, and I forced myself out of the crisp clean sheets

to throw on some old clothes for a dusty ride in the Yala National Park.

We headed outside to the awaiting jeep, and I clambered up the ladder into one of the back seats. It was a long dusty drive to the entrance to the National Park. We spotted water buffalo half-submerged in the lakes, not too far from crocodiles. Back on the shore there were herds of deer. The most elusive and yet prized wild animal was the leopard. We spotted groups of jeeps congregating in spots likely to lead to the sighting of a leopard. Drivers alerted each other to likely sightings and we sat patiently in the jeep surrounded by fellow tourists in other jeeps. Our guide had eagle eyes. After the other jeeps had given up and disappeared down dirt roads, he asked our driver to stop. He spotted the face of a leopard, well camouflaged beyond the leaves of a tree. We passed the binoculars around and I finally managed to spot the leopard.



Having spotted the leopard it was time to exit the National Park. We drove back along the bumpy dirt roads towards the Park exit. Wild dogs lay in the dirt near the exit. I wondered how long they would last before succumbing to a predator. After exiting

our guide spotted a herd of elephants. We stopped at the roadside and silently gazed at these creatures playing in the lake.

“Only after exiting did we spot elephants!” observed Alex.



We resumed our drive back to our accommodation. When we were nearly there our guide spotted another elephant, an enormous lone bull elephant. We stopped the car and observed him in silence. Then

he gracefully walked towards the jeep, and passed directly in front of us, slowly picking up each limb and easing it forward.

“Why is it that we only see elephants up close after exiting the National Park?” asked Alex.

The elephant slowly moved away from us and we resumed our drive back to our accommodation block. Once we arrived I clambered down the ladder out of the jeep in my dusty clothes.



“You can’t go and sit by the beach this evening,” warned the attendant. “Sando might make an appearance.”

Sanbo must have been the elephant we spotted earlier. Recalling his formidable size, we decided to heed the attendant's advice. We ascended the stairs to the deck safely ensconced behind a fence. We sat down and scoured the bushland for signs of Sando. Soon we heard the gasps of tourists behind us and we headed back towards the restaurant. Alex pointed to the crowd, and silently urged me to head that way. I stood with the crowd and spotted Sanbo, his giant frame poised on the boardwalk designed for human traffic.

The crowd silently gazed at Sando across the pond as he gently walked along the boardwalk. Would the boardwalk crash under his weight? Finally Sando eased himself off the boardwalk into the bush.

"You can't walk back to your hut tonight when Sanbo is on the loose," advised the attendant. "We will drive you to your hut in the buggy."

Sandra from our neighbouring hut hopped into the buggy with Alex and me, and we were driven along the path to our respective huts. When we arrived at Sandra's hut our driver refused to let her out.

"Sando is outside Sandra's hut," he warned. "It's not safe for her to get out."

"You can shelter in our hut," Alex suggested.

The three of us retreated to our hut, and shortly after, the attendant returned to advise us that Sando had now left Sandra's hut and it was safe for her to return.

Sandra took her leave and Alex and I were free to luxuriate in our spacious room. The attendants had drawn the expansive curtains surrounding three sides of the hut for us and I was free to return to our crisp pristine sheets.

The next morning we awoke and opened the curtains.

“Alex, there’s a monkey outside!”

We silently observed the monkey and Alex took photos. Then another monkey arrived, followed by an extended family of monkeys. They raced around to the outside pool. Some monkeys sat on a wall with their babies. Others came and sat in the tree next to the pool, and others sat on the edge of the pool and leant their lips down to have a drink.

“I’m not so sure about waking up at five to go on a safari,” I observed to Alex. All of our best wildlife experiences have been right here near the hut!”



Sharing Food on the Train to Hikkaduwa by Meredith Stephens



We purchase a second class ticket for the train from Fort Railway Station, Colombo to Hikkaduwa. We ascend the stairs worn by thousands of feet over the last century, and descend to the platform. The crowd is a younger one than I am used to. After a delay of thirty minutes the train arrives and we pile in, hoping for a seat, but half expecting to be sitting in the doorway with our bodies protruding outside. I stand in the aisle chatting to my travel companions, all towering over me, when I am offered a seat by a smiling local man. I wonder why I am chosen to be offered a seat. Is it because of my diminished height that I appear more frail than my traveling companions? I sit down and can hear the gurgling of a baby behind me, and women speaking a language I assume must be German. I

turn and see a young woman with fair hair tied in a ponytail holding a baby whose hair is sprouting out an even fairer shade than his mother. I turn back to make eye contact with her to offer her my seat, which she gratefully accepts. I stand in the aisle again and banter with my travelling companions.

Some local passengers with a baby about the same age pass her across the aisle to the passengers in front of the German mother and child. They hold up the baby and the German mother holds her baby up to face her. Each baby fixates their eyes on the other, and they reach out their baby hands in uncoordinated movements.

A busker enters the carriage with a microphone to croon to the passengers. He stands proudly in the doorway and begins singing, and then moves along the aisle to solicit donations. At each stop vendors board and move through the carriage holding large baskets containing snacks for the trip. I can hear them offering their produce in what I assume is Sinhala, as they make a few sales as they walk along the aisle.

A local who has been sitting with his wife resplendent in a bright pink sari notices me standing in the aisle and again I am offered a seat. I wonder why I am the one chosen from the group of eight westerners? Is it because I am the smallest woman in the group, or dare I say, do I look older than my companions? Again I accept the offer, and sit next to his wife while the husband stands adjacent in the aisle.

The windows are wide open and a refreshing breeze relieves us from the humidity. I can't see the other passengers because the aisle is crowded, but I see a hand from the other side extending to offer my travelling companions and me giant segments of pink grapefruit. I

accept and peel the pith from the segment as if it were a banana, and enjoy the exquisite sweetness.

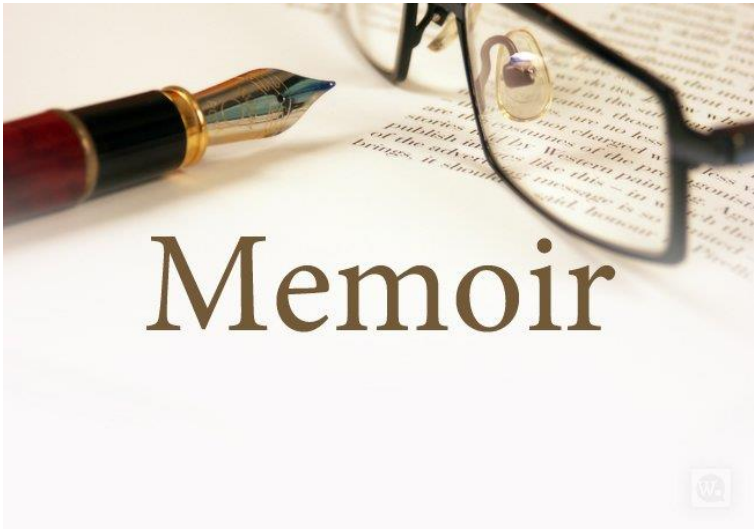
Next the woman next to me extracts a packet of popcorn from her bag and passes it along to me and then her husband. All of this is achieved by expressions and gestures rather than verbal language.

Finally we reach our destination of Hikkaduwa. I rise from my seat and utter one of the two words I have learnt in Sinhala *āyubūvan*, looking at the husband and wife in turn. My utterance appears to have been comprehensible, because I am met with smiles and they repeat the phrase back to me. I have been the recipient of hospitality from strangers in a crowded carriage in a faraway land, despite only having exchanged a single word with them. I determine to seek out another opportunity to taste the exquisite pink grapefruit!





Meredith Stephens is a recently retired professor from South Australia. Her work has appeared in *Transnational Literature*, *The Blue Mountain Review*, *Agape Review*, *Borderless*, *The Font - A Literary Journal for Language Teachers*, *The Writers' and Readers' Magazine*, *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching*, *Reading in a Foreign Language*, and anthologies published by Demeter Press, Canada. She spends her retirement gathering material for new stories as she sails in Australian waters and beyond.



Memoir



Living With Ataxia by David Beavan

When I was a teenager I remember my father used to weave a little when he walked. We played a lot of golf, and he often toppled over when he tried to tee up his ball. "Damn middle ear," he said, and we all nodded in agreement. Back then nobody knew what caused balance problems other than middle ear issues or too much alcohol. By the time I was on my own my dad was using a walker, and then years later a wheelchair. I thought this was a natural progression of his "middle ear" problem.

Around the time I turned fifty I began to notice a slight imbalance myself. Riding a bike, jogging, playing golf, and ice-skating were all becoming more difficult. I put it down to age but when it steadily progressed I was concerned.

My doctor referred me to a neurologist and that is when I got the diagnosis which changed my life. I had "Ante Cerebellar Degeneration." It meant the part of my brain stem which monitored my balance was degenerating. As it turns out there is no cure and it is fatal. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, and the doctor gave me the news like he was telling me I had the flu!

I started to do my own research and found out that the disease is also called "Ataxia." That sounded sexier and not as much of a mouthful.

I had a lot to learn about this disease. One in 50,000 people get it. Lucky me! From that neurologist I was referred to one of the top men in the field to find out more about my "strain" of the disease. It turns out there are many strains, of which some are more deadly than others. There are thirty-four main strains but only nine can be tested for here in Canada. If yours is not one of the nine then your blood has to be sent to Germany where they test for the other twenty-five.

To make a long story short, mine was not one of the nine. A year after my blood was sent to Germany I found out it was not one of the other twenty-five either. The neurologist told me mine must be a "mutant strain." That was the worst thing he could have said in front of my wife. She called me a mutant for six months!

The one good thing that came out of this test was that I did not have one of the more aggressive strains. Some people are in wheelchairs in their teens and dead in their twenties. As the years go by and I become more affected, I hold onto that last thought.

My mobility worsened each year. By the time I was sixty I could no longer play golf. Jogging was out of the question without falling every ten yards. I tried to skate one winter and it felt like I had never skated in my life. I had long since retired from my sales career and taken a part-time job three days a week at a car auction. I was now starting to fall a lot. I was fortunate to come away with scraped knees and hands and one broken bone in nine years before I quit. I could not face another winter sliding around on the ice with my problem.

I left the job just in time because the disease progressed more as I approached seventy. I had become my father. I purchased a "quad cane" on the advice of friends but it didn't work. A cane is great for taking the weight of an injured limb but not to keep you upright. Then six weeks after my seventy-first birthday I had my first serious fall. I broke my right arm in six places up near my shoulder. We had a horrible winter. My wife had to do everything I would do with my right hand and when we had to go out I was petrified I would fall again.

After the fractures healed and I was taking physiotherapy for my shoulder, Covid-19 came along. Now I was terrified I would fall, break something else, and have to go to a hospital. No way! It seemed the safe and logical thing to do was to start using a walker.

I had always been fit and even when ataxia started to

rear its ugly head I still used to walk around the block. Now I feel like a little old man. People I have known for years who are used to seeing me walking are uncomfortable. They don't know what to say. "Knee replacement?" "New hip?" Of course when I tell them about my Ataxia they stare blankly. Not a single person had heard of it.

The mental anguish I have been through since I took up with my friend the walker is worse than the physical anguish of breaking my arm. I feel ashamed and feeble. Ataxia is not easily explained. A knee or a hip injury is common and temporary. This disease is a mystery to everyone except my wife and me.

After pushing the walker for half an hour I lock the wheels and sit at the end of the driveway and watch the world walk by. At least once a week I hide behind my sunglasses and weep for what I have become.

Each day I tell myself it could be worse. I now spend my days with my camera or working on the book I started six years ago. Pushing the walker does not give me the exercise I need. I have a treadmill and a spin bike in my basement but the thirteen steps down there terrify me.

I can't remember how old my father was when he was in a wheelchair. I am not looking forward to that. I know my future is not bright but I accept it. I have no other choice. It is what it is.

Recently I was pushing my walker along the street when I started talking to a neighbour. I started to complain about the boredom of the walker and how much I missed being able to ride an actual bike. He asked me if I had considered a "recumbent trike." "What's that?" I asked. I went straight home (slowly) and googled it. That's when I found out the largest supplier in Canada was ten minutes from my home. I had one in an hour and it has literally changed my life. If the sun is shining I am riding. It has seven speeds so I can go up any hill and disc breaks for the descents. For two or three hours a day I have my life back.

This essay was recently published on the National Ataxia website



David Beavan. I have been forced to retire at 75 having lost all of my balance. I have taken up oil painting (not very good), Ukulele (not very good), and writing(remains to be seen).

The Piano by Seyda Eker

[Muge is pronounced like the French Muguet : mu-gay]

It was early when the doorbell rang. Jumping out of bed and hastily pushing my arms into my dressing gown, I opened the door.

‘Muge! my darling – but how – why?’

‘Hello mum. Surprise! I’ve come to see you over the Sugar Festival.’

‘Of course, yes, it’s the Sugar Festival. I’m not really awake yet. But your dad and I didn’t think you’d get a holiday. Fancy coming all the way from Istanbul! Now I’m so happy my head is spinning.’

After breakfast, Muge had a shower and went to her old room for a sleep. Happy to have my daughter home for a visit, I slipped out to the shops to get some provisions to cook her favourite meal.

Coming up the stairs on my way home, I could hear music playing. It got louder and louder and I realised it was coming from our flat. Softly I turned the key in the lock and opened the door. A Chopin Polonaise flowed around me. I crept silently into the kitchen, and put my bags down without making a sound. Then I tiptoed into the sitting room. Completely absorbed in her music, Muge was unaware of my presence.

While listening to her and watched her fingers creating the beautiful music, I saw again the tiny girl nodding and clapping to the rhythms of the music on the radio while I nursed her. It was obvious

she responded to rhythm and as she grew older I could see that she was attracted to music. When she was eight, she started organ lessons. Two years later, at her teacher's suggestion, she changed to piano lessons. She enjoyed them and looked forward eagerly to each lesson.

As I stood there watching her fingers stroke the keys and saw her delight in playing, I remembered the little girl getting excited each week when she went for her piano lessons. She used to glow with pleasure after her hour of music. But then she had to wait all week to play again on her teacher's piano. At the same time she had a lot of academic work to do to prepare for the entrance exam for the Anadolu High School.

'My music helps me to cope with all that, mum,' she told me, 'It's my relaxation.'

I knew it was time to have a piano at home, even if it meant some sacrifices.

'I can sell some land to raise the money if it means so much to her,' her father said. We kept it a secret. We were going to move into a new flat. Every week we would go there to check on the worker's progress. Tiling, painting, fittings, everything was getting fixed. As usual we went to our new flat on Saturday afternoon. The workers had finished for the day and everything was quiet. In the sitting room there was a large object, draped under a sheet.

'What is that?' We pretended to be astonished. 'Go and see, Muge!'

She pulled the sheet back and gasped. Her face went white with excitement as she looked at the gleaming piano. At last she

lifted the lid and touched the keys. Her eyes were shining. My husband looked at me and smiled. Earlier that week he had made a secret journey to Ankara with a pickup truck to collect this beautiful instrument. It was well worth the cost and effort.

Now Muge could play every day. As she wanted to learn more, we came to this unfinished house so she could practise. Her repertoire grew steadily: Mozart was a favourite. To relax she played Bach lullabies.

One day her teacher looked very serious. 'Muge my dear,' she said, 'I have reached my limits. You need a more advanced teacher now.'

So we found a new music teacher, a Polish gentleman. Of course she now became interested in Chopin and soon the house was filled with the haunting strains of his polonaises and nocturnes. How she enjoyed playing and how we enjoyed listening to her. When she was 14, I was confined to bed by a bad back. For many weeks I lay flat, in pain and bored. My only pleasure was the time of the day when Muge came home from school and played to entertain me. She chose pieces either to relax me or to cheer me up.

Sometimes she rattled off Mozart's Turkish March to brighten my mood. I felt more cheerful with the lively rhythms. Sometimes the polonaises she played so beautifully would soothe my anxious spirits and take me to a zone far away from physical pain and the strains of daily life. When the Polish music teacher came to give his lesson, his sensual aftershave added even more charm than usual to the romantic notes of Chopin.

The music stopped. I looked up from my dreams of the past. Muge was smiling at me.

‘That was lovely but I’m too tired to play any more. We’ll have some more music when dad gets home.’ Later she was as good as her word and my husband and I enjoyed another music filled evening.

‘Darling, you don’t know how much that has meant to us,’ I said to her when she finished.

‘Why are you crying?’ she said as she came over to the settee.

‘It’s always special to your father and I when you play for us,’ I said between the tears, ‘but this is extra special because it’s the last time that we will be able to sit here and listen to you.’

‘Why is it the last time? I know I don’t come home as often as I’d like but I will be here again and we can have many more musical evenings.’

‘It’s not that darling...’

‘What is it then, are you moving?’

‘No, we’ll be here but the piano won’t.’ I looked at my husband but he shook his head gently. ‘Tomorrow,’ I continued, ‘a van is coming to take it away. If we had known you were coming home for the festival, perhaps we could have delayed it for a day or two, but it’s too late now.’

‘But what am I going to do? I can’t afford a piano for my flat yet. This one has always been a part of my life and I so look forward to the chance of playing it when I am home.’

‘I know darling, but neither your father nor I can play and a piano like this deserves to be played regularly. I assure you it’s going to a good home.’

I felt awful because poor Muge went to bed depressed and perhaps even a little angry with us.

Early next morning I could hear the piano being played when the front door bell rang. Muge opened the door before I could get there. Two men stood outside in brown smocks. One of them was holding a folder in his hand.

‘We come to collect a piano,’ he said.

‘That’s right,’ I replied.

‘It’s got to go to this address, is that correct?’ He held out his worksheet which Muge took from him. She seemed anxious to find out who was to be the recipient of the piano.

‘But that’s my address.’

‘Thank goodness you’ve found out,’ I cried, ‘I just don’t know how much longer I could have kept this up. It was to be our surprise. We are sending your beloved piano to you for your birthday, so you can play it whenever you feel like it and not just when you come home.’

Muge threw her arms around my neck. Now it was her turn to cry.

‘I’m sorry to have spoilt your surprise. I can’t think of a present that I would rather have.’

‘The only thing now,’ I said, ‘is that when we want to hear you play, we’ll have to come to Istanbul.’



Seyda Eker lives in Adana, Turkey. She is a retired English teacher, as well as a painter working in pastels. The picture is of her aged 20 on the Serpentine in Hyde Park. She is compiling a series of stories and pictures recalling life in different regions of Turkey during the latter part of the Twentieth Century. In her spare time, Seyda enjoys walking, reading and handicrafts.

At My Little Desk by David I. Steinberg

Susan sits on my left at her desk, its edge flush with mine. Keith sits in front of Susan, diagonally to my left. Already, in Third Grade, I see how handsome Keith is - his ruddy, Irish complexion and thick, dark hair falling in a wave over his forehead, his shy, sweet grin, the easy flush of color to his cheeks. No one knows he's mine!

Susan chatters away with Keith, monopolizing him. Doesn't she *know*? Keith is *my* friend so I say something to her (probably mean) and then she hits me, so I hit her back. She screeches, shouts, and cries. Our teacher, Mrs. Brown, rushes over to see what's going on.

"*David hit me!*" she shrieks.

"*David!*" says Mrs. Brown, scandalized, as if nothing like this had ever happened in a classroom of *hers*. Keith looks at me with somber expression, the smile that lights his face gone.

"She hit me first!" I tell Mrs. Brown, aggrieved that Susan left out this fact.

"David!" says Mrs. Brown, shocked, "boys *never* hit girls, not even if a girl hits you first, now apologize to Susan!" This makes no sense. I want to ask Mrs. Brown what difference it makes if a girl or a boy hits you? Should I let Susan - or anyone - hit me and not defend myself?

Outraged, all I can muster is, "But she hit me first, why do I have to apologize?"

"Go stand in the hallway facing the wall, *right now!*" says Mrs. Brown in a harsh, unfamiliar tone of voice. "Out in the hall! Think about what I've said - boys *never* hit girls!"

Exiled to the hall, I stand in shame for anyone passing by to see. If you're in the hall you've been bad! But they won't know how unfair it is and *shame shame* their eyes will say when they look at

me. Occasionally I glance through the doorway at Keith and see Susan still sniveling, tissues bunched wrathfully in her hand.

I hear someone coming down the corridor, the first person to see me in my state of shame and it's Mrs. Green, the school witch, who looks disapprovingly at me without saying a word and now she's the first to know: *I'm a bad boy!*

Until this morning, Mrs. Brown has been my favorite teacher. She's teaching us how to multiply, she reads us *Charlotte's Web* on rainy days - a book I came to love as much as the soothing tone of Mrs. Brown's voice. I used to love Mrs. Brown almost as much as my mother - but that is all changed now.

I remain in the hall for an unbearable amount of time, and the longer I stay there the more I hate Mrs. Brown, but also and especially Susan, the troublemaker! Just look at her: blond curls, sparkly, blue eyes, round, chubby face, rosy cheeks – little piglet! Though our desks will continue to abut each other, she will not be my friend anymore.

But I will always love Keith – even though it will take me years to understand my feelings for him. In springtime later that school year, Keith and I are playing marbles one day during recess. I take my shot with a small marble and nick his prize boulder – a Purie, as we called them, a large, clear-glass marble. I have fairly won it according to marble play rules and I'm elated to win Keith's favorite!

But as I pick up his beloved boulder, Keith's bottom lip quivers, he barely holds back tears in his beautiful, dark eyes. Spontaneously, I extend my hand as he extends his to receive the boulder I drop in his palm, the surprised, grateful look on his face my treasure.

Our marbles match occurred months after the fight with Susan. My love for Keith survived the hallway humiliation and endured the long winter months when the ground was frozen and

everyone's marbles sat in marbles bags on closet floors or in dresser drawers until spring returned us to marble season.

How could I have known, even as Keith's Purie boulder fell from my hand into his, this would not be the last time I would suffer for love?



David I. Steinberg grew up in Niantic, Connecticut and has lived in San Francisco for many years. He received his B.A. in English Literature at the University of Hartford and an M.A. in English: Creative Writing. David has published widely in anthologies and literary magazines, plays guitar, percussion, a bit of mandolin, and is attempting banjo. *Twang!!!!*

My First Day Centre by Peter Street

Introductions

When I shook hands with Jimmy there were some kind of warts which covered most or all of his fingers and there were similar markings around his lips. He was rocking from side to side and to and fro. Me, in my naivety thought he was drunk. Then, what I thought were warts were scabbed over cigarette burns. He later told me he had no feelings in his fingers or his lips. So, his cigarettes would just burn down and then burn holes into fingers and into his lips from keeping the cigarette in his mouth, which he did most of the time.

He slurred he had Huntington's disease. I hadn't a clue what that was? I tried, really tried to understand everything he was trying to say. It was like learning another language but I was getting there. He was half way through the history of Huntington's when tea and biscuits were brought around. I was one of the first to be served my afternoon tea, together with the other young spinal guys. The tea servers missed Jimmy even though he was on the same table; they completely ignored him.

We had days out organised with the local snooker hall no coast to us 'crips.' Once there, we were lowered out of the bus with the electronic drop down tail-gate to within a few yards from the main door of the Hall. Once inside one pro snooker table was going to keep us company all after noon. Depending who was on duty behind the bar we were given free soft drinks. Much to the annoyance of the paying guys and girls, so to stop any ill feelings we created an

informal match, anyone who came on the table while we were there would be non-payers. So it worked out ok for everyone in the end.

One night we even took on a local snooker team, we were charged for that. We didn't complain, it was all swings and roundabouts. we lost, but what the hell it was a few hours into an everyday situation, we were almost in the everyday world.

"Always the same," he slurred. "Glamour crips." he called us. We were always the first.

Then the turn of the C.P.'s (cerebral palsy) next to be served were all those who were deaf with no speech. This process happened once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Next to be served were the elderly. Next were those with mental health problems "the loopy gang" is what the tea servers called them. Then it was the turn of the recovering addicts. The tea-lady finally served Jimmy. Every afternoon and every morning was the same, except if there were official visitors or family. Then everything was served in a correct order. I asked the tea-lady why it wasn't served like this all the time? "Mind your own business," Then for two days I was served the last tea dregs alongside Jimmy.

I couldn't fault Jimmy's openness and yes at times he was embarrassing. As far as I was concerned we were all one regardless of our disabilities. There were arguments like all families, but that's what we were - a family. The problem being the tea servers seemed to have a stronger voice than we had. Some of us had only just joined the family, and were finding our feet (so to say) While others had been in the family all their lives.

Something had to be said, but what, how, who? It was the fear and loneliness of being at home in front of the telly watching nothing more interesting than something like: "Watch With Mother" that gagged us. Days out snooker - day trip to Southport - free nights out to live sports events.

Some of the other guys in our little gang of 'crips' even spoke of us as: "None People" They also thought being with other "None People" was far, far better than being with no people at all. Or even worse with people who didn't want us anywhere near them.

I wasn't the only who ashamed by not speaking out. The tea-servers knew we were all scared of supporting Jimmy's claims of unfair treatment. So, no one said anything, not even an out-of-place look. Nothing was ever aimed at the tea-servers.

Occasionally able-bodied researchers who knew everything there was to know about disability, except disability itself, would visit us from time to time. Yes, they were a pain in the bum and they would report everything they saw, but for those few weeks we were served tea/coffee in some kind of humanitarian order.

I asked Jimmy if his illness was catching or not? He slurred 'dick head' for thinking such a thing. I apologised. He said he was going to have a fag outside. It was just like watching someone walk who had, had about ten or more pints of extra strong lager.

I watched him stagger on past the toilets towards the exit/entrance down the corridor down through the stench of piss and shit which layered the corridor near the main entrance. Jimmy would turn around to me and then aim two fingers at the office.

When he returned we carried on our conversations of trying to get to know each other. His honesty impressed me but I couldn't cope very well with him continuously standing then sitting. This was happening way beyond reasonable. I tried not to make it obvious. He could see I was getting annoyed; I tried, really tried not to make it obvious. I asked John, the chef who was nearby if he could get someone to push me to the toilets. John was the first gay man I had met who constantly talked and talked about his ex boy- friend. Who he was still and always would be in love with. John was the main chef of the centre. It was a natural choice.

John and his ex had been partners in a Blackpool Hotel until he caught his boyfriend 'having it off' with a stranger. So, John decided to jump from a sixty-foot bridge into a flowing river but landed on a tiny stone island in the middle. He broke his hips and sustained a spinal injury, which he only half recovered from. It wasn't that simple with his hips. He walked with a stick and when he wasn't cooking he chained smoked. Then one day he said he had given in his notice to quit the day centre and was going to find his ex. It was a couple of weeks later when we received a card addressed to me. Why me I hadn't a clue? The postmark was Rhyl, Wales saying: "Paul is sorry and we are back together – Love John" It was the p.s: Be careful – that's all I'm saying.

I was learning to walk again, but still afraid of the tea server. six months after leaving the Centre I sent a copy of my letter to Joe our local councillor. I never found out what happened to those particular tea servers. But the place has since been demolished.

My name is **Peter Street**, I'm 75 years young, Irish (dad was born in county Offaly) I am a widely published author and poet. My childhood memoir: Goalkeeper is about growing up in the 1950's before autism was made known. I have moments of madness such



as, while poet in residence for BBC North I went to the Balkans war as a war poet. I have read my poetry and short stories in most places you can think of including high security prisons, schools, colleges and The American Land Institute, Salina, Missouri. Patron: Professor Fred Whitehead Missouri uni'

I left school barely literate, I have no educational qualifications whatsoever. I am autistic. 1984 I had a serious spinal injury, keeping me in a chair for almost four years

A Gentleman Never Tells by Michael Antonoff

It was a job to die for. My male friends couldn't believe my good fortune. Wow, they said. You work at a girlie magazine, and they pay you to do that?

If only they knew.

And so it happened that between 1980 and 1982, while working as "articles editor" of a New York-based men's magazine called *Genesis*, that my boss, the editor-in-chief, stepped into my office for the first and only time. The man, let's call him Joe, was at least twice my age and had a habit of cutting his fingernails with a nail clipper at his desk whenever we met in his office overlooking Bloomingdale's on Lexington Avenue. His white skin was flaky, and I'm sure he could have appeared as a pitchman in a commercial about the onset of psoriasis. Besides the *New Yorker* cover-type view, his office was spacious enough for a sofa and extra chairs where editors would pitch legitimate stories like: "Why is the weather so weird?" or "Where the jobs are."

My interior office, on the other hand, was so far removed from those with windows that I had no idea whether shoppers were entering Bloomingdale's for sweaters or umbrellas, snowshoes, or sneakers. The only thing I could hear was the constant whoosh of elevators proceeding on the other side of my wall. To counter this reality, I hung behind my desk a poster, a depiction of a 747 barreling into the open blinds of a faux window. I tried to draw in colleagues through the rat-tat-tat of my typewriter. Few showed. That morning, when the editor-in-chief appeared like an apparition, I nearly spit up my coffee.

Joe hadn't even taken off his raincoat. He had come out of the elevator, passed by the bosomy Puerto Rican receptionist, and turned right toward my office instead of left to his. He came bounding in with one question on his mind: had I or hadn't I? To this point, he announced that he didn't want to know. There were unsaid legal issues, for sure. But on this weekday morning just past 9, the elephant in the room was a woman named Teresa (stage name: Misty) who I'd gone out with the night before.

Teresa/Misty had won the annual Friends & Lovers Contest, a photo competition on behalf of women who had no problem putting nude pictures of themselves in the mail. Usually, the pictures were sent by the women's boyfriends, but sometimes they'd come directly from the ladies themselves. The payoff was a professionally photographed national magazine spread and a free all-paid vacation to New York City. That was where I came in. I was to chaperone the winner from her hotel room to dinner and drinks and show her a general good time.

"So, how did it go?" said Joe. "Don't tell me." I could tell he was nervous, not having the ballast from his desk in front of him or the crutch of his clippers.

Whoosh, went an elevator.

I reviewed in my mind what had happened. After leaving work the night before, I'd gone directly to the United Nations Hotel in the East 40s to pick up Teresa, a 5'7" auburn-haired beauty in her mid- to-late twenties who worked as a dancer at a striptease club in Baltimore, or as she pronounced it, "Ball I More."

We settled on Italian. There was an old-fashioned restaurant on Second Avenue called Ernesto's in spitting distance of the Roosevelt Island Tram. She was wearing platforms, which accentuated our height difference especially when I found myself standing in the depression of a gutter just before stepping up to the curb. Nevertheless, I let her place her arm inside mine. I was her escort, and I was determined to be the gentleman. Arm in arm we walked. I noticed that a steady parade of male passersby pivoted their heads.

We both ordered pasta, mine with shrimp and scallops in a pink sauce, hers with lobster in a spicy red sauce. We had glasses of Chianti, too. I regaled her with tales of my spending summers on Fire Island (the heterosexual part) and finding mollusks in the shallow bay with my feet.

“Do you know the difference between what happens when you reach down and pick up a clam or a scallop?” I asked. She nodded no. “A clam clams up. But a scallop opens and eight blue eyes peer out.”

She giggled. She seemed to be buying what I was selling.

Bivalves have their utility.

I segued to sports, a safe topic. I pointed out that one of the hats I wore at the magazine was sports editor. Each month we ran an article about baseball, football, basketball or hockey, forecasting which teams might end up in a defining event like the Super Bowl. Predictions were tricky because the magazine had a 2- to 3-month lead time. In truth, I had no interest in sports and depended on a sports reporter at the *New York Daily News* to pen each 2,500-word article. My main task was to make sure that the names of team members the writer cited were spelled correctly. Also, if he listed a statistic, like the number of runs batted in (RBI), it better be correct. I referenced seasonal booklets put out by the professional sports leagues and if a spelling and stat matched the manuscript, put a check mark over the typewritten text. Unfortunately, my eyes often glazed over with boredom. When the magazine's copy editor caught me putting a check over a misspelling or erroneous RBI, he went ballistic, yelling and snapping a pencil in my face. Despite the type of magazine we worked for, he said, when it came to something as

sacred as the All-Star Game, the copy we ran better be airtight. I never had a tougher copy editor.

Teresa put her hand on my arm, commiserating that when it came to baseball, there was just too much to know. Then, she suggested that the Orioles should be considered as obvious contenders for the World Series. I said I'd see what I could do.

Spumoni for dessert? No. Serendipity 3 was right around the corner, and as many Manhattan birthday girls know, it was the place to go for huge sundaes and mugs of hot chocolate with peppermint sticks at tables circumscribed by teddy bears in pink bow ties.

Next, it was onto a piano bar for after-dinner drinks. Appropriately, if corny, I asked the man at the piano to play "Misty" for me. Teresa half-chuckled, and I stuffed a dollar bill into his tip jar. We got a little tipsy, and she hit the lady's loo. I took her back to her hotel room.

The next morning, my boss continued to fish. "I hope you didn't do anything I wouldn't do," he said. I looked at Joe, not sure

what to say. Should I be honest? Should I make up a story? Should I hold my tongue? A gentleman never tells, I thought to myself.

Despite the euphemism “men’s magazine,” *Genesis* was brimming with pictures of women. (Women’s magazines also were filled with pictures of women, though dressed.) Between the nude spreads were articles about the subterranean economy and why this new thing called the personal computer was the future. Also, every issue would carry a female celebrity interview. For instance, Goldie Hawn, a popular actress of the time, never actually sat down with *Genesis*, but she did talk to a freelancer who sold a version of the exchange to us for \$500, no questions asked. That gave us the opportunity to put the celebrity’s name on the cover, though if readers expected Goldie to appear in the buff, they were disappointed as soon as they flipped through the pages. Some retailers put their “sex” magazines in sealed, transparent plastic so that customers would be titillated by the cover but rewarded or disappointed only after they forked over the \$2.95.

I was called the “articles editor” for a reason. The articles were protected by the First Amendment and made it safe to send a

magazine that might otherwise be construed as filth through the U.S. Mail, distribute on newsstands and sell in 7Elevens next to beer and salty snacks. Joe had previously worked at *Penthouse*, a clone of *Playboy*. Thus, *Genesis* was a clone of a clone with a monthly circulation a fraction of the big boys' despite claiming on its glossy cover "over 2,000,000 readers." Pass-along readership went a long way even if the pages became sticky in the process. *Genesis* staked out a demographic largely avoided by the more sophisticated *Playboy*—at least in the way it portrayed itself. Our readership was mostly single and blue collar, men who may have finished high school, enjoyed watching sports, drank beer, smoked weed and went home tired and lonely to fall asleep while propping up a magazine.

I wrote girl sets, too. They were the extended captions that accompanied each model on four or five consecutive pages. There were four girl sets per issue, and I wrote at least one each month. I'd make up the names. Roni, Debbie and Peggy were women I'd known in real life, but the images I'd be handed that would end up in print were usually taken by a photographer in Europe who provided a sheet of slides for one-time use and a one-time fee. The

photographer retained the rights to sell them to our competitors after a decent interval once our own issue was off the stands. It seemed ironic that decency could be defined by the frequency of indecent exposure. A blonde with more than one name might be portrayed on a beach in the Seychelles one month and, in a competitor's magazine on a beach in Hawaii 6 months later. She might be described as bubbly and petite in February and quiet and statuesque in September. Who cared? My boss certainly didn't.

I made up her dimensions. I made up her back story. The prime directive was to never give her a job title that would threaten the self-esteem of our male reader. Brain surgeon, no. Waitress, yes. On its most altruistic level, a reason to rename and relocate the girls was to protect them from men who might get the wrong idea. Sure, I had to write them as available. Sure, they'd love to take up with a great guy. Someone like our reader. But I wouldn't want readers to get the wrong impression. You didn't want Joe Six Pack from Milwaukee chasing after Denise I had placed waiting tables at a Denny's in Waukesha. More importantly, the ladies' identities were crafted from fiction on account of how the photographer got paid and who owned the pictures. The model was typically paid by

the photographer for all rights well before *Genesis* ever saw the pictures. That is, except in the case of the Friends & Lovers Contest.

As we made our way back to the U.N. Hotel, I pondered my options. Stand on my toes and ask to be invited in? Make an excuse about having to use the bathroom? Should I offer her money? Or should I just say good night and wish her a safe trip back to Ball I More?

It's not that she wasn't my type. Maybe there's some truth in the notion that opposites attract. It's probably why I was never attracted to petite women. Or women of my own faith. In both cases, Teresa may as well have been sent by central casting from its offices in heathen heaven.

When I wasn't making up extended captions for girl sets, I'd be choosing reader submissions for the *Genesis* jokes page. It was a popular feature in *Playboy*, too, that typically objectified women. ("Hear about the woman with varicose veins who went nude to a costume party as a road map?") Readers would scribble a joke on a postcard and mail it to the "Jokes Editor" expecting it to be published in exchange for a *Genesis* devil-logo T-shirt. They were

instructed to indicate S, M, L or XL. Most of the jokes in the daily pile were repeats of ones we'd already published. I hate to think how many reruns got into print once I left *Genesis*, its institutional memory lost with my passing.

In taking Teresa back to her hotel room, I was tempted to proposition her. No, if anyone should be doing the propositioning, it better come from her. I also knew that I wasn't carrying the kind of cash it would take if our relationship suddenly turned transactional. Still, I was clearly conflicted. Yet, my instinct was to leave it alone. Do the right thing. Kiss her on the cheek, if I could be so bold, and bid adieu.

But what would I tell Joe? I knew I'd have to fess up the next day.

I always knew I would spill the beans. It was my nature. But I also knew that by blurting out the truth, I'd be giving something up. It was the power I held over him. Keeping Joe guessing. Keeping him off balance. Only she and I knew the truth. Until I let it slip.

Joe also needed a story to tell George, his boss, the owner/publisher of the magazine, which included a stable of non-pornographic motorcycle magazines. George was a tithe-giving Presbyterian who instead of putting his own name on the *Genesis* masthead, gave the honor to the well-known owner of a chain of Japanese steakhouses. According to Joe, George hardly ever visited the office, choosing instead to spend his time “riding motorcycles in the Arizona desert chasing jackrabbits,” as he put it.

George, who I suspect was elated by Ronald Reagan’s recent election as president, did direct Joe to make sure that every issue include at least one article, the filler between girl sets, that adhered to the formula: what’s wrong with the Soviet Union; what’s right about America? The recurring theme made sense since many of our readers were soldiers amusing themselves in their down time who needed the reinforcement that what they were doing helped keep America great.

My gig at *Genesis* lasted 2 years. Joe called me into his office one morning to say I was being let go. I took lunch early, walking in a daze some 20 blocks to the Automat, a once robust

chain of restaurants where I'd dined on my father's knee. This location was the last Automat, and it had "modernized" by adding a David's Cookies kiosk where I drowned my sorrows in an inch of vanilla ice cream bookended by two chocolate chip cookies side-dipped in extra chips. Some people who are fired get drunk; others overdose on sugar and butterfat.

Joe hadn't given a reason why I was out, but I suspect two. One was that I was part of a general housecleaning of staff who had been recruited by him a few years earlier from magazines that glorified recreational drug use. My already-terminated colleagues had included the magazine's art director, who I had once worked with at *Paraphernalia Digest*, the monthly trade journal of headshops, and the magazine's managing editor, who I had previously worked with at *Head Magazine*. (The latter colleague had made the mistake of telling everyone in the office how sorry the American people would be for having elected Reagan. Also, he managed to get himself arrested for dealing cocaine one day after work.) Both of my previous magazines were based on the premise that the more marijuana people consumed, the better the world would be. While Joe had strategized that editorial recruitment for a

girlie magazine would be easier if the talent came from another stigma-attached publication, George already had enough explaining to do on Sundays. Porno was bad enough but signing the checks of employees who had helped make the world safe for drug pushers was even worse. So, I surmised, George told Joe to make it so, and I was gone.

The other reason I was let go, I suspect, came more from Joe himself, whose own lost youth failed to find a surrogate in me as a young man. As a male editor at *Genesis*, I was supposed to embody the fantasy promoted by the magazine that women are available, and men should be able to have their way with them. He'd given me the perfect opportunity to take advantage of a woman he'd selected from hundreds of entries. Wasn't I red blooded enough, heterosexual enough, to do the dirty with the very winner of the Friends & Lovers Contest? If I hadn't blurted out the truth the morning after, if I had at least held my tongue, left him guessing, who knows? I might have lived to write another girl set.



Prior to being exposed on the masthead of *Genesis* as articles editor, **Michael Antonoff** was the editor of *Paraphernalia Digest*, associate editor of *Moneysworth* and a reporter for the *Bergen Record*. Books after *Genesis* where he worked as a staff editor include *Personal Computing*, *Popular Science*, *Video Magazine* and *Sound & Vision*. As pixels punctured print, he shifted to online marketing. He worked as a content creator for B&H Photo. His last in-office job saw him producing manuals for cameras hidden inside clock radios. Antonoff currently freelances from an outer borough of New York City where he writes mostly about technology.



Scala Sancta by Owen Thomas Christensen

Sunday. It was the Lord's Day, a day of rest and worship. Usually, the church steps were bustling on this day, but only a single visitor had used me today. He had to step on me to enter under the Lord's roof. Hat in hand, he opened the door and quietly entered. I could hardly hear him close the door behind him. Odd, I thought, usually more people use me today. As this was not the case, I reveled in the occasion. One singular person couldn't hurt once in a while. However, I do wonder where everyone else is. Perhaps it was something about a new one down the street. Bigger, more extravagant. A waste of money, really. Why build another church when I'm as good as any other? There wasn't anything wrong with me, and the man who just used me, well, he didn't seem to find an issue with that. How curious.

An entire week had gone by. The priestess would occasionally use me, but no visitors at all. I waited and waited, but nothing at all; nothing to dull the edges of my steps, for the entire duration of seven days. It felt strange. It wasn't as if I didn't enjoy the pain-free experience for once, but I strangely longed to feel someone again, despite it always coming back to bite me very quickly. As the Lord's day came to be once more, there was yet the same visitor once again. Hat in hand, he walked up my steps and entered the church. Still, I could hardly hear him close the door. What an odd fellow. Why

would he choose to use me, despite a bigger and more extravagant one being near? Was it to mock me? Was it to mock the other one? Was it pity? Regardless, I tried to shake these thoughts out of my head. He was using me, and that made me happy. Even if it hurt.

Another week and absolutely nobody to use me. Something was definitely going on. I hardly noticed the priestess walk in and out. The man too, really. I was starting to miss him, given he was almost my sole source of usage. I hardly knew the fellow, yet I felt a strange attachment to his presence. Even if only once a week, I would still see him on occasion. I sillily found myself longing for him. I longed for the weight of his body upon me. After all, he dulled my edges. Never once in my existence had I craved a man so dearly, so desperately. Then, I saw him. I saw him walking up to me. I felt excited, opportuned to tell him to stay, to demand him to keep using me. "Hey!" I cried out to him, "Please keep using me! I love you!". I don't know why I blurted out that last part. Are stairs even capable of understanding the concept of love? Let alone giving or taking it? Was that concept not bound to more fortunate ones? Regardless, I eagerly awaited an answer. He got closer and closer, ready to use me, ready to dull my edges. Then, unlike the man, the door leading into the church slammed open. The priestess jumped down the stairs and into his arms, completely avoiding stepping on me. I simply watched as they embraced one another. So, that was why he kept using me because he wanted to get to her. I was merely a stepping stone, a tool in his pursuit of horrible, human desire. He

was going to use her too, wasn't he? As he had used me, so selfishly. He would use her to get to someone else, step on her as he had stepped on me. How foolish of me to believe his intentions to be kind, when in turn they had been cruel. What a terrible man, how I hate him so. I had to warn the poor priestess before she'd end up like me.

But before I could get my warning out to the priestess, together, they stepped on me. They used me to walk into church. At that moment, I had almost forgotten the betrayal, drowned out by my own, strangely human desire. I felt loved, wanted, and of use, to him. And as the door shut, it was neither quiet nor loud. It was perfectly, audibly comfortable to the ear. At least he stepped on me, even if not for my, our sake. At least he would still use me, even if I was not the one he wanted. I'd rather be used by him than nobody else because only he knew how to dull my edges. Only *he* wanted to. Only *he* ever did.



Owen Thomas Christensen. As of writing this, I am a 19-year-old high school student, currently living in my own apartment after moving to Denmark with my family. I have been writing flash fiction since the age of 14 and, per my family's wishes, I seek publication. I come from a lower-middle-class family from Wythenshawe. Each short story is a reflection of human nature, combined with an intense emotion I have felt while writing them. I currently have nine finished stories, each varying in length. This number, of course, will increase with time.

The Day of The Suicides by Henry Vinicio Valerio Madriz

“It’s a shitty life!”, the frustrated man said while hearing the shouting and screaming of the next-door family. It was the last straw! He wanted to interfere, to knock at their door, to save someone so he could have saved himself, his soul, lost for so long; but, instead, Liam got up from his cozy sofa, his long-minute witness of lonely hours, stood up for a while in deep thought, walked stairs up toward his bedroom, his crying room, stopped for a moment to take a look at his daughter’s empty bedroom, her picture on the pink wall, opened his bedroom door, opened his balcony’s twin doors, took a deep breath, looked at the street, nobody there (it was 2:10 AM), and jumped. That was how Liam chose to die, to close earlier his book of life. Nobody will miss him but a blood tie, he was a lonely man.

Nevertheless, if Liam had chosen to overcome his frustration about not being able to see his daughter (a court order), he would have cared about others, knocked at his neighbors’ door, stopped the fight, called the police, supported (and fallen in love

with) Chloe, and become her salvation and regained his daughter's custody.

“It's a shitty world!”, the suffering woman said while watching her cruel and aggressive husband leave the apartment after breakfast. She wanted to act as the professional she was (a psychologist), putting an end to the endless-day power-abusing husband situation; but, instead, Chloe felt ashamed of not being able to protect herself and her horrified children (bed-wetting every single night), went to her bedroom, opened the closet twin doors, looked for something, found it, took the gun, went to her children's rooms, finished their suffering, returned to her bedroom, lay down, and shot. That was how Chloe chose to die, to close earlier her book of life. Nobody will miss her; she was a lonely woman.

Nevertheless, if Chloe had chosen to report her husband to the police (and the police had acted on time), she would have been able to save herself and her children, met Liam (the love of her life), gone to work at the clinic that day, supported Wyatt (her new patient), and become his salvation.

“It’s a shitty clinic!”, the desperate young man said after leaving the medical building. He wanted (but mostly needed) to tell his psychologist everything about him and his tormenting life, to unburden himself to anyone who would really listen; but, instead, Wyatt came back to his house, came in, didn’t pay much attention to what was going on there (not a home) with all its drugs consuming and violence by everyday strangers, went to the kitchen to get a knife, went to his bedroom, walked in circles inside those 4 walls, opened his bathroom door, sat down inside the bathtub, let the water run, and cut his wrists. That was how Wyatt chose to die, to close earlier his book of life. Nobody will miss him; he was a lonely young man.

Nevertheless, if Wyatt had chosen to tell his friends about his hellish life or asked for another doctor’s appointment, he would have felt released, moved to a dorm to live peacefully so he could live his dreams, met Grace (his soulmate) in the new Administration class that morning, encouraged her to start her new music project, and become her salvation.

“It’s a shitty school!”, the fearful (but talented) young woman said while crying on a college bathroom toilet that afternoon. She wanted to run a new music website program to give novice singers and bands the chance, for free, to produce and advertise, worldwide, their albums; but, instead, Grace returned to her dorm, let her failure fears take control of her inspiring goals, went to her bedroom, then to its bathroom, took many pills, lay down on her bed, and slept... forever. That was how Grace chose to die, to close earlier her book of life. Nobody will miss her; she was a lonely young woman.

Nevertheless, if Grace had chosen to continue with her project, she would have met Wyatt, become an extremely useful person in the music industry, supported Carter, and become his salvation.

“It’s a shitty system!”, the amateur singer-songwriter said after reading all the music companies’ rejection letters. He wanted to altruistically share his inspirational music to cheer the world up; but, instead, Carter cried for a while, wiped his tears off, breathed

deeply, stopped his painful thoughts, cleared his mind, opened his front door, went downtown, and walked in front of a speedy truck. That was how Carter chose to die, to close earlier his book of life. Nobody will miss him; he was a lonely boy.

Nevertheless, if Carter had chosen to persevere and fulfill his goals a bit longer, he would have been a successful music star, inspired many people, made a better world with his lyrics, supported Nova, and become her salvation.

“It’s an insipid home!”, the naive girl said while looking at a picture of her with her daddy while listening to a violent, sexist, and hopeless song on the radio. She wanted to talk to her mom again for her mother to tell the court she really loved, needed, and missed her father, so they could bring him back into her life; but, instead, Nova heard the news (her father jumped from his balcony), got terribly sick (sadness is one of the worst sicknesses ever), and let herself die. That was the way Nova died. Everybody will miss her because she had a lot to give (affecting others’ lives positively is the way one lives

forever); she wasn't a lonely girl but a popular and loved neighbor, classmate, friend, and relative.

Life creates its proper environment for creatures to grow and develop in harmony, under God's watch and blessing. Ergo, all and each of these elements are needed and required. No one is replaceable, having the natural and social right to be happy, to create a better world.



Born in Atenas, Costa Rica, 1969, **Henry Vinicio Valerio Madriz** graduated in English Teaching and Linguistics & Literature. Photography lover. He's published "Strange Fate", Darkness Falls, "Loving Shadows", Dear You, "My Superheroes", KAPOW!, "Ages", About Time, The Red Penguin, USA; "Running", Strangest Fiction Volume One, USA; "The Cyrenian", Otherwise Engaged Literature and Arts Journal Volume 11, USA; "My Love's Gone On A Train" and "Treasure", Younker! The Flight Of Youthful Temptations, India; and "Green Mirrors", All Your Stories, December 2023, UK. He got shortlisted with his poem "Soldiers' Death Sentence" in Voice of Peace: 1st Intercontinental Poetry And Short Story Anthology 2021, The League of Poets.

You won't probably remember by Bohumila Ottova

“You won't probably remember all those years of plenty, when we had a house, garden, trees weighed down with fruit, hens, a doggie running around, a cat lying in delight in a sunspot and changing nonchalantly places to rest further, as the sunbeam moved, and all my brothers and sisters with their children would gather at our parents' house.

“You won't probably remember all the time we'd love to stay in the backyard, when all the work in the vineyards, fields and the orchard was done, sitting in armchairs, taking turns on a swinging chair for two, covered with a tent-fabric roof to protect us from the sun. The air was filled with the smell of thyme and mint and that of sun cream; a light breeze would bring wafts of smoke even though my sister would do her best to keep her hand with the lit cigarette under the table and to blow it away from us. Radio enhanced by the loudspeakers would carry around popular tunes, that we might sing to from time to time, either the whole song, the refrain or just a couple of words here and there, depending on what our memory would serve us, chasing away flies and wasps should they buzz around the little ones or our drinks. We'd be talking, having a dip in a pool, drinking ice coffees, draft soda that we all chipped in for, just to make sure we'd have a cool drink that even your older cousins could serve themselves into the colourful plastic cups with Minnies, Spidermen, Snow Queen or McQueen images; we would eat watermelons, ice creams, snacks that one sibling would prepare and mum and dad would play in the pool with you or another of your cousins, little arms winged with inflatable armbands, sitting with you on a cover in the shade under the apple trees or after spraying it with the cold water from the hose, jumping with you in their arms on the trampoline, while other little ones might pick up a fallen watermelon piece and eat it even if an ant was crawling over it, the music, the laughter, the joyous cries when your uncle splashed you with cold water.

“You won’t probably remember any of this, since those were the times when there was no reason to hide from the sun and its now lethal heat, when we could live above the ground, when the plants grew, watered by rain -not the acid out-pour that we have now- back then, to go outside, we didn’t need to wear spacesuits, nor require a clearance from the county for it, but what is hard to imagine for you now, there was enough water to pour it onto the gardens, fields, lawns (that’s how you called a grass that you’d make grow and cut to make it pretty) and flowers. Oh, how lovely it was, to grow something only because it’s beautiful and smells nice. It feels as if yesterday, and ages ago, as the Third World War, when four men with an oversized ego pressed on the red nuclear weapon buttons. Why? Because they could. Now, Billy, can you pass me my Ginkgo medication please? And please, be a darling and take some at the same time. You’re a grown-up man, you should think about it on your own. I may not see the light of the day anymore, living like a mole in this underground bunker settlement -and yet, we are the lucky ones, were it not for the wine keeping galleries, we’d be long dead- and once burrowed underground, we dug and dug to make it bigger and better, to ensure we’d be as many as possible to get increase our chances to survive; as you know, I’ve had my share of digging and so did your uncles and aunties, some of them succumbed to the earth slides -may Lord bless their souls- but you, although you grew up here, I think there’s a chance for you and for your baby Chuck as well. I believe you will find a way, like ginkgo, to outshine this disaster, survive and strive. Beauty and the light are bearers of hope for those who follow them. I feel weary. Thank you for that cover, dear. It’s a good idea to have a little lie-down. Let’s hope the pictures of the past will follow me into my dreams and, by wishful thinking, turn to reality. What else could my old bones wish for?”



Among other things, **Bohumila** has studied drama and modern literature. It is for the Strasbourg Write a Story competition in 2015 that she has written her first short story and made it as a runner-up. Starting with writing one story per year, Bohumila fell head over heels in love with it and has not stopped. Not yet. Twelve of her stories were published last year in international competitions paper anthologies, and others were listed in *Cranked Anvil Flash Fiction*, *Cranked Anvil Short Story*, *Willowdown Books Cunningham Short Story* or in *Flash 500* competitions. She is hopeful that this is only the beginning of an amazing path to publication of her own book.

The Cinema Goer by Andrew Senior

From the corner of her eye she saw that the straw was in his mouth. She sat very still, heart pounding, and waited.

The cinema was one of the only places where he let his guard down. A confined and darkened space where he could sit, on the very back row, and monitor the other cinema goers by the glow of the screen, or the burst of light when they opened the door, or the split-second concealment of the neon bulbs that lined the edges of the steps as they found their seats in the dark, all of them subject to his alert and unwarranted distrust.

It would soon be their ten-year anniversary and she remembered their first date at the cinema. A train had featured then too. It was only a few stops, jolting slowly along the line from her parent's house and only a few minutes from the station to the cinema. He was there already, pacing in the foyer when she arrived. The time he had said to meet meant they were 25 minutes late for the screening. To avoid all the adverts, he'd said. She didn't tell him that actually she quite liked that first bit, the quiet hush before the screen came to life, the rustle of everyone else's sweet packets, and

then the trailers for all the upcoming releases.

She turned her head enough to see that his eyelids were drooping. His chin was on his chest, head lolling. Spillage from the drink was faintly visible on the material of his outstretched legs. She waited a while longer, just to be sure, and then slowly pushed herself up and edged out into the aisle. She went cautiously down the steps, allowing the neon lights to guide her, expecting to hear his paranoid, accusatory tone in the darkness, asking her what she was doing. But of course, nothing came.

At the bottom of the stairs, she paused and glanced back. Pale faces stared at the screen, not her. He hadn't moved at all. She opened the door just enough to slip through, closing it quickly behind her, pulling impatiently against the hydraulic mechanism. As she walked away she heard the low, dramatic score of the film beginning to build.

In the toilets she rinsed out the cup that she had carefully prised from his hand, making sure all trace of the powdered-up sleeping pills was gone, and stuffed it in her handbag. Her fingers were shaking as she checked once again that the tickets were in her coat pocket.

A woman came out of one of the cubicles, oblivious, complimented the colour of her handbag and began washing her hands.

‘What are you seeing?’ asked the woman in a friendly tone.

She told her the name of the film.

‘Oo, we saw that last week! It was brilliant. It’s got an amazing twist at the end. We didn’t see it coming at all.’

The woman left. She looked at herself in the mirror but quickly lowered her eyes. The woman’s final words played in her head. Didn’t see it coming at all.

She passed through the foyer, where he had stood waiting for her nearly ten years ago, left the cinema and ran across the road to the railway station. Her suitcase was waiting in a locker. One day last week she had snuck it down from the attic whilst he was still at work, packed it and hidden it under the stairs. Then yesterday she’d left the house whilst he was in the shower, taking the suitcase with her and dropped it in the locker at the station on her way to the office. It was all carefully planned.

The departure board said the service was running on time. She would be far into her journey when the film ended, some two

hours from now, probably nearing her destination by the time he was finally awake; disorientated, she imagined, and at a loss as to where she had gone.

She sat in her allocated seat holding on to her handbag, the cup still inside. Over the tannoy the manager welcomed everyone on board as the train jolted into motion. Taking out her phone, she managed to steady her hand enough to type: “On my way.”

She rested her head back against the seat. The movement of the train rocked her gently. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to picture him slumped beneath the bright beam of dust-spiralling light as it projected the film that neither of them would see the end of, unaware that his distrust of her was, for the first time ever, actually justified. She breathed out a slow, quiet, sigh of relief, as quickly and smoothly the train gathered pace and sped away. At last she was doing it.



Andrew Senior is a writer of short literary and speculative fiction, based in Sheffield, UK. He lives with his wife and offspring and writes whenever he can find the time to do so. He prefers it to talking. His work has recently appeared, or is forthcoming, in various publications, including Isele Magazine, Postbox Magazine, Litro Magazine and the Honest Ulsterman. Visit andrewseniorwriting.weebly.com.

A Woman in Distress by David Sheldon

I sought out my reflection in a first-class storefront window, observing the changes from a safe distance. I needed to know that I was still handsome, albeit in a more mature way. Thirty-five years old, or was it thirty-six? I decided on the smaller number and took a detour on my way home. An artist friend had told me the village would change, 'You'll see, the place becomes more intimate after the tourists leave.' In the lampshade light of dusk, the echo of high heels and the bloom of a woman's perfume transformed two intersecting streets into an outdoor living room. Something calm and safe registered inside me, and I carried it further on, choosing at the last minute an obscure path no wider than a cart.

Along the way, an orange slip of curtain fluttered inside an open glass door. While watching it rise and fall, half-dreaming, I became aware of the silhouette of a woman. She stepped forward, pulling the curtain back on what had been, up until then, an innocent pleasure. If taken the wrong way, the *revealing* would change me into a voyeur. And yet, she *was* curious. The silent invitation in her eyes startled me out of my troubled marriage. It was like a shock of red seen from a slow-moving car. Suddenly, the wheels of my mind were gliding towards a mutual attraction. A wordless communication followed. Without the preoccupation of language, each subtle gesture was played out in slow motion. There was the freedom to engage in a whim. She swiveled her sandaled foot to the music spilling out of the open doorway. It was as if she were attempting to recover a portion of herself that had been trampled on.

For the truth resided in her loneliness, a sadness that she conveyed without embarrassment. There was nothing more alluring to me at the time than a woman in distress. How easy it was to become trapped in an unhealthy relationship when there was no one to offer a fresh perspective. What would it be like to give shelter to such beauty? I took a half-step toward the wilderness of her lithe body. But a mess of possible scenarios rushed in, clouding my

thinking. Now that I was in the grips of writing stories, I lived within the realm of cause and effect. Still, the unfolding excitement would almost be worth it. It would almost be worth hurting my wife. But the fear of damaging my children was curling like a wave inside me, turning me out, pushing me onward—the possibility of love receding with each heavy step home.

Life was unsettled for many of us. Millions of people had lost their livelihoods during the Great Recession. You would see furniture being loaded into a truck and know that your neighbors' lives were in a state of turmoil. Meanwhile, corporate executives were repackaging government bailouts into mansions, yachts, and diamond necklaces. Naturally, marriages were falling apart at an alarming rate. As a result of my financial difficulties, I was no different than this woman. Like her, I dreamed of a new life. Because if we don't imagine what we want, those who are in control will brutally give it to us.

Courage breeds creativity. That is a way of saying that the courageous heart is endlessly inventive and mysterious. This awakening allowed me to think differently, which might explain how my path eventually led me to a library in the south of France, where I sit now, writing down these words. A part of us wants this moment to be authentic. We want life, all of it, even the hard times, to lead to something more. Who has not fallen in love with that mysterious face partially hidden behind a curtain and then dreamed of another life? Michael Ondaatje writes, 'There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border we cross.'

And so, I began to write about this woman I barely knew. I invented her days and nights, described the letters she wrote but never sent to the man she loved, the urgent journeys they conceived out of passion, and the corridors of jasmine they walked after a concert. She wanted order restored to her life. She was craving that perspective that affirmed beauty was everywhere. She needed to be

possessed anew, reread, and reinterpreted as a mistress, and this exchange of social conventions for the potential of spiritual growth transported her into a new realm.

When I was done, I walked out of my library and found that I was no longer married, yet my life continued mysteriously. Standing there beneath the Sycamore tree, I imagined the woman pulling a chair up to the window after making love, watching the rain fall, her mind demanding nothing, her body content. At that moment, I wanted to go back in time and recover her name. A name that I would follow up a limestone stairway leading to a one-bedroom flat, an arched ceiling dating back to the Renaissance, flowers in a vase, the rain drops running down the window lit by a lamp post.

David Sheldon After a successful career as a custom home builder, I moved to France with my two daughters and focused on the craft



of writing. I have a Bachelor of English degree from Northern Arizona University, emphasizing creative writing. I recently finished my first novel, *Epiphaneia*. While looking for an agent, I am sending you three short stories (one flash fiction). *A Woman in Distress* deals with those chance moments we wish we would have acted upon. *Woman on a Couch* is about a journalist whose life is transformed by the experience of interviewing a famous singer/songwriter. *Life in a Northern California Town* centers on a frustrated artist making a living buying and selling homes. He meets his mercurial neighbor, Billy, and his perspective is changed by her comings and goings.

Jonesy by Samuel Smith

You're about to step out of the air lock one cold, brittle morning when you notice there's a small bone on the doormat. You crouch down to get a better look. It resembles the leg bone of a small animal, but it's been picked clean, exposing the translucent marrow at either end. You step out and punt it into the fake shrubberies that line your front drive.

A week later, you open it to see another bone, twice the size of the previous one. It looks like the ribcage of a bird, but with small hooks at the end of each rib. You once again kick it into the bushes and go about your day.

A week later, you open the door and gasp. Facing you with yawning eye sockets is a skull. This time, you pick it up, and the heft of the thing leaves you in no doubt that it's real, not some reject from a high school science lab. The protuberances over the eyes and the twin sets of teeth make it hard to fit in an average shoebox, but you manage it after breaking off one of the jaws. Burying it in the back garden whilst your quickening breaths steam up your helmet, you pat it flat then try to forget about it.

Another week goes by, and you open your front door one grey and moody morning to find the entire skeleton of a mysterious, unidentifiable creature draped across the drive. Its skull is horribly distended, teeth the size of hunting knives erupting from both jaws. It has four arms, each ending in splayed claws. Its ribcage is the size of a wardrobe, and it has a great sweeping scythe of a tail that ends in huge barbs. It looks enormous next to your modest ship. Just as you're wondering how you're going to bury this monstrosity in the garden, you glimpse movement near the creature's ribcage. You

flinch as your cat leaps onto the thing's elongated skull, and flicks it's tail across the empty eye sockets.

“Good kitty”, you stutter, reaching forwards to tickle Jonesy behind the ears. “But can you please stop now?”

The cat purrs as if in agreement, but the steely look of determination in its eyes tells a different story. You make a mental note to ring the council and ask them to increase the anti-grav shields around the pet cemetery.



Samuel Smith is a former Creative Writing and Scriptwriting student and has previously experimented with both community radio broadcasting and stand-up comedy. His stories will make you laugh and think, and he enjoys experimenting with convention to create offbeat scenarios and characters.

Don't be Scared by Claire Jaggard

I eat binoculars.

I know I shouldn't, but they're just too deliciously crunchy to resist.

Besides, the tourists bring me new pairs so regularly that I'm sure they mean them to be treats.

Sometimes we play a little game. They start by brandishing the delicate morsels as if the main purpose of binoculars were to help admire the scenery. They drape the chewy straps around their necks, lift the soft rubbery ends to their eyes, fiddle with the tangy metallic rings and gaze through the glassy lozenges.

Eventually – it always happens – they put the binoculars down beside them and pretend they've forgotten all about them. I know it's a ruse, and while they avert their eyes, I reach out to hook in my prize.

I like to watch the tourists lingering on the shore, greedily drinking in their surroundings while I savour the binoculars, piece by tasty piece. They sweep excited arms across the backdrop of heather clad hills, point up towards the buzzards drawing lazy circles between the clouds and crane their necks down the length of the loch to see where the old ruined castle teeters on the edge of the promontory.

Showing my gratitude for their gifts is tricky; doing so can cause the tourists to leave in a hurry, and I don't want to scare them. Subtlety is the key. I don't raise my head above water more than once a decade or so. Whenever I do, there's a flurry of excitement, a flash of cameras and they rush away. More often, I simply send a ripple towards my benefactors. I have so much water to play with, it doesn't take much to streak a satisfying wake across the mirror.

They always notice. I see them pause and look around, pretending to explain away the ripple. It must be the way the wind is swirling, they say, or maybe a small bore set up by the tide. I smile to myself. No, it's just me.

At the end of one long hot summer, the day the rain came, I was gifted a particularly succulent pair of binoculars. These had been hung for decades and their leather casing was worn to softness and infused with a trace of tobacco. The couple who brought them looked happy and relaxed, as if they were enjoying their tour of the Highlands and each other's company. They must have made a special excursion to present their offering to me. So delighted were they to have found the loch and so mesmerised by its mysterious beauty, that snatching the binoculars from under their noses was child's play.

I was particularly proud of the ripple I sent as thanks. It rose as if from nowhere and raced across the smooth expanse right to their feet, causing them to jump back on the shingle and laugh in surprise. Wry smiles were exchanged, shoulders shrugged, heads tilted. I hoped they understood my meaning.

The heavens chose that moment to open. The couple grimaced at the sky as raindrops began to pucker the loch's surface and they ran away, back up the steep steps towards the road.

It is a naughty habit, but since I discovered binoculars taste so much nicer than people, there's no reason to be scared.



Claire Jaggard lives in Cromhall, South Gloucestershire, and is a broadcast and online journalist. She started writing for pleasure as well as work when her boys left home and was delighted to reach the Final 10 at Stroud Short Stories within a few months. Her short stories have since been published in an anthology and online and paper magazines, and broadcast by BBC Upload. She's currently researching ways to commit murder for her first cosy mystery.



TRAVEL TALES & STORIES

The Futile Search for Pearls of Beauty by Roger Knight

Before the discovery of oil in Bahrain, pearling was it's main industry and export. It's pearls were renowned for their size, colour, lustre and beauty and were sought after from around the world.

Pearl divers, lean as whippets, wearing only a loin cloth would set off into the Arabian Gulf aboard their pearling luggers to scour the sea bed with their pearling baskets, often for extended periods of time, undertaking multiple dives in a day.

Laden with oyster shells, the contents would be spilled upon the deck and prised apart, to hopefully reveal their prize, as though they were the spoils of some maritime treasure hunt.

Sadly, most of those oyster beds have been ransacked and plundered, despite the demise of the industry which became eclipsed by oil. Fortunately there are still a few remaining oyster beds to be found around Al Dar Island, where we would lift oyster shells and take them by the arm full up to the beach to examine their contents, mostly in vain for that all elusive pearl of beauty. Their discarded shells, like so many scored out scratch cards that produce only disappointment.

Sometimes a few miniscule pearls would be discovered, but now, the only remaining pearls of beauty and size are to be found around the necks and in the ear lobes of those women who were the fortunate recipients of them, when they were in abundance, relics of a bygone era that still radiate their undimmed beauty from the sea.



Roger Knight Having become a reluctant retiree, I have embarked upon a replacement career of writing, now that I become stuck in those valleys of reflection. To date I have published one Collection of poems, Poems of Passage and have had several poems and short stories published in various anthologies.

Magical Mountains by Jun A. Alindogan

My initial foray into scenic mountain landscape came during my first church-related trip in Seoul in the early 90's. The city is basically enveloped by mountains that gives you a sense of balance between nature and progress. In the suburbs, so-called prayer mountains dot the area with individuals of all ages and gender who come to seek God's solutions to personal and social problems or to offer thanksgiving for grace, usually at dawn. What was impressive was the place's open doors at any hour and on any day to welcome seekers. I only came to realize the significance of mountains and faith as I grew older. Mountains provide relief and calm to life's perplexities by offering a mutual relationship to an individual's faith by serving as a bridge to God and vice-versa, and by acknowledging that mountains are only magical because of the Creator. In my trip to Hong Kong in the early 2000s, mountains are a part of the bustling island life in a seemingly peaceful co-existence with skyscrapers, the sea, infrastructure, and social connections.

As I gravitated towards my 60th year, I longed for mountainous areas to help me out with my intermittent allergic rhinitis. Mine is air and dust-induced so a good quality of air is needed to avoid my condition

from becoming too permanent. In addition, mountains are also a type of escape from developing mobility issues as well as a good source of internal and external communication with oneself and nature.

Locally, most of the mountains I have been, are located in Rizal province, a site of waterfalls, forests, lake, rivers, and farms, which is a few hours away, east of Manila. The mountains look the same from afar but even from a distance, the distinct character of each mountain is still evident, from its spikes, contours, color, to its tower and presence. In the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, to grasp for fresh air was a luxury and when an opportunity opened, I and three friends travelled on motorbikes to a raw mountain campsite surrounded by wild sugar cane grass that allows you to see skyscrapers in the city and notice its clean air and clear sky. It was a version of Tagaytay city with nipa huts on slopes where you could eat an all-day-breakfast meal upon ordering. The area stood proud that however tall and advanced the buildings have become, the mountain still proved its dominance.

Farther upland is another campsite where you are forced to hike on stony rough and dusty road for about half an hour to a slow walker

like me though the road is littered with a few residential houses on both sides and unbridled dogs. The landscape is different upon arrival as the view on top, juts out to a forested hill to your right and to your left, a big lake and in front, a field. There is also a lone but tall tree beside a wooden table, where you enjoy either an unobstructed sunrise or sunset over some coffee, soda, or beer. The mountain's majesty is palpable here.

Post pandemic, I and other senior citizens and a few younger ones spent the Holy Week holidays in a protected mountain campsite in executive cottages which had a porch at the back, facing a mountain range. A thick forest covered the area that caused its cool breeze and a lettuce garden showcase that displayed what it means to be organic. The whole mountain site is fluid and seamless in its capacity to build good rapport with other elements of nature: be it the wind, the birds, the insects, and the earth. It is a kind of respect that we should see more in our human relationships despite conflict and misunderstanding.

In my residential mountainous terrain, the charm is still present in a few pockets of forests on select mountains which will soon disappear due to unregulated quarrying. Mountains will avenge

themselves to human exploitation in catastrophic consequences of both floods and erosion and spew their power upon negligence and abandonment.

Intermittently, I travel with a good friend in search of upland landscape to unwind and just enjoy nature without worries for the future. The windmills we have visited beside a not-too-deep cliff reminded me to harness the simplicity of energy amidst a body of water on descent and on mountains upon ascent.

On another trip, on our way, to a pine-tree-mountain side, the fog permeated the location even in a defiling summer heat. No amount of intense temperatures can prevent the mountain from imposing its magical allure.

As one goes to closer to a mountain site, a mystery unfolds that is hard to decipher so acceptance and submission are necessary for bits of emotional and spiritual comprehension.

Mountains are magical in the sense that one does not get tired of its presence, however, many times you climb or view particular mountains or ranges as they always offer a space for self and communal introspection. The magic never dies; neither does it fade.



Mr Manuel A. Alindogan, Jr. or Jun A. Alindogan is currently Academic Writing and TESOL professor at the Asian School of Development and Cross- Cultural Studies based in the Philippines. He is also the Academic Director of the Expanded Alternative Learning Program of Empowered East, a Rizal-province based NGO in the same country and the founder of Speechsmart Online that specializes in English test preparation courses. He is a freelance writer and a member of the Freelance Writers' Guild of the Philippines (FWGP)

The Great British Seaside by J.A. Newman

In the Victorian era, resorts like Margate in Kent provided a welcome break from the choking fumes of the industrial towns and cities. Tourists flocked to these fashionable resorts, aided by the railways, to breathe in the healthy sea air and to stroll along the esplanade or the pier which was considered good for the constitution. In response to such high demand, boarding houses and hotels began springing up all along the coast. Until the 1980s terraces of guest houses lined the streets, all proudly displaying 'No Vacancies' signs in their windows. Sadly most have now disappeared owing to the advent of the readily available package holidays to foreign destinations.

Living in Kent and south east London from the 1950s to the 1970s meant we often spent a Sunday on one of the Thanet beaches, but if the mood took us to stay longer we had to drive up and down all the roads trying to find a guesthouse with vacancies. One day during the 1970s my husband, young daughter and I stumbled across a pretty B&B tucked away down an unmade road leading to the beach. In their window a sign displayed 'Vacancies' so I knocked and was welcomed in by a very homely lady. We stayed the night and thoroughly enjoyed it, so much so that we stayed on several more occasions. A few years later the owners retired and sold the house much to our disappointment. Since then I have stayed in a variety of places in this area including holiday cottages and caravans. One guest house, in Westgate-on-sea, was a particular favourite of mine and I stayed there on a number of occasions on my own and later, I introduced my daughter to the delights of this Edwardian resort. Being in close proximity to the sea front, it was wonderful to get up early and stroll along the water's edge before breakfast and have it all to ourselves. Sadly, after witnessing a change of hands four times over thirty years, this guesthouse finally closed down. Westgate was also my father's favourite part of Thanet and we spent many a day on this beach as a family. We even rented a holiday flat there one year when I was fifteen. I was beginning to feel my feet and

acquainted myself with the geography of the town. I have never forgotten it. I'm delighted to say that the Edwardian high street still has canopied shops and the little Carlton cinema is still in operation.

Broadstairs is another favourite. I was seven and my sister was four months old when we first stayed here as a family. I have been back many times and am pleased to say it hasn't lost its old world charm. Last year I met up with a writing friend and stayed in a B&B for the Dickens Festival which has been held every year in June since 1937. Charles Dickens visited Broadstairs regularly from 1837 until 1859 and the Dickens House Museum holds many artefacts relating to his life there. Indeed this is the home of Betsy Trotwood in David Copperfield, the novel he wrote whilst staying in Bleak House overlooking the harbour and Viking Bay. Another famous person was former Prime Minister Ted Heath who was born in Broadstairs. He used to moor his boat *Morning Cloud* in the harbour and drink in the Tatar Frigate.

My friend had never been to Broadstairs but she loved it. I was delighted to show her all my favourite haunts including Morelli's ice cream parlour. Although updated, it still has wicker chairs, jukebox, Formica topped tables and pink leatherette booths; a real step back in time. Whilst we waited in the queue we watched mesmerised as the assistant created a work of art with three different flavoured ice creams decorated with fruit, swirly cream and wafers in a huge glass. After enjoying a knickerbocker glory on this very warm day, we walked to the Pierremont Gardens for the Dickens parade. Pierremont Hall was where the young Princess Victoria stayed with her mother the Duchess of Kent between 1826 and 1836 for their summer holidays. The costumes included a lot of Dickens' characters including Fagin, Marley's ghost, and Queen Victoria in all her splendour being driven in an elaborate black coach and horses. Some of the characters extended their parade down the high street and through the Victoria gardens, situated high up on the cliff top and, at the bandstand, the musicians were clad in old fashioned striped bathing costumes. There were also some craft stalls in the Victoria gardens. In the evening we met up with my brother and my nephew, who live in Thanet, for a meal in a bistro and caught up with

their news. The town comes alive on an evening and has an almost continental vibe. On the Sunday morning we caught a bus into Margate and visited the Turner Contemporary. The artist JMW Turner loved the quality of the light in Margate and stayed in a guesthouse on the sea front many times. The Turner Contemporary gallery now stands on this spot and showcases work by contemporary artists including Anthony Gormley and Tracy Emin, 'Margate's daughter'. After some refreshment at their excellent café that overlooks Margate main sands, and armed with our bottles of water, we walked to the Shell Grotto with its fascinating history dating back to ancient times and speculation as to its original use. Afterwards, we ventured to the Margate caves deep underground, where we could cool down whilst listening to stories of pirates and espionage. On the Sunday evening we saw an excellent performance of Great Expectations at the Sarah Thorne theatre which was a short walk from our guesthouse in Broadstairs.

My parents moved from Bexley to Margate in 1971 with my 10year old brother. In those early days I was able to board a weekday train at Peckham and take my young daughter to visit them for the day. This was the 'Margate special' that boasted £2.50 for a return ticket! Apart from the obvious, the big attraction was Dreamland and in the evening the pleasure gardens became magical, illuminated with fairy lights. However, this was not to last. These gardens were removed in the late 1970s to make way for more rides. The amusement park went into decline in the early 2000s until it closed down altogether. It reopened in 2015 after a major refurbishment of the Grade-II listed scenic railway but sadly my favourite rides, the river caves and the miniature railway, no longer exist. Incidentally, the dilapidated Dreamland cinema features in Sam Mendes' film 'Empire of Light' with Olivia Coleman and Colin Firth.

My brother has remained living in Margate and has his own shop stocking comics and everything Science Fiction. This is located in the Old Quarter of Margate where you can buy anything from a cappuccino to vintage clothing. There is also an excellent book shop situated within the old town bank and a variety of attractive cafés and bars with outdoor seating. Margate is enjoying a revival after

going through a slump in the 1990s/2000s. Once again, tourists and day-trippers from London are flocking to Thanet and boutique hotels are springing up.

The Thanet coast holds a lot of memories for me. Westgate and Broadstairs in particular, are pure nostalgia.



J A Newman has published five books: NO ONE COMES CLOSE a memoir, BAY OF SECRETS a family mystery and two rom-coms: WHERE THERE'S A WILL and the sequel LOSING THE WILL. Her latest work is her anthology THE OTHER SIDE OF LIFE. She has written many articles for This England and Evergreen magazines and The Writers and Readers' magazine. She has also had historical short stories

published in two anthologies for the Caradon Hill Heritage Project and one for the charity Help4Heroes. She was born and raised in Bexley, Kent and enjoyed a hairdressing career in various locations before retiring to South East Cornwall where she found her writing voice. She is currently living in West Norfolk with her husband. Her blog: julieannnewman.wordpress.com and Facebook @J.A.Newman.author

How Far Do You Need to Travel? by Bohumila Ottova



What does it really mean to travel? Is it going to the far shores, exploring foreign lands? Or is it simply to distance ourselves from the common, from the ordinary?

I realised I needed to take a short break from my everyday routine, to cut myself off the day-to-day umbilical cord of work, home, or being a couch potato with my daughter. It was high time to sever the lifeline of comfort and take a daring step forward.

Sometimes, our silent plea to the universe resonates and brings forth

unexpected opportunities.

For me, it was a friend suggesting that we go together on a writing retreat. It was only then that I remembered a special place. In 2018, I have been here on several occasions. However, as anybody else, I got caught up in mindless activities, and with help from the pandemic, I have somehow forgotten about it. As if the road had overgrown with rose bushes and fallen into oblivion.

We quickly reserved our rooms, as we liked the idea of such a lovely getaway at less than an hour-drive from our homes.

What is this place? “Le Jardin de la Ferme Bleue” meaning “The Garden of the Blue Farm”. In the



Uttenhoffen borough of France, there is a stunning Alsatian half-timbered house painted in cobalt blue, as if Hokusai's wave washed over it.



While the farmhouse and outbuildings have their own charm, it is the garden truly inviting you to travel. And what a garden it is! 'Regular garden', with its boxwood topiaries artfully trimmed in symmetrical forms, where intentionally planted flowers prosper with those brought by visiting birds, finding their own natural spots.

The atmosphere on the grounds is unique, with its trees, plants and bushes, as well as statues, benches, and delightful chairs. You're unsure where to look or which leaves to brush. You only know you wish to linger there; let the wisteria scent to envelop you, try to fix in memory the cascade of its gracious strands of flowers.





You'll find here also many little nooks and crannies where you can sit, write, read and absorb the peaceful ambiance with every fibre of your being. The birds sing tirelessly, pouring their hearts out. Bees and bumblebees hum a tune with their wings about the work done and the work ahead. The dandelions achenes drift in the gentle breeze, and you just wish to find a way to lock in this precious sensation of appeasement, the feeling that you are part of a serene sanctuary. Close your eyes.

Embrace the sun's rays. Allow the wind to give you a delightful chill and indulge in the symphony of the bird songs.

This is your destination. Your mind roams freely and transforms everything along the way. Even drinking a cup of tea in this scenery feels ceremonial. All your senses are heightened, in symbiosis with this harbour of peace.





But that isn't all. Each journey has a power of metamorphosis when you meet people with whom you connect on a deeper level than merely exchanging platitudes of small talk. We were fortunate to be invited to dine with the creators, craftsmen, and keepers of this enchanting site.

There's Jean-Louis, the landscape architect, who

plants, trims and gives the loving care to the garden, which rewards him generously with its lush green beauty.

There's Alain, the architect, professional ballet dancer and lampshades creator.

Combining their multiple talents and passions, they breathe the soul and life into the ravishing garden and into the home of vibrant blue that seems to mirror Chagall's skies.

To travel entails more than merely walking or driving. It allows you to shift your eyes, change your point of view, to raise your head, or, on the contrary, to squat down. It implies observing both the grand and the infinitely small. It is about letting the door ajar, so that your inner child may peek out, place its hands cautiously on the doorframe, and seeing that it's safe – no dragons around- venture outside, hop for joy, and just be.

Travel is about the majestic, the noble, and the extraordinary ordinary. That is why the geographical distance doesn't matter. Take a compass if you will. Draw a twenty-five-mile radius around your home. Explore the nearby magical places you haven't visited yet. You figure that because it's just a stone's throw away, you can go there anytime. So, you don't.



Be smarter than me. Turn 'anytime' into 'today'. Your new adventure starts with a first step.



Among other things, **Bohumila** has studied drama and modern literature. It is for the Strasbourg Write a Story competition in 2015 that she has written her first short story and made it as a runner-up. Starting with writing one story per year, Bohumila fell head over heels in love with it and has not stopped. Not yet. Twelve of her stories were published last year in international competitions paper anthologies, and others were listed in *Cranked Anvil Flash Fiction*, *Cranked Anvil Short Story*, *Willowdown Books Cunningham Short Story* or in *Flash 500* competitions. She is hopeful that this is only the beginning of an amazing path to publication of her own book.



ARTICLES

The Jack and Jill of all Trades: Trials and Tribulations of a Teacher by Sarah Das Gupta

So many people deem themselves experts on education. After all the majority of them have been to school and as parents have sent their own children to school. So, they must be knowledgeable and well-informed on the subject. Covid, as in so many areas, proved this theory wrong. As a teacher who worked in many very different classrooms for over sixty years, I have long wanted to say, 'if only you knew'!

No, teachers do not have short hours. I left my house at 7am every morning to print off work sheets, finish off marking or prepare the classroom. I arrived back at 18.00 hours if I was lucky. More often I was attending a meeting, dealing with book orders or running extra-curricular activities – in my case drama or debating clubs, book societies, extra lessons for students who had missed classes. Sometimes the day would only end by midnight after accompanying students to a theatre trip or concert. This can be an exhausting experience, checking you haven't left little Johnnie in the loo or a couple of girls did not get off the subway.

Yes, but what about those long vacations? Most teachers spend time catching up on the latest opinions or new theories in their particular subject. They prepare new syllabuses and often new subjects. I worked in India for a number of years. I was once foolish enough to suggest to the head mistress that introducing Politics would be beneficial. I arrived back in school after the summer vacation to find it was on the syllabus and I was teaching it! Moreover, it had proved a popular option. I was teaching a class of over thirty students on the roof, with a corrugated iron cover. Summers in Kolkata are rather hot and India has the longest constitution in the world.

Ah! You say but it's so rewarding developing students' minds. Well, in the case of some students, it can be tricky to locate the mind in the first place. One difficulty is the range of abilities in the same class. English, my subject, is frequently 'mixed ability'. This means you have the full range of academic ability in the same class. This

presents the greatest challenge to a teacher. Suppose you are teaching a Shakespeare play. At one end of the class are students who struggle to spell the dramatist's name and at the other youngsters who want a list of critical work on the play.

The number of students who read widely and independently has steadily fallen over the last fifty years. Television, computer games, social media provide less demanding entertainment. Often when you hand out a book, the first comment is, 'It doesn't have any pictures, Miss.' The second being, 'It's very long. Do we have to read all of it?' The third is, 'Is there a movie of it, not black and white?' When I once asked an adult evening class to write a book review, some of the group looked anxious, 'Oh, you mean a library book,' one said. Obviously, there were no books in the house.

It has always surprised me that parents complain about discipline or rather the lack of it. At parents' meetings, nearly always at the end of a long, tiring day, you have one or two, usually fathers, who begin, 'When I was at school . . .' You then prepare to listen to a lesson about discipline and behaviour. The odd thing is you often find that that same parent cannot deal with his teenager(s). He expects a school to teach his own intractable kids. Over the years, it has been my experience that the parents of the most academically gifted want to spend hours hearing the teacher praising their prodigy to the skies. The parents of kids who set fire to the lab, who punch a teacher or pour gravy on another student's strawberries, never turn up to meetings.

Of course, you always have the opportunity to write your assessment on the dreaded termly report, one of many areas where computers have come to the rescue. I remember teaching in a school where the report consisted of one large piece of paper where each teacher wrote a comment using a fountain pen, no biros. If one teacher made an error, every single comment had to be rewritten. It was a wonder the reports ever got sent home.

Writing reports is only one of many tasks faced by the teacher. There is that dreadful word, 'homework'. Aptly named as the more homework they set, the more 'homework' for the teachers. Most either stagger home with a pile of books to mark, or sit after school, wondering why they asked 7A to write about, 'My Christmas Presents'. Surely no one was crazy enough to give anything to Max Croft- he was the one who set the lab on fire.

Sometimes I look back and think, 'How did I do this for 60 years? How many exams did I set and correct? How many school lunches did I eat? How many times have I taught 'Macbeth'? Yet I also think how many students did I help to succeed? How many students read and enjoyed great writing? How many became independent, critical thinkers? In the end teaching is rewarding in terms of the influence teachers have on students' lives. Though certainly not in terms of payment.

If only more people understood the responsibilities teachers have and how many masks they wear: teacher, social worker, counsellor, psychologist, advisor, they might be more valued.

PS I retired at 80 and am still in touch with students entering their seventies.



Sarah Das Gupta is a retired teacher from Cambridge, UK. She has also lived and taught in India and Tanzania. Her work has been published in many magazines and anthologies including: 'The American Literary Review' , 'Songs of Eretz', 'New English Review', 'Pure Haiku', 'Green Ink', 'Carmina', Lothlorian', 'Literaria', 'Berlin Review',

'Black Poppy' and others.

Why The Stories We Tell and Write About Ourselves Really Matter by Roger Knight

We are all storytellers. We all live in a network of stories. There isn't a stronger connection between people than storytelling.

Jimmy Neil Smith

We all have a story to tell or write about ourselves. How authentic and accurate it is, rests with the listener or reader and their interpretation of it.

The theory of narrative identity, according to the French philosopher and literary critic Paul Ricoeur [1913-2005] attempts to answer the question of how persons maintain their identity throughout their lives.

It proposes that who we are is constituted by or formed from the stories we tell about ourselves. We make sense of events and occurrences in our lives through storytelling, particularly those watershed moments that can become cathartic, making ourselves the protagonist perhaps in an irrevocable life changing event.

By telling or writing this story about ourselves, our sense of self can emerge, one that hopefully might be a bit more insightful, acquiring a more objective understanding of who we really are. This is part of a continuous work of self-interpretation and appraisal which we can both make and discover through such stories.

Narratives can be seen as testimonies, possibly even confessions where some atonement might be sought. In a way, this may be a means of attempting to make more sense of ourselves, as there is often ongoing revision and editing of our story.

We are all entangled in narratives by which we try continuously to make sense of ourselves and our passing place in the world, and in the end, we may never have a full and final answer to who we really are.

The quest for identity is innate and compelling and is a constant driver to continue writing our story and the many episodes that can encompass it.

As we become more aware of our mortality, there is I suspect a wish for our story to endure, to be passed down through generations, like the stories that abound in many ancient communities, as a means of keeping their culture alive.

Such an example is the aboriginal people disclosing their dreaming stories to pass on imperative knowledge, cultural values and traditions to future generations.

Perhaps there is an unconscious, unspoken hope that our stories could still be heard and read after our passing, by successive generations who might be intrigued or even inspired by them. An unrealistic ambition or sheer vanity perhaps?

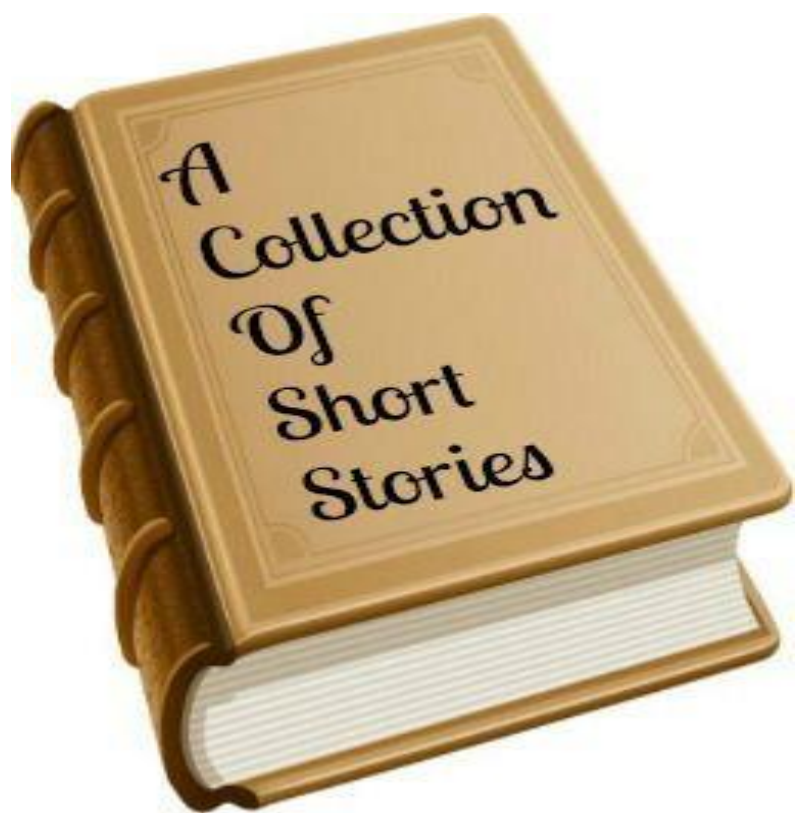
In the final analysis for me though, it is simply having the satisfaction that for the most part, my story has already been written, which has given me some degree of existential meaning, making sense of where my life took me, what I chose to do with my allotted time and who I chose to share my journey with.

As well, my stories reflect both adversity and enchantment, situations in which I believe we do discover our true selves, testament to the paradoxical nature of life.

Herman Hesse, I think expressed this sentiment perfectly, 'my inner life has been of my own making. I deserve its sweetness and bitterness and accept full responsibility for it.'



Roger Knight Having become a reluctant retiree, I have embarked upon a replacement career of writing, now that I become stuck in those valleys of reflection. To date I have published one Collection of poems, Poems of Passage and have had several poems and short stories published in various anthologies.



A
Collection
Of
Short
Stories

Stalked by Gary Beck

“Don’t answer that,” I told my wife, when the house phone rang for the fifth time early that morning.

When she had answered the first four times, whoever was at the other end waited long enough for her to know someone was on the line, then disconnected. This had been going on for several weeks and had become a growing irritation. Caller I.D. had been blocked, so we couldn’t tell who was harassing us.

“We may as well let the answering machine pick up,” Madeline suggested. “This way we can screen the calls and only answer those we want to.”

It was a sensible, practical solution to the problem and I tried to suppress my anger at this persistent phone intruder. It took another two weeks for the frequency of the calls to diminish, then they became sporadic and we thought the situation was resolved. We started answering the phone again, but a few days later the anonymous calls resumed. We had to be at the office by 8:30 a.m., so we didn’t have much time for our daily routine to be distracted by annoying phone calls.

We both worked at the Outreach Center. Madeline was the executive director and I was the program officer. The Center provided social services to homeless families with children who were placed in temporary shelters, without services. We provided referrals for housing, medical and dental treatment and other needs. Somehow we began giving meals and life skills workshops to several of the family’s children and we needed a social worker to deal with a case load that kept growing.

Madeline and I met at Gotham University, in New York City. We were very different people. She was a dedicated jock who believed in liberal causes. I was a computer and gamer type who believed that child molesters should get the death penalty. My sister had been molested when she was seven years old and it took her a long time to get over it. Madeline was opposed to the death penalty and we argued about it often, never reaching a compromise.

But we found many things in common. She loved poetry and got me to read her favorites, Blake, Emily Dickenson, Whitman, Rimbaud, Rilke and others. I liked them. I introduced her to the world of gaming and she actually got involved in a series of women's war games and was a fierce competitor. One big quality we had in common was we both wanted to serve the needy.

In our junior year, a close friend, Warren, inherited a huge amount of money from a trust fund when he turned 21. He half jokingly asked our opinion what he should do with his new fortune and Maddie instantly replied:

“When we graduate, fund a program to help the homeless. Charlie and I will run it.”

‘Wait a second! What do you think you’re doing, committing me to some kind of project?’ But I didn’t say it. I only thought it. From that moment on she took charge of our lives, which now included romance and marriage. Warren didn’t know how tenacious Maddie could be. After graduation and our wedding, where he was our best man, she persuaded him to put up \$150,000 a year for five years to start a not-for-profit organization to serve homeless families with children. After that we would be on our own.

We rented an office and workshop space in the East 30’s, in an old commercial loft building. Then we reluctantly gave up our dorm rooms that had been so comfortable for the last four years, rented an apartment in an old walk-up tenement building off Third Avenue in the twenties, and began a new life. We quickly got more and more involved with the homeless children, many of whom we discovered were gifted and talented. So we started a computer learning center and more and more kids came to us. A lot of them weren’t in school, so one of our goals was to get them all into classrooms. The problem was we didn’t have enough time or personnel to deal with all the needs and services the kids required.

If we wanted to continue working with the kids, we needed someone capable to help with them. That’s when the complications grew. \$150,000 a year may seem like a lot to some people, but after rent, \$2,600 per month, Madeline’s executive director salary,

\$30,000, my \$28.,000, we'd have to hire a social worker, at \$35,000. All the other expenses, insurance, electricity, the list went on and on. This meant we didn't have much money for a project coordinator. After some quick grant writing and Mad's funding efforts we raised \$15,000, so we could pay someone \$24,000, which would mean our stretching every dollar for the rest of our expenses. But we started interviewing candidates.

The kids were mostly black or hispanic, so we wanted to hire someone who could relate to them. However, the only qualified applicants wouldn't work for that low salary. And I couldn't blame them. We finally hired a bright young black woman, a recent college graduate, on a two week trial basis. She seemed to be afraid of the kids and quit after the first week, without explanation. Then we hired a young latino man, but we found out he was bribing the kids to participate in life skills workshops, with trips to McDonalds and promises of new sneakers. Mad fired him. We were getting desperate. I was leading most of the life skills workshops, which I enjoyed immensely, even though I didn't always know what I was doing. Yet I didn't have time to do program development, grant writing and outreach to all the agencies and services we needed. Then Michael Donnigan applied for the job.

Michael was in his 40's, with a history of working for not-for-profit public service organizations. He had a great resume, outstanding references that Mad called and he made a very positive impression. So we hired him. He started his two week trial period on a Monday and spent the first few days going through our records and program guidelines, which seemed to take a lot of time away from the kids. Then somehow he always had a conflict when it was time to do something with the kids. This was disturbing, but I talked to him and he seemed to understand what was required. On Thursday he took the kids to Madison Square Park, then he didn't come in on Friday. We only found out later that day that while they were in the park he yelled at the kids for making too much noise. Some local parents tried to calm him, but he cursed them and stormed off abandoning the kids. Of course we decided to fire him.

He didn't come in Monday. I phoned him, but only got voice mail and left a message asking him to call me. He didn't. When he

didn't call or show on Tuesday, I phoned him and left a message firing him. I would have preferred to do it face to face, but he didn't give me any choice. Our good judgment was confirmed when some of the kids told us he ordered them around nastily and treated them disrespectfully. He finally came to the office on Friday and wanted two weeks pay, as well as severance. I told him we'd pay him for the first week, even though he walked off the job on Thursday, but there was no severance, since he wasn't a regular employee, but was hired on a trial basis. He took his check, told me he'd sue us for wrongful termination and stormed out. We were relieved to see him go.

We hired a young black man who wanted to get children's services experience and he fit right in from the first day. He liked and respected the kids and they really took to him. We forgot about our previous employee, until we got a subpoena to appear in court. This was a new experience for us. I had never been to court and Mad's vast experience had been when she paid a traffic ticket once. We did some quick research on the internet, learned we needed a lawyer and Mad contacted a legal referral agency. They told her to ask large law firms for a pro bono attorney who would handle our case. Mad called several firms and one responded, assigning a young associate to meet with us. After a mutually satisfactory meeting, Mary Takagawa took our case.

Mary, a recent Columbia Law School graduate, was barely 5 feet tall, but full of energy and resolve. She had played the cello since childhood, the instrument almost bigger than she, and was sensitive to the plight of her clients. She admitted she knew nothing about labor or wrongful termination law but researched enthusiastically online. The first hearing was to determine if the plaintiff's case had sufficient merit to proceed. The judge, actually a lawyer doing court service, an older white woman with an abrupt, almost nasty manner, terrified Mary, who was almost tongue tied. We had hoped for a dismissal, but this was not to be.

The judge scheduled a hearing in a month and Donnigan cordially said goodbye to us, as if this was nothing personal. Mary apologized for her inadequacy, admitting she never appeared in front of a judge before, and vowed to do better next time. Mary was

more confident at the next hearing, which had a new judge, a very pleasant, reasonable woman, who stated that not-for-profit public services groups deserved a fair chance to be heard. Mary presented a basic case, outlining the terms of employment and the circumstances that led to termination. Donnigan contradicted those facts, raved about how he was injured on the job and exploited. He presented an alternate scenario and claimed there was no two week trial period. It was our word against his. The judge scheduled a hearing in a month, at which time we could present evidence proving our claims. After abusing us verbally in front of the judge, he bid us a courteous farewell, assuming a lawyer's persona, which Mary thought was crazy.

At the next hearing we brought letters from former applicants and our current employee, attesting they were told of a two week trial period. Donnigan, citing case law, insisted that the letters didn't allow cross examination, accused us of forgery, and insisted we were colluding against him. He accused us of nepotism, husband and wife getting government money and exploiting the children. He called us dirty names and when Mary objected to his tirade he told the judge he was being persecuted by a big firm lawyer. Mary's heartfelt declaration:

"Your honor. This man has more experience than I do," gave us a laugh, but another hearing was scheduled.

Now that Mary was in an actual courtroom fight, her samurai spirit emerged and she was determined to prevail. She persuaded her supervising attorney at her firm to give her the services of an investigator. The investigator discovered that Donnigan's employment history and references were false. He had a pattern of either being fired or quitting previous jobs, then suing for wrongful termination. He had worked for the Department of Sanitation, was constantly late, out sick, or walked off the job after disputes with his supervisor. In one ugly incident, he dumped a load of garbage on a supervisor's lawn and porch. He was dismissed and filed a wrongful termination suit that was still going on. The judge learned these facts, dismissed the case, Donnigan thanked her politely, then said goodbye to us politely, as if this was just a lawyer's lost battle, not an involved individual.

We promptly forgot about him and went on with our lives and work. Until Mad told me she thought she saw him following her when she left the office to go to a meeting. We talked about it and finally shrugged it off, until she saw him again. And we started getting phone calls at night, just like the earlier ones. Mad started to see him every time she left the office and I knew she wasn't imagining it. We were playing Pokemon-Go one afternoon in front of Macy's, at 34th Street and Herald Square, and we both saw him. I decided to confront him and went towards him, but he disappeared into the crowd of shoppers and 'pokies'.

We decided that this was becoming a problem and went to our local precinct to file a complaint. The sympathetic desk Sergeant informed us that since Donnigan had made no overt threats and we had no evidence that he was making the phone calls, there was nothing the police could do.

"You should file an official complaint, so if he ever crosses the line in any way, we'll have a record that can be used against him."

"Thanks, Sergeant Paxton," Mad said. "Any suggestions how we should deal with this?"

"Yeah. Don't go anywhere alone for a while. Be more aware of your surroundings and monitor things more carefully. If there's any kind of incident call 911."

"Thanks, Sergeant Paxton," we both said.

This was a new experience for us and we had a long talk about whether or not Donnigan was dangerous. I dismissed him as a nut job, with nothing better to do at the moment.

"As soon as he gets a job and gets on with his life we'll have seen the last of him."

“I hope you’re right,” Mad replied. “But there’s something wrong with him. I think he’s mentally disturbed and we should take the cop’s suggestions seriously.”

“Agreed.”

We kept seeing him at a distance, but as soon as he saw that we noticed him, he quickly departed. The phone calls continued at night, sometimes going on for hours. We talked about the problem, but couldn’t figure out what to do. When Mad suggested we get a gun I couldn’t tell if she was kidding, or not. We were playing Pokemon-Go one evening and we went to the subway station at Park Avenue and 23rd Street. We were on the platform and Mad suddenly poked me.

“Look. It’s him.”

I made eye contact with Donnigan and he grinned.... No. He smirked at me, letting me know he was getting to us and it would continue. I started towards him, anger changing to rage, just as the train came in. He waved at me dismissively, turned to melt into the crowd and I don’t know if he tripped, or was jostled, but he fell on the tracks. People started screaming and the train came to a stop. A lot of the crowd left the station realizing the tie up could be for hours. I stood there stunned, then turned to Mad, who didn’t know what happened.

“Donnigan fell in front of the train.”

She was shocked, but said: “Is he dead?”

“I don’t know. Should we stay and find out?”

“No. Let’s go.”

“We could tell the cops who he is.”

“Did you push him?”

“Of course not,” I replied indignantly.

“Then let’s get out of here.”

We left as the cops and emergency personnel came thundering down the stairs.

That night there was a short article on the internet about the man who fell on the subway tracks and was killed, but nothing after that. Someone had been devoured by the ravenous city, quickly forgotten in the throb and pulse of continuity. There were no phone calls that day and none after that, a definite indication that Donnigan was the culprit and could no longer call out from wherever he was.

A few days later we got a call from Sergeant Paxton from the local precinct. He spoke to Mad and I listened in.

“Did you folks know the guy you complained about was killed in the subway?”

“No. When did it happen?”

“A few days ago. He fell on the tracks at the 23rd Street station. Some eyewitnesses said he tripped and no one pushed him. I guess he won’t be bothering you anymore.”

“Those phone calls stopped.”

“Then your complaint will just be filed away somewhere. Funny how things work out sometimes.”

“Isn’t it. Thanks for calling, Sergeant Paxton.”

“You take care,” and he disconnected.

We looked at each other for a few moments, then I said:

“I almost feel sorry for the guy, dying like that.”

“Well I don’t,” Mad responded. “I’m glad he’s gone, before he did anything worse to us.”

“That’s a bit harsh.”

“What if he got crazier and violent and hurt us? How would you feel then?”

I thought about it, then answered:

“I’d never forgive myself if he hurt you.”

“Then forget him. It’s time to get on with our lives.”

“Weird how things work out sometimes,” I mused.

“Yeah. Now come to bed. I want to celebrate being alive.”

“Is that an order or request?”

“Whatever brings you to my arms.”

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and



worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 39 poetry collections, 14 novels, 4 short story collections, 2 collection of essays and 8 books of

plays. Gary lives in New York City.

Philippe Discovered by Ernie Savage

My parents died in the mid 1970s, not long after Mary and I married and in sorting out their things I found a book, signed "To Elizabeth with love from "Philippe" October 1930". I recalled that my mother had a boyfriend who was a fellow student reading French. She told me about her embarrassment when one morning when he was spending the year in France, she had checked the post in the hall of residence, cheerfully saying, 'Are there any French letters for me?' There were some giggles and one student explained what French letters were. I guessed that the boyfriend was plain English "Philip", and affected the French form. He would only be about 65, so it was possible that he was still alive. The book was *Lancashire Witches* by W. Harrison Ainsworth, originally published in the mid-nineteenth century. Like her I had studied English; neither of us had thought much to this story. It is described as a Romance, not an historical novel and its historicity is muddled, but it did give her an idea for a novel on the same theme, though it remained unfinished at her death. After University she went into school teaching where, for a short time she was successful, but she had little opportunity to work at the novel.

I wondered if I could find him and learn more about their time together at university, but I could not see how. Even if the university retained records of students, they would be reluctant to let me view them. Then I remembered Barbara, Mary's aunt.

'Oh no!' my mother had exclaimed at our wedding reception, 'That's batty Barbara Baines.'

'How wonderfully alliterative.' I said. 'Where?'

She pointed out a woman that I knew as Mary's Aunt Barbara.

'She's Barbara Reid now; she's known as Aunt, though actually she is the wife of Eric, a first cousin of Mary's father. Why "Batty"?'

'She was in the same year as me at University and always had some madcap scheme afoot.'

Barbara had spotted my mother and came over, arms outstretched. 'Elizabeth Armstrong or I'm a Dutchman. Gracious, how long is it since we saw each other?'

'Not since graduation,' said my mother shortly. Their conversation lasted a few minutes with Barbara describing various events and my mother giving almost monosyllabic responses.

'Gracious, I haven't spoken Jim and Aggie. Bye for now!' With a cheery wave she was off, calling over her shoulder, 'I hope it won't be as long to our next meeting Liz!'

'She must remember I have always hated being called "Liz",' my mother muttered.

*

I recalled this conversation and decided to show the book to Barbara, to see if she could tell me something about this boyfriend. I rang up and said it was a long time since we had seen them and their children, Gordon and Jane who were a little younger than us and as yet unmarried.

'Gracious! Have we seen you since Henry's Christening?' Barbara's voice boomed down the phone.

'I think so – we met at...'

‘Of course! When Jim and Aggie had that cottage in... where was it? Somewhere in Wales... Llansomething.’

I laughed, ‘Half the places in Wales are Llansomething! It was Henllan last summer. Mary, Henry and I joined them and as you and Eric were nearby, we decided to meet.’

‘Of course, we pitched up our caravan beside the sea. You drove over and we went to that dreadful restaurant, the Piss God or something.

‘*Pysgod Pen y Mor*, I think. Fish by the sea?’ I was not sure if I remembered the name correctly but I was sure Pysgod was fish. ‘Anyway, we’d like to pop round and show you something you might find interesting.’

I’m intrigued – what about this weekend?

*

The following Sunday afternoon we were all in the garden that Eric so lovingly kept. It was hot and sunny, so Barbara and I who wanted to sit in the shade, were in a little summer house. Eric and Mary meandered through the garden sharing thoughts about horticulture. Mary is the gardener, though we only have a pocket handkerchief sized plot. Gordon and Jane played rather imaginative games with our son Henry. This gave me a chance to quiz Barbara about her time at University with my mother and the mysterious “Philippe”.

‘You and my mother were in the same year at University weren’t you?’

‘We were indeed, though she excelled and I merely plodded. She got a First didn’t she?’

‘Yes.’ I thought it better not to ask her what class of degree she got. When we were clearing up her things in the autumn we found...’

She interrupted me. ‘I am so sorry I didn’t get to her funeral, No one told us she had died. I’d like to have gone and paid my respects.’

‘It was a quiet affair really, just immediate family.’

‘Of course it makes one contemplate one’s own mortality. She was only 64 and we are almost exact contemporaries.’

It was about this I wanted to ask you.’ The book was rather large and heavy and I had been hiding under my jacket. I now produced it and held it open at the front, pointing to the inscription.

She took it read it out. ‘To Elizabeth with love from Philippe October 1930. This was your mothers? She’s the Elizabeth?’

I nodded.

‘October 1930, that was the beginning of our second year at University.’ *Lancashire Witches*. Good gracious me! I tried to read it once but it is such a heavy tome and rather tedious. How fascinating!’

‘Who do you think Philippe was?’ I asked.

‘Oh good gracious me! It must be Philip Christopherson. She had quite a fling with him. He was very handsome; he read French so spent his year in that country as they do. He’s pretending to be French, calling himself “Philippe”. I’ll tell you a funny story.’ She lowered her voice. ‘During his year in France, she checked the post in hall every day, shouting cheerily, ‘Are there any French letters for me?’

‘She told me about that.’

‘Of course no one ever calls them that today do they?
It’s always “condoms” Not that we really knew anything.’

‘About condom?’

‘About sex. Don’t imagine that Lizzie and Philip were having it off in the bushes or anywhere else for that matter. We didn’t. Not like you lot in the 60s.’

‘We didn’t either, well, most didn’t.’

‘October - when was your mother’s birthday?’

‘April, why?’

‘So this,’ she tapped the book, ‘which must have cost a few bob, was not a birthday present.’

‘No. But...’

‘I know.’ she interrupted, ‘it was just before he went off to France. It was in that term that the embarrassment about French letters happened. I remember because I didn’t know about them either and I saw Jacquetta Lowndes speaking quietly to Lizzie so I asked Jacquetta what she’d said to your mother and she told me, and it was my birthday which is October 30th .

‘Is he still alive?’

‘As far as I know. I get a Christmas card from Jenny Higham who was very friendly with Eleanor who was the lucky one who got Philip.’

‘Got? She married him?’

‘Yes, and... but here they come!’

The others were now approaching.

‘Daddy, Uncle Gordon and Auntie Jane and I found a dinosaur behind the rhododendrons. We are going to call it Dendrosaurus’.

It was a sort of hobby horse that had been given various pieces of covering which made it not unlike a dinosaur. We all chatted about this which had been put together by Henry, with a lot of help.

Barbara recognising her duties as hostess cried 'Tea! I'll bring it out when it is ready.'

'I'll come and help,' said Mary.

Further conversation about "Philippe" was impossible, but as we were leaving Barbara said, 'I'll give Jenny a ring and let you know.'

*

Next day Barbara rang me up. 'Edward! I got hold of Jenny who has kept up with Eleanor and Philip Christopherson. I asked if she would mind if I gave you her number. She was sorry to hear of your mother's death by the way, and wished she kept up with them.'

'My mother broke the ties with university and criticised me for keeping up with old friends from those days. She enjoyed her time there she said, but that was over. Please do give me Jenny's number.'

We chatted for a few moments before she ended the conversation. 'Do let me know how you get on Edward.'

I wondered if I wanted to know about the secrets of my mother's life. 'Mary,' I had asked my wife, 'do you think I should ring this Jenny Higham?'

'Why ever not? It might be very interesting. In any case she will be expecting you to ring'

Eventually I dialled the number Barbara had given me.

'Hello!' The voice was cheerful.

‘Err... I’m Edward Simpson, the son of Elizabeth Armstrong as was.’

‘Oh yes, Barbara told me about you. I was so sorry to hear about Elizabeth’s death, so young.’

‘Thank you.’

There was an awkward silence for a moment before we both spoke at once

‘My mother...’

‘You want to know about Philip Christopherson...’

‘Yes. He was her boyfriend I believe.’

‘Barbara said something about a book, was it *Lancashire Witches*? And inscribed with a message?’

“‘To Elizabeth with love from Philippe October 1930.’”
and the name was given in the French form.’

She chuckled. ‘That sounds like him. He was good looking and a real charmer. We all fell for him, but your mother caught him in first year, but in second year he was in France. Sometime in the autumn term of final year it ended and he and Eleanor Foster got together and married not long after graduation.

‘Not long after...?’ My mind was racing on.

‘Well, it’s a long time ago and everyone at the time guessed or knew but they “had to get married” as people said in those days.’

‘I see.’ If Philip had wanted sex with my mother he would have been disappointed. She was quite firm about such matters, though never condemnatory to those who slipped.

‘Do you want me to put you in touch with Philip and Eleanor?’ She asked.

‘I’m not sure. Do you think they would want to meet me?’

‘They are very hospitable. I’m sure they will be delighted to meet Elizabeth Armstrong’s son.’

‘Well...’

‘I must dash – got people coming to lunch! I’ll get him to ring you.’

I asked Mary about what she thought. ‘If he offers to see me or just chat on the phone, shall I?’

‘Where does he live?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘If he’s not too far away you might meet him in person. I’ll come with you and hold your hand, thought what you have to worry about I cannot imagine.’

*

I put thoughts about my mother and her boyfriend of forty odd years ago out of my mind. It was near the end of the academic year and there were lots of exams to mark. I was struggling with a particularly difficult set of papers when the phone rang.

‘Leverford 256789.’

A genial, voice asked cheerfully. ‘Is that Edward Simpson?’

I didn’t recognise the voice so was somewhat cautious in my reply. ‘Yes.’

‘Philip Christopherson here. And you’re Elizabeth Armstrong’s son. How wonderful!’ Your mother and I were at University together. I was so sorry to hear she had died.’

Thank you.’ I really didn’t know what to say now. ‘I’d love to meet you. Where are you based?’

‘I’m in Leverford.’

‘Eleanor and I are about to go to the Dales for a short break. How far is Ilkley from you? We’re having a couple of nights there because we wanted to see Ilkley Moor.’

‘It’s less than twenty miles.’

‘I gather you have a book to show me. I’m intrigued. Could we meet there? Have dinner in our hotel and chat?’

‘We have a young child, Henry so dinner would be difficult. How about afternoon tea?’

‘Fine. Shall we say 3.30 a week on Saturday at...’ he named an hotel in the town. ‘We intend to climb Ilkley Moor on Friday so we will need a lazy day.’

‘I’m looking forward to it,’ I assured him, though in reality I was rather apprehensive.

*

There is a frequent rail service to Ilkley and Henry loves travelling by train, so, as the hotel is near the railway station, we travelled there on a rather smelly diesel rail car. Philip and Eleanor were waiting in the in the entrance hall.

‘Edward?’ He was slim, balding, about the same height as me, which is just less than six feet. He was wearing a lightweight cream coloured jacket and trousers and an open necked brown shirt. Extending his hand he said, ‘I’m Philip and you must be Mary? This is Eleanor.’

She was nearly as tall as her husband and was wearing a blue flowery summer dress. ‘Hello!’ her voice was surprisingly deep but mellifluous. It was difficult to imagine her as a twenty year old, somehow supplanting my mother in Philip’s affections. But if she had not I would not exist. ‘And this is Henry,

Elizabeth's grandson? How she would have loved him. I can see a resemblance.'

'She did see him for three years before she died. 'The next one is to be a girl, we've put an order in and she will be called Elizabeth.'

Eleanor smiled. 'Our grandchildren are a lot older, but of course we started earlier.'

Perhaps Philip was embarrassed at this recollection of their somewhat precipitate marriage, he coughed gently and said, 'Let's not stand here in the draught. I've ordered afternoon tea in the lounge. Our treat.'

We made our way to where a table was set out with tea for five. 'Do you like cake Henry?' Eleanor asked.

'Is it chocolate cake?' he asked.

'Do you like that?' He nodded.

'We'd better make sure there is some then. She moved over to where a waitress was busying herself with teapots and jugs.

After we had finished the tea Philip again took charge. 'Let's sit down and do show me that book.

I passed it over.

'Good God! I remember now. I was about to go off to spend a year improving my French and my understanding of French culture and so on. I knew about this book and called your mother a Lancashire Witch because she had bewitched me.' He laughed and turned to his wife.

'She enjoyed it and had hoped to write a sequel, though she despaired about its historical inaccuracies.' I described some of these.

'Yes, she always wanted things to be just so. I was keen on her; she was very attractive and...'

‘She seduced you.’ Eleanor’s tone was somewhat acerbic.

‘What’s seduced Daddy?’

Mary broke into the conversation. ‘Henry, let’s go out and see if we can find...’ she hesitated.

Eleanor came to the rescue. ‘Our car is outside, let’s go up to the Cow and Calf rocks and you can sing *On Ilkla Moor Baht ‘at.*’ She sang the line. ‘Come on, we’ll teach you.

After they left there was a silence until Philip resumed the conversation. ‘Seduced usually means takes the other to bed. It was not like that with your mother; she had strict views on sex and marriage.’

‘I know. Did you...’ I wanted to know but was embarrassed

‘Did I try to persuade her to go to bed with me? I did indeed. She was very attractive and I’m sure she wanted to but... We went to Stratford, to the new Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. Old McKendrick, the English Prof was keen to see it. A group of us went to a performance of *As You Like It*, mostly those doing Eng. Lit but I tagged along because of Elizabeth. We stayed in an hotel, and...’ He paused. ‘I was totally naive, but the sexual urge is strong at 21. We were, perhaps co-incidentally, after the performance, walking upstairs in the hotel. We reached the top of the stairs and embraced and kissed and I... God help me, I put my hand where, well, let’s just say, where it shouldn’t go.’ He covered his face with his hands and laughed in a self-deprecatory manner. ‘Your mother froze and said, “Go to bed Philip. Alone!” Next morning she was icily polite and we never were together again. She was always polite, even friendly but we were never close again. I then took up with Eleanor.’

Was it regret, or sorrow after all these years? Had he hoped... but if they had married I would not exist. It was an uncomfortable thought.

Another silence fell and then he spoke calmly. 'But what did she do after graduation? I know she did the Dip. Ed. Did she teach?'

'For a few years, yes, then she met my father who was one of those who believed that wives should stay at home and care for that and the children, though in the end there was only me.'

*

The rest of my time with Philip was filled with conversation about various odd matters. We discovered that now both had an interest in antiques. After a while Mary, Eleanor and Henry returned.

For a while we chatted about Ilkley Moor, the song and the huge rocks, named the Cow and the Calf. Henry had, with a little help climbed these.

'We'll make a mountaineer of you Henry.' Philip claimed. 'Everest next year?'

Mary smiled. Glancing at her watch, she said, 'We'd better be going if we are going to catch that train.'

We made our farewells and strolled to the station. 'Was it worth it?' asked Mary

'I think so,' I replied. 'I'll tell you all about it later.'

Ernie Savage I was born in 1941, had a conventional middle class upbringing in the north west of England, attended the local grammar school, went to Liverpool University (geography) and then took the post graduate certificate of education. I taught until premature retirement in 1997, latterly in Colleges of Further Education.



I got married in 1971 to Madeleine and we have two sons, who are now well established in work away from home.

Writings

I always hoped to write an made various attempts but, encouraged by a mentoring course at the National Centre for Writing I self published with *Troubadour* two volumes of short stories.

Lost Lives, Tales and Fancies

Secret Lives: More Tales and Fancies

I am not very “pushy” and have only attempted to sell these to friends and family

A full length novel is due for publication also with Troubadour

No Country For Old Men

A Second Chance at First Love James Osborne

Terry was a pretty high school student with a bubbly personality, honor grades and a circle of close friends. Life was good, or so she thought. The fall school term had just begun, and she was at her assigned locker ... for the last time.

The next locker to hers rattled behind the door. She was reaching into hers and couldn't see who was there.

"Shit! Forgot the damn lock again," the husky male voice said, mostly to himself.

Terry closed her locker door.

"Sorry for the language," the young man said, an attractive smile turning up the corners of his mouth.

Terry looked into his deep blue smiling eyes and her heart melted.

"I'm new," he said. "My family just moved here. I'm John."

"Terry," she managed, wondering if he sensed how fast her heart was beating.

Someone shoved her hard from behind, knocking her purse and books flying to the hallway floor.

"OMG what the hell was that about?," she shouted.

Terry watched in surprise as John grabbed the retreating student by the back of his t-shirt, whirled him around and slammed him against the lockers. John was a head taller than the other student and much heavier.

"You will apologize to Terry for that," John said.

“Who the fuck are you?” the boy said defiantly. “She’s my girl. We’re dating. Mind your own fucking business.”

“That’s no excuse,” John replied. He grabbed the front of the boy’s t-shirt with both fists and lifted him off the ground, slamming him against the lockers again. A crowd was gathering as Terry saw the kid’s shirt began to tear.

“Alright, alright!” the boy said. “I’m sorry.”

As if distracted, John let the boy fall to the floor. He knelt down to help Terry gather her things.

“Sorry about that,” he said, his head bowed. “I hate bullies.”

“That’s enough,” Terry heard a male teacher shout from behind her. “Both of you ... to the principal’s office, right NOW.”

John stood and walked toward the office.

Terry was sitting on a park bench near her home letting the family Scottish Terrier chase squirrels up huge chestnut trees in the city park.

“I owe you a second apology,” a voice said from behind her. It was John’s. Her breath caught in her throat as he sat on the bench beside her.

“I’m sorry I roughed up your boyfriend,” he said, genuinely apologetic.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she replied. “He’d like to think

so, but we're just friends. He's one of the reasons my parents have transferred me to another school, a Catholic convent school. Starting tomorrow."

"What?" John said. "Why?"

"My parents think I'm too headstrong ... hanging out with that boy's crowd," she replied. "They're a bit rough but fun. My dad says I'm too hard to control. He thinks the nuns will fix that. We'll see. Just when I got my class schedule all set up and my locker organized the convent school called to say I've been enrolled. Three years ... I'll be graduating from that damned convent school. None of my friends go there."

"My God, Terry," he said. "Didn't you have any say in that?"

"No."

"What the fuck," John said. "Oops, sorry."

"That's okay," she replied.

"Can I ask you something?" John said. "There's an outdoor concert coming up next week. Would you ... I mean, I'd really like you to go with me ... uh, if you think your parents will allow that?"

Terry's heart pounded.

"I'm sixteen ... it's my business who I date," she replied, showing a flash of anger, and then realizing she'd said 'date'. She knew that her beating heart had forced her to blurt out that meaningful word without thinking.

Within weeks, she and John became much envied among the kids in both high schools, she one of the most attractive teenaged girls in their small town, and he a much-

admired tackle on his high school football team. By the following spring, Terry knew she'd fallen hard for John and was confident he felt the same about her. They didn't let the two schools cause a problem; they became inseparable.

But as her tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades led to graduation, huge doubts about her future had become a constant companion to her day and night, on top of all the stresses everyone her age had to endure. For three years, priests and nuns at the convent school kept pushing her to consider devoting her life to serving the church as a nun. Her upbringing in a deeply devout family had made her a prime prospect for the church, and it pursued that possibility relentlessly.

Terry became deeply conflicted. She was torn between a fairy tale wedding and life with John that she'd dreamed about almost constantly, and the religious life her convent teachers and her parents wanted. So, upon graduation, she decided to enter a convent. When she told John, he was stunned.

"I have to be absolutely certain," she said. "I really, really hate doing this to you, John, but I have to be sure."

"Well, I guess you need to know, my love," he replied, making a show of nonchalance while reeling from the worst emotional pain he'd ever felt. "I love you more than life itself, Terry. But there's no way we could be good together, unless you are absolutely sure. It's bizarre, you know, I'm competing for you with the Roman Catholic Church. Do I stand a chance?"

When she emerged from the convent six months later, John was waiting. Terry knew then that only John could make her life complete. He asked her to marry him. Terry was ecstatic and accepted.

She rushed home to share the joy of her wonderful news. She wanted her mother to be the very first person in all the world to know. The response was shocking.

“You mean that John boy?” her mother said dismissively as she went into the bathroom and, ready to close the door, added: “You’d better discuss this with your father when he gets home.”

“Mom, John and I have been together for more than three years,” Terry said, her hand holding the door, barely able to believe her mother’s reaction. “He’s a wonderful man and he loves me. It’s what we both want.”

The door slammed.

What the fuck? Terry thought. She went to her room in tears and paced the floor until she heard her father call her name.

“He’s just a kid,” was the first thing her dad said. “And did you know, when his father was transferred here, he joined my staff at the firm? He reports to me.”

Terry was aware both of their fathers worked for the same accounting firm. She was unaware of the reporting structure.

Oh shit, she thought. *We don’t need this, too.*

“Listen, Dad, I’m eighteen, and John’ll be twenty soon,” Terry said, ignoring her father’s implied threat. “He’s in his second year of college. We plan on waiting until he graduates.”

“That’s not the point,” her father said. His tone was sharp. “He’s not Roman Catholic. Will he convert?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, making no effort to hide her frustration. “And I’m not going to ask him to. Good heavens, Dad, surely you realize that sort of thinking is obsolete; it means nothing these days.”

“Not to me and your mother it doesn’t,” he shot back. “And not to both of your grandmothers and grandfathers.”

“What are you saying?” she asked, fearing the answer she knew was coming.

“You go ahead and marry him, but you’ll no longer be a member of this family,” he said. “And that’s final. Period.”

Terry fought back tears and rushed to her room.

Until then, the young couple had paid no attention to things not relevant to their generation, like religious, cultural, racial and lifestyle differences. Their generation was forcing much social change at the time. Besides, they had each other. That was enough, or so they thought. But the couple hadn’t realized how powerful an influence religion still held over many people of their parents’ age, including her parents.

Terry was apprehensive about telling John’s parents about their plans, especially after her father’s intolerant response. She knew that John’s parents belonged to another religion, but as it turned out that didn’t matter. They were delighted with Terry and John’s news.

Despite repeated attempts to persuade her father to reconsider, his religious prejudice remained firm and unswerving. Terry knew she couldn’t bear to become alienated from her family and her devout grandparents, who she loved deeply. The young couple finally made a decision that broke their hearts. They were forced to go their separate ways.

In the years that followed, Terry and John married others. Each raised families, pursued careers, and experienced the triumphs and tragedies of life. Among those tragedies, both of their spouses died as few years apart.

“I loved my husband,” Terry said. “We had a wonderful relationship. I was blessed. But during all that time, not one day went by that I didn’t think about John, hoping he was happy and well. But let me be clear; there were no thoughts of disloyalty. I’m not made that way. I even told my husband about John. He said the most remarkable thing ... that my having loved John proved to him that I knew how to love. It was a gift, he told me. Wasn’t I ever lucky to have found someone like him? I have to admit, just remembering the feelings that John and I shared all those years ago often warmed my heart, and I think made me a more caring person.”

John also freely admitted that Terry was on his mind persistently throughout those decades.

“In my mind’s eye I would hear her wonderful laugh,” John said. “I was buoyed often by remembering her fabulous sense of humor and the many, many good times we’d enjoyed together.”

Over the years, John and Terry’s growing families would encounter each other on rare occasions in the parks and restaurants of their hometown. Both admitted there would be an emotional twinge at first, but it would pass, and the four parents and their children would mingle briefly, leaving the past firmly behind them where it belonged.

Terry’s path in life took her to study accounting and ultimately become a supervisor in an accounting firm.

John’s route in life was different. After graduating

college, John became a teacher in a small rural town nearby. A few years later he became principal of that town's local elementary school. John was nicely settled into his career and raising his family when he and his wife agreed to take over two businesses in a nearby summer resort – a pizzeria and an ice cream shop – owned by his wife's parents, who wanted to retire. He continued to teach and tend to his family during the school year and run the pizza and ice cream shops in the summer.

Then, tragedy struck. John's wife died unexpectedly of a heart attack. In his grief, he found solace by focusing on his children, his education career, and his growing business interests.

A few years later, tragedy struck Terry's life. Her husband died of cancer. She found comfort in her family and career. She had a few relationships. But as she said, "they came and went, and left me with a bit of increased wisdom but few regrets."

One day, quite by accident, Terry and John met at the ice cream shop that she was surprised to learn he owned. They exchanged recent histories and decided to meet for coffee. Then they met for more coffees. Then they began seeing each other again.

At first, they were uncertain, tentative even, about their rekindling attraction for each other. Those feelings had been tucked away 'safely' years ago. Neither dared to call it 'dating'. They told friends and their now grown children: "We see each other occasionally."

But Terry knew. "My heart soared every time I saw John, and every time I heard his voice on the phone."

Those occasions became more and more frequent. Still, their unease persisted.

One day, John told Terry that he was going to the Florida Keys for a few weeks, maybe a month, on a combination business/recreation trip. Terry's heart fell. Now that she'd found John again, the thought of being apart for that long was more than she wanted to bear.

To her delight, John invited her to accompany him. He told Terry that he owned a condo there. He quickly assured her the condo was a two-bedroom unit where she would have her own private room and bath.

The first night there, the separate accommodation lasted less than an hour.

#

(First Love, Second Chance was inspired by a true story about teenage lovers, forced apart by religious prejudice, who later in life found each other again as well as the love they had once shared.)



James Osborne is the author of THE ULTIMATE THREAT, an Amazon #1 bestseller, plus two other novels and a collection of short stories. His latest novel, PRESCRIPTION FOR DECEPTION, will be the third book in his Maidstone Trilogy. Osborne's stories and essays have appeared in dozens of anthologies, magazines, and literary and professional journals. Samples can be found on his Amazon author's page: www.amazon.com/author/jamesosborne, and his Goodreads author's page: <https://www.goodreads.com/JamesOsborne>

His varied career includes investigative journalist, army officer, college teacher, vice president of a Fortune 500 company, business owner, and writer and editor.

Before the End by Lewis Whitehouse

Theodore was in his office when the end-of-the-world announcement was broadcasted. One of his coworkers, in complete disregard of company policy, commandeered one of the large monitors whose usual purpose was to terrorise them with motivational messages. Ted was about to object - any interruption of the motivational messages was against company policy - but a news reporter had already flashed onto the screen.

“If anyone is standing, we urge you to sit down. You are advised to stop and listen to this message.”

Heads popped over cubicles to see what all the fuss was about.

“We have information regarding asteroid Juno. It has been confirmed that the gravitational pull of Mars was insufficient to pull it off-trajectory, and it has proven too big to be affected by human intervention. Impact with Earth is imminent. In approximately 16 hours, a mass extinction event will take place. No one is expected to

survive. This is the end of us. I repeat, we are doomed. We are doomed! We are fucking-”

The reporter, who had remained calm during the majority of his report, devolved into sheer panic, and with a flash the screen went blank. With another flash, a different reporter was on the screen, apologising for the profanity. The reporter continued, but Theodore had stopped listening.

The world was going to end.

He thought he should feel dread - or an impending sense of mortal doom - but he felt empty. He looked around his cubicle, where he had spent the last ten years of his life.

He stood up and walked out of the office building, not noticing what any of his coworkers did or said. He no longer cared.

The street outside was chaotic. People were running, some trying to take control of the situation, others not believing the news. Another fell to their knees, screaming incoherently to an indifferent cosmos.

Theodore felt a vibration against his leg and grabbed his phone. He swiped his thumb and scrolled through the article headlines that competed for his attention.

“US government green lights emergency euthanasia programme”

“400 arrested as supporters of Anonymous storm the Vatican Archives”

“Hugh Lawrence denies taking steroids to play Osmosapien”

What was he doing? He threw his phone, sending it skittering across the concrete. He wouldn't spend his final moments staring at that thing.

He began running, feeling like he was searching for something, and stopped outside a restaurant he once worked at. All the tables were full, and he saw his old boss through the kitchen pass, hard at work. All the other staff had presumably left, so the customers were queuing up and ordering their food at the counter.

“Vittorio!”

Vittorio looked up. “Theodore! Do you want any food? I am giving these fine people their last meal!” He said, waving his arms.

“Why?” said Ted.

“What am I gonna do, wallow in self-pity? I love what I do - I live *la dolce vita*! I will see you in the afterlife!” he said, blowing a kiss. He was buoyant.

Ted left the restaurant, unable to shake the feeling that his life has been inadequate. He walked a little further down the street, until his attention was caught by a group of looters, who had smashed the window of a television shop and started helping themselves.

Ted couldn't believe it - cosmic fluctuations of energy at the beginning of the universe created matter, and after billions of years of uncountable interactions, a planet was created, that somehow, surmounting insurmountable odds, had escaped total annihilation long enough to produce life, and not just life, but civilisation. By merely being born, each of those looters had defied infinitely large odds. They had been blessed with the mysterious beauty of consciousness, self-awareness, and creativity, to experience a

confounding, absurd, and miraculous reality. And what had they spent their existence doing? Hoarding rocks.

“Bad luck, mate, I think all the 4K ones are gone,” said a man holding a fifty inch flat screen.

Ted turned away without saying anything, feeling sad for him, but he knew he was also feeling sad for himself.

He felt the urge to run once more. He ran and ran, until his lungs laboured and his legs burned, yet he did not stop, regardless of the strange and lurid scenes he saw on the streets. Eventually he joined the motorway, running past gridlocked traffic, toward the national park just outside of the city.

Soon he was surrounded by trees. He stopped at a lake and sat at its edge, cupping water with his palms and drinking greedily. Thank God it was summer, he thought. Dying would be shit in the winter. For a while he sat and did nothing, feeling the sun on his face and listening to his breath.

After an unknown amount of time, he rose once more and walked barefoot on the nearby grass. He inspected the ground like he did when he was a child, seeing a completely different world

amidst the jungle of grass blades. He laid flat on the ground, watching an anthill. He saw a rabbit, and tried to follow it as long as he could. He didn't get near it, but he enjoyed the chase.

The sun was setting now. The place around him glowed. The grass was soft as silk, the wind fluttered the leaves to create many fleeting harmonies, and the woods formed a small enclave that seemed to embrace him. It was all so beautiful.

When it grew dark, he found some wood and built a small fire. He was hungry, but he knew it no longer mattered. As he stoked the fire, he looked up at the stars, thinking about how small everything was in the grand scheme of things. We were made of stardust, and would return to stardust once more. Ted usually laughed at the fact that this was supposed to console you on the fear of death, but this time he found it oddly comforting. He thought again of the looters, imagining what they were doing now. He thought of Vittorio, working hard in his restaurant, doing what he loved. He hoped they were enjoying their final moments.

Ted thought he understood now. He listened to the sounds of the night, the crackle of the fire, the faint buzzing of insects, and

the occasional hoot of an owl or the call of a fox. The clouds had long since parted, revealing the vast tapestry of mystery and wonder that was the cosmos.

Ted felt grateful that he had as long as he did. He only wished he had opened his eyes once in a while.

END

Lewis Whitehouse is a science fiction and fantasy short story writer hailing from a small town in the North of England. As well as pursuing his passion for writing, he also enjoys analysing data, playing music, and growing food. Lewis has a deep love for literature that delves into technology, meaning, purpose, and our place in the vast universe. He strives to create thought-provoking stories that challenge the reader's perspective on the world around them.”





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