
Flash! Fiction
by Peter McMillan

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The 34 stories, vignettes, and apocryphal tales contained in this anthology are reprints of Peter McMillan's flash fiction that has been published on the Internet.

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.




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Cover photograph: Rue Ste-Famille, Québec, 2011, P. McMillan

For Bengue

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It did not come as a surprise. Instead of surprise, it was more like a sad resignation. After all, it was really the only conceivable ending for a troubled, lonely and unspectacular life.

In some places, among some people, the departure would have been marked with shame and disgust for a life wasted and worthless. Condemning failure and shunning the one who failed somehow seems to maintain the uninterrupted value and meaning of life. And so it is that death, or at least the thought of death, is put off—indefinitely.

But in this place, among these people, the departure is not so meanly marked. This is a place of conservative views and a people whose living roots stretch far back into the hazy and almost forgotten years of the Great Depression and World War II. Judging in this case would be expected to be harsh—very harsh.

In these days where families are dispersed across the country and even across the globe, the clan is something of an anachronism. All the more remarkable then is the solemn and respectful appearance of every one of the living blood relatives from the elder generation of both sides of the family, most of whom are in their 80s.

The image projected on the rolling cemetery lawn on that sunny and mild autumn day in this small south Alabama town and ancestral home was that of a latter day Scottish clan, American for many, many generations, but fiercely united in the family rituals of death and the show of solidarity in the face of the unknown.

Judging there would doubtless be. Guilt there would be. Forgetting there would also be. Nevertheless, for one extended moment there would be a oneness. The moment passes into memory preserving

the experience of the clan gathering to send one of their own to the other side and holding on to one another in an unspoken promise.

And so, the judging was hushed.

Only one breach had been heard, but it was of no consequence. It was just the perpetual mourner who marked the death of his loved one by seeking out every opportunity to attend the funerals announced in the local newspaper.

*First published in Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal, Volume #28, October-December, 2009.*

It began the way they all begin. The tugging from somewhere out there, growing ever more persistent and difficult to ignore. The tether to home no longer there. All that keeps you around is the familiar, the predictable, the safe. What's out there is only vaguely understood. People talk about it, and most of them talk with the enthusiasm of explorers and conquerors. Few come back who have no story of great importance to tell.

When you're younger your instinct for comfortable certainties is so strong that it alone is sufficient to keep you home. But as your mind and body change and grow, independence and confidence develop and bring with them inner certainty.

Just as countless millions before you have journeyed out from home, so you, too, set out to conquer the unknown. In your haste to get under way, you set aside your quarrelsomeness and accept all the provisions that your family can put together. You know that you can discard what you don't need once you've got well beyond home. The weight and bulk of all this stuff—how can it possibly be necessary?—will not be easy to haul even for the 20 or so miles before you can dump it. But you promised not to insult your family on your way out—whether from guilt or fear of the curse, it's hard to say.

Dawn is coming. Ahead, the scattered clouds brushed along their rounded edges with lavender and pink highlights tell you that the sun is rising just over the horizon in the direction you're headed. The air is cool and crisp. Apart from the soft crunching sound of the fine gravel underfoot and the non-melodious clanging of your load, it’s quiet. The sounds in the meadow to your left and the forest to your right are magnified in the morning stillness. There's no one

else on the road, so you're alone with the rush of thoughts of the young wayfarer just set out from home for the first time.

You don't even notice the extraordinary weight that you're carrying. You've seen pictures in National Geographic and mail order catalogues of what hikers and mountain climbers look like with their massive, fully-outfitted frame backpacks. You figure you would be satisfied to be travelling so light. However, your backpack is so chock full that if it had snaps instead of that sturdy double zipper, it would pop open and shoot all your belongings out on the road behind you.

You've got things dangling off the backpack, a set of pots and a large black cast iron pan, a tent, a fishing rod, a life preserver, a camera, a pair of snowshoes, an inflatable dinghy, a double-end paddle, a plastic mesh bag filled with pears, tomatoes, corn and pecans from the family garden, a four-foot long cardboard cylinder with a laminated map of the world, a parachute, and a sleeping bag rolled up and stuck on the top of the backpack just above your head.

And that’s just what is clipped onto the frame backpack. Trailing you at a dutiful distance of two-and-a-half-feet is a two-wheeled cart with a rugged mountain bike, bulky sacks and tins of dry goods to last for several weeks, and an overfull packing crate with exactly 100 books, including the Bible, a hodgepodge of titles from 19th century German philosophy, the history of economic thought, Russian literature before the Revolution, the nearly forgotten samizdat of post-war Eastern Europe, and Mr. Esslin’s theatre of the absurd as well as a handful of recently acquired titles on travel, bird watching, and wilderness survival and a prized first edition of the collected works of O. Henry.

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Weeks later we catch up with the young wayfarer. He seems to have lost his bearings in the desert. In all directions, there is nothing but sand—flat desert and sand all the way to the horizon. And there's no shadow. Well, there is a shadow, but it's the shadow of the noonday sun.

We've happened on our traveller just as he is frantically going through all of his pockets and all of his belongings in search of—Must be a compass he's looking for. He's standing dead centre of a circle of footprints that look to have been made by someone methodically scanning the horizon from every point in the circle's 360 degrees.

Ah! There it is! He's located his compass.

With compass in hand, he faces north, in line with the compass needle and then turns sharply to the right, looks off into the endless sand and shoulders his pack and resumes his journey eastward.

He's back on track, reinvigorated by the thought that he hasn't lost his way and that through perseverance he has triumphed. Having lightened his load again, he marches forward, confident that he has all that is needed to come out of this OK on his own.

The cart is gone, left behind on the craggy rocks of some distant mountain pass a lifetime ago. All that remains of its contents are the small volume on surviving in remote and desolate conditions and the second volume of the first edition O. Henry. Also left behind—miles back on the desert plain—are the dinghy, the boat paddle, the life preserver, the fishing rod and the snowshoes.

After briefly checking in on our young traveller, we again take our leave. As we zoom out, we halt momentarily to take in the bird's eye view of the desert. Off to the east, the desert ends abruptly.

Beyond there is nothing but blackness. Our young friend is headed due east and seems to be 100 miles or so from the edge. A few miles back—near the spot where the circle had been deliberately etched out in the sand—lies the parachute, marooned in the blinding desert whiteness of a perpetual midday sun.

*First published in Long Story Short, July 2010.*

Cathedral bell door chimes send my heart into a sympathetic panic. My wife and I have been invited for dinner at her partner's mansion. I've never met him or his wife before and don't usually care for nouveau-riche business-types, so I don't expect much. Not much, that is, except for validation. And that just met me at the door.

Our hosts greet us at the door, invite us in, and then escort us through the great hall to the study where we have drinks and the customary 'get-to-know-you' small talk for the benefit of the strangers—the hostess and me.

After 15 or 20 minutes of this, I sense restlessness, and I assure everyone that I'll be fine—that I'll just have a look around the library.

The partners move towards the terrace with their drinks to go over their pitch for their presentation in Vancouver on Monday. The hostess excuses herself to the kitchen to finish preparing the meal.

The library had caught my eye as we were led through the hall. Two arched, stained-glass doors open to the right off the foyer, and since one was ajar, I glimpsed an intriguing floor-to-ceiling bookshelf. Now I could lose myself among books, lose track of time, until dinner and then time to go home. Perfect

What's on the bookshelf? Are they bestsellers, mysteries, history, religious, scholarly, cloth-bound, paperback, or just decorative spines? Is the bookshelf used often, or have layers of dust collected on the books and underneath the books? Are there secret hiding places in the bookshelf for money, jewellery, love letters, wills, a handgun?

Maybe there are patterns to be discovered, which will tell me something about our hosts. I wonder whether he reads literature, and whether it's ancient or modern, poetry or prose, European or American. Perhaps she reads English history or East German literature or parapsychology.

Maybe hidden in the books is a history of their travels. Books stamped with book dealers' addresses in Buenos Ares, Hong Kong, London, Sydney, New York, and New Delhi.

Maybe the bookshelf wraps around the room. I've never seen one of those in person. How many volumes would it hold? Maybe there's a second floor or even a third floor, with sliding ladders on each floor and a spiral staircase connecting all of the levels, each with a hidden door for secret entry and exit.

I had no idea they were so interested in books. Maybe I misjudged them. Maybe we should get to know them better. Maybe we could have them over for dinner sometime, invite them to the cottage, to the theatre, or even sailing.

Suddenly, my thoughts are interrupted by my wife who is standing over me in the study, two steps from where I started on my journey to the library.

"Honey! Honey, what's wrong? How long have you been lying there? You forgot your medicine again, didn't you? We'll have to cancel dinner and get you to the hospital right away."

*First published in Daily Flash 2011: 365 Days of Flash Fiction.*

Married, two kids, a dog, and two jobs—Ben was an ordinary guy. In a crowd you could scan past him five or six times and not notice that he was standing right there in front of you. Around the neighbourhood he was usually recognized by who he was with—Spots, Ben Junior, or one of the girls.

*A nondescript man, an everyman, but a nobody. Got it. Next?*

The writing still wasn't paying, but it would, he said. The other job, selling shoes, was 'research,' he said. It stretched the household income, but more important was that it got him out of the house. His wife and teenage daughter, who'd read all of his recent work, finally suggested it.

*OK. The nondescript man is a writer who can't write.*

Only a few weeks into the new job and Ben had filled several pocket-sized notebooks from the dollar store with bits of writer's material. Shoe sizes, foot odours, missing/extra toes, corns, bunions were of interest in the early pages. By page 11, Ben had moved on to capturing the subtle shades of customer behaviour between the polite and the ill-mannered, the modest and the showy, the parsimonious and the spendthrift, and the carefree and the morose. Moods and attitudes and demeanour Ben cross-referenced with the shoes customers bought.

*This nondescript man and failed writer sets out into the world to find something to write about. Next.*

But that wasn't the extent of Ben's research. You see, Ben liked to wear new shoes. And he had nearly half of an entire store to choose from. Every day, every lunch hour, he would slip into a pair

of new unworn shoes he'd had his eyes on that morning. For twenty minutes—his best estimate of a mile—he would walk, climb steps, maybe run after a bus, and jump over spilled garbage on the sidewalk, always taking a different route.

*This nondescript man and failed writer—now a student of shoe store personalities and their footwear preferences—is quirky. What's next?*

On returning to the shop, Ben cleaned and sanitized each pair of shoes, because his 'footprint' was supposed to be figurative and abstract and uncontaminated but equally because he was fussy about cleanliness.

*OK, very quirky, but not quirky and disgusting is what we're supposed to think?*

Studying customers as they tried on shoes that he'd worn, he liked to imagine what it would be like to walk in their shoes. On his daily walks he wondered how the new owners of his shoes would carry themselves. Would they walk with a precise, measured and decisive step? Would they walk tentatively, weaving left and right, stopping occasionally to look around? Would they swagger with arrogance and bad taste, projecting an exaggerated image of themselves?

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*“People are characters, and characters are people, so give them their freedom.”*

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After the manager retired, Ben rose quickly through the ranks. Although it was never his ambition—which remained to become a successful writer—he accepted the offer to manage the shoe store.

*So, the nondescript writer morphs into a nondescript shopkeeper, trading characters for customers, plots for business, art for reality? Tragedy. Anything more?*

One day Ben noticed that one of his employees was wearing store shoes when she went out for lunch.

*The creative urge forsaken but resurgent? That it?*

It was more entertaining when Ben was a cross-dresser, wasn’t it?

*Yeah, but it lacked authenticity. This one at least sounds like you…us.*

*First published on the Short Humour Site, 2009.*

Today is January 4, 1960. It is 5:30 Monday morning in a small south Georgia farming town, and the only lights on in the town square are from the diner, squeezed in between the drug store and the barber shop. The college bowl games are over. Syracuse beat Texas in the Cotton Bowl and won the national championship. It's drizzling now, and it's expected to last all day.

In the diner are the regulars—the earliest of the early risers.

Sal, the proprietor—short and stocky, a friendly, round grandfatherly-face, and recovering alcoholic and chain-smoker whose two previous diners burned to the ground—turns out the same orders of grits, eggs, bacon, and toast day after day.

Elaine, the waitress—beautiful and engaging but a tramp to the Ladies' Auxiliary—looks tired since husband number four disappeared, leaving her alone to kiss the young ones good-bye every morning at 4:30 before scribbling a note for her mother to read once she stumbles out of bed.

Ben, the farmer—a nervous young father, whose weather-beaten face adds 20 years—spends most afternoons teaching his sons about farming, occasionally taking the smarter one aside to encourage him to become a doctor or lawyer or banker, even though the farm escaped the hailstorm last summer.

Frankie, the mechanic—a stranger with a badly disfigured face from some overseas conflict—keeps to himself, though no one really minds, because his looks don't affect his knack for fixing any kind of engine, though Fords and Chevys are all he ever sees.

Henry, the truck driver—a pudgy, balding milkman who became a long distance truck driver and took to chewing tobacco when his young wife ran off with the revival preacher—only comes to the diner on Mondays, because for the rest of the week he is on the road somewhere between here and Bakersfield.

Today is January 4, 1960, and soon, a Facel Vega FV3B will crash outside Paris, killing one—but Sisyphus will roll on.

*First published in The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, April 2010.*

An old guy wearing a gray plaid fedora and a khaki jacket raises his walking stick to point at an empty space in the dairy case. A tall skinny kid in a grocery apron re-stocks the adjacent yoghurt section from a precariously-stacked trolley.

“How can you have a special and run out on the first day?” complains the old man. The kid rolls his eyes and nods his head, not so much in agreement but as if to signal to the old man that he should find someone who cares. Meanwhile his movements between the trolley and the dairy case do not slow at all.

I wait, but nothing else is said. Looking ahead, I sense something familiar in the old man, but I can also still remember not long ago being the kid. Anyway, I don’t say anything. Never do. It’s complicated. I was once contemptuous, young, and ageless; and soon I’ll be irritable, old, and finished. Besides, what could I say?

“Razor Cotton? Wicked percussion, man!” I hear myself say to the tall skinny kid who, with his back towards me now, reveals a gruesome picture on his t-shirt.

“How about a couple of those Yoplaits?” I add.

Reaching towards the shelf, he opens his hand flat as if to make the entire display available to me and then turns abruptly to run after the old man.

“Hey, Sir? Lemme see if we’ve got that special somewhere in the back.”

“Don’t bother, son. Not supposed to have it. Clogs the arteries. You may have just saved my life, kid. How ’bout that?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Save my life?” interrupts the old man.

“No. Never mind. I gotta get back to work.”

“Have a good day, kid,” says the old man with a satisfied smile.

As the tall skinny kid comes back to the dairy case, I catch his eye. “So this special, you have some in one of the coolers in the back?

“I must have been mistaken,” answers the tall skinny kid, shrugging his shoulders. “We’re completely out.”

“But I just heard you say—”

The tall, skinny kid recoils: “Say? I didn’t say anything. Listen, we’re out of stock, OK? Talk to the manager if you want. He just walked in. Over there by checkout 16 talking to the blonde cashier. The big guy in the black leather jacket with the chopper half-helmet under his arm.”

“Frankie!” yells the tall skinny kid. “This guy wants a rain check, and he’s really pissed—er, upset—that we ran out on the first day.”

Standing frozen in place I watch a much older Frankie the Fist on his approach, praying devoutly that he won’t remember me—now bald and wearing an eye patch and a very crooked nose—as the welsher who took him for five grand at the races.

Barrelling in my direction, Frankie puts out a great big arm to embrace me, or so I think until he pushes his way by me, making his way to the old man in the fedora.

He calls him Cy as he crunches him in a friendly but painful-looking hug, and then I remember. This is Cy, the guy from the murder trial who walked on Frankie's alibi.

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There's the door buzzer. It's my groceries. I have them delivered now.

*First published in Bewildering Stories, Issue 348 August 10, 2009.*

Married, two kids, a dog, and two jobs—Ben was an ordinary guy. In a crowd you could scan past him five or six times and not notice that he was standing right there in front of you. Around the neighbourhood he was usually recognized by who he was with—Spots, Ben Junior, or one of the girls.

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*First published on the Short Humour Site, 2009.*

My hero would have to be my 11th grade History teacher. She was an *iconoclast* in our small farming town in southwest Georgia. She didn't look or act like your typical small town teacher. And she certainly wasn't your country club type. She just wasn't like anyone else we'd ever seen—even on TV.

She wasn't ideologically to the left or to the right. In fact in the presidential election in our senior year, no one knew for sure whether she voted for Carter or Reagan. That's when she taught us what the secret ballot was all about.

She wasn't particularly friendly with any of the school employees, except for the janitor and the Spanish teacher, but, maybe because of her presence or her background, she was respected and even feared, at least in one-on-one encounters. There was a rumour that during the high school football playoffs, she had a run-in with one of the coaches. One version had it that he left the gymnasium red-faced and teary-eyed.

When you saw her for the first time, you would swear you were looking at Olive Oil with fiery orange-red hair, but you didn't dare think on it too long. She was different – no doubt about it. For one thing, she was from Baton Rouge, which sounded foreign enough. She said women there didn't wear calico dresses or giggle behind their hands or whisper in mixed company. That remark and others like it didn't endear her to her female colleagues.

What made her importantly different was that she treated us differently, like we were adults, even in our meanest, most juvenile moments. Although she taught us everything the state told her to teach us—we aced the state's "quality control" tests—what most of the few of us who still attend the five-year high school reunions re-

member is that she taught us what she called "critical irreverence." All the icons—this is when we learned the meaning of the word ‘iconoclast’—of American history and Western civilization she advised us to view critically and with a little irreverence, because, she said, too much reverence and too little questioning is sure to "keep you on the plantation."

One particular occasion stands out. Weeks before graduation, she defended a student who had submitted an essay for the state essay championship. The administration had moved to withdraw the student's entry upon learning the essay topic. She took her gloves off for that one – so we found out later – and gave the principal and his nephew, the vice-principal, a verbal thrashing that drew a small, enthusiastic crowd from the delinquents who hung around in hallways and parking lots until they became 16. From a more reliable source, we discovered that she even went so far as to threaten her resignation unless the student and his essay were reinstated.

Later that year, we heard that she had accepted a job at the local private (whites-only) school.

*First published in Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal, Volume #30 April - June 2010.*

Hello Christopher. This is Quentin.

Quentin Mc—

Yes. Yes, it has been a long time.

Have you heard?

About Eric.

Yeah, I'll hold.

*Three 8-year-old boys. Just met. Families on vacation. Bored. On their own. Go exploring. Find railroad tracks running along the edge of a mountain. Put pennies on the tracks for souvenirs. Argue about whether it's illegal or dangerous.*

Is this Christopher's secretary?  Still holding.

*Follow tracks around the curve and into a dark train tunnel. Unable to see to the other end, but walk towards it, kicking against the rail with their feet and occasionally reaching out for the cold, damp wall. Stop in the middle of the curve where both ends of the tunnel are visible. Continue walking. Wonder whether the railroad is still in use. Never heard a train whistle back in Gatlinburg. Exit the tunnel and walk along the tracks, leaving the rails once in a while to go off into the woods. Take turns rolling rocks down the mountain. Getting bored and hungry, turn around.*

No, thank you. It's important that I tell him myself. I can hold a little longer.

*Just before reaching the middle, the long-long-short-long sequence of a train whistle overtakes them. Turn in the direction of the sound and wait. Five, 10, 15 seconds pass and then the bright, white headlight of a locomotive fills the opening behind them.*

Christopher? It's OK. I know you're busy, but you'll want to hear this. Eric went back to the train tunnel. He shot himself in the head with a starter's pistol.

Yes, he's dead.

No, I don't think so. Just couldn't keep silent any longer. You know how hard it was for him. But he wouldn't break a confidence. That's why we never doubted him.

No need to worry about that. We weren't even interviewed after the accident. Nothing to connect us. No doubt. Suicide.

A shame … yeah.

It's OK, I'll be there. And I'll let them know you wanted to come.

Don't worry. Won't happen again.

*First published in Dew on the Kudzu - A Southern Ezine, October 5, 2011.*

He appreciates order. He never fails to notice the neatly-folded towels in the large marble-tiled bathroom, the downturned tumblers on the writing desk facing the large picture window, and the un-opened bottle of vintage Scotch whiskey. The room always smells the same—fresh but without the chemical odour.

He always stays in this room. It's his room on weekends near the end of each quarter. He never asks for another room, and he never asks for anything out of the ordinary. He eats in his room, he stays in his room, and he talks to no one other than the hotel desk clerk. He lives in his room. From high above the city, he follows the day's progress, he mostly just hears the TV that's always on, he reads his daily newspapers, and he works, usually until two or three o'clock in the morning, because he can't sleep until the bottle is half-finished.

He is always alone in his room. He is always alone except when he goes to the office. He always flies in on Fridays for the Monday morning briefings he gives to the executive management team, advising them on efficiency improvements and redundancy elimination. He does not let anything distract him. He insists on a private elevator and no contact below C-level on the organization chart.

He doesn't seem too much one way or the other. He doesn't smile or laugh or frown. He doesn't give compliments or sarcasm. He's indifferent to what others have to say, but they often fail to notice. He checks in as if it's the first time he's ever been in the hotel. He orders the same meals at the same times and leaves the same tip, always as if he's doing it for the first time.

He is unremarkable in many other ways. But where his job is concerned he is truly remarkable. No one is even in his league. They

say that he is really the one person responsible for the company's 20 consecutive years without a negative earnings report.

This weekend is like every other weekend for the past 80 quarters … except for one thing. The briefing is scheduled for Monday afternoon.

Just like every previous weekend at quarter's end, he sits at the desk, going over his report, reviewing his calculations, and examining his assumptions. Hours pass, and well after the city lights have lit everything from below, the bottle empties and the papers lay undisturbed.

He's never opened the door to the balcony before. But tonight he carries his glass and bottle outside to sit and watch the city that he's only known from these heights. It's past three in the morning, and he's still sitting there, drinking, quietly.

At five-thirty on Monday morning, sirens converge on the hotel.

*First published in Black Lantern Publishing, Volume III, Summer 2010.*

It started sometime in my late forties. Things just set me off. Things that didn't bother me before now do. They're threatening, because they seem directed at me. It's as if I'm being singled out to be insulted everywhere I turn.

When I'm driving, it's other drivers. They cut me off or refuse to let me in. Their car horns scream at me, and the drivers make faces and gesture obscenely with their mouths wide open. When I'm a pedestrian, it's other pedestrians bumping into me, shoving me, shouting at me, tromping on my feet, or stepping on my heels. When I'm a client, the talking machines misdirect me and I wander into and out of dead ends until I finally fall through the administrative trap door. When I'm a customer, it's out of stock, not under warranty, or not available as advertised. When I'm a citizen, my email, telephone, and banking activities are under surveillance. When I'm at home, things just fall around me—a glass falls, bounces off the counter and crashes to the floor and among the glass shards is the medicine that I thought I had taken this morning.

This is all new for me—a change. I've changed, and while I sometimes wonder if the world—other people—is at fault, I feel like I can see myself becoming different. Occasionally now, I catch a glimpse of myself as if I were standing there beside myself, and I wonder how I became this stranger. It's common, so I've heard, that children fear growing up, fearing that they will become someone that they would find unpleasant, like a grown-up they know. I remember looking in the bathroom mirror when I was six-, seven-, or eight-years-old and imagining whether I would like the person I was going to become in 20 years. Looking back, I'm sure I would have frightened myself.

My reactions are becoming wildly disproportionate to what triggered them. I do see that. I yell at the dog next door and scream at the neighbourhood kids and shout at the old man on the bicycle and swear at the call centre representative and break dishes and throw books and newspapers and slam the phone down and rip the mail to pieces. A very small part of my mind is conscious of what I'm doing, but it's not enough—

"Ok, Mr. Slightham. That's our time for today. We'll pick up here next week. Have a great day!"

*First published on the Short Humour Site, 2009.*

*Penguins behind the glass.*

Are they all alive? Some aren't even moving.

I think they're all alive. Some may be sleeping. I hear they can sleep standing up.

What do they do all day, when they aren't sleeping, I mean?

Just wobble around, jump in the water—they're good swimmers—squawk and flap and swallow fish whole. Not a bad life. Everything they need is here.

What do you think they think about?

Probably nothing much—food, play, maybe sex, if it's mating season.

Do they mind being watched?

No, they're simple. They don't have our sense of individual space and privacy.

I'd get so bored. Don't they get bored?

Wouldn't think so. They aren't as complex as we are. Their needs are very basic. If they were like us, this might seem like a prison, but they're not capable of feeling and thinking the kinds of things you worry about.

Have they ever been anywhere else? Is this the only world they know?

Yeah. This is it I imagine.

What's it like—to look out—every day—

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on a sea of faces, wide-eyed and beakless, rounded flippers waving about, shrill, high-pitched shrieking and layers of unintelligible chatter punctuated with loud, boisterous squawking?

We have a famous ancestor who told a story about how we—not all penguins, just those of us who are now kept by humans—ended up in zoos, museums, and aquariums. None of us believed the story was completely true. There were many things that were beyond our imagination. It did, however, give us something in common. And our generation could only dream—and occasionally hope, because we only knew this place.

My close friends Zwakh-ah-ah-akh, Xipshch-Xipshch, Yeedoor-Ahh shared my hope of one day finding freedom, something that we'd never understood until Eck escaped. She was caught within minutes but not before she got a good look on the other side. Most of the flock was too terrified to ask what she saw, but we were curious. But Eck behaved strangely. She would stand for days at the glass wall, and she never spoke, even to us. And she never ate or slept either. One morning we woke up and she was gone.

After that we behaved differently during daylight hours. Well, not so differently that the humans would recognize any difference. We watched them carefully but not so they noticed. Humans get nervous and agitated when you stare at them for too long, like Eck used to do. So from reflections and sidelong looks we scanned the human herd for signs of understanding.

We wondered what they were thinking.

*First published on the Short Humour Site, 2009.*

My first teaching job was in an inner city school. It was pretty uneventful until the day I introduced the talking stick.

It was a nice stick. It had some sort of animal hide wrapped tightly at either end and a single large white eagle feather fastened to a colourful array of beads halfway up. I had picked it up at a souvenir stand in New Mexico on a road trip back when I was in college.

I had completely forgotten about it until I got into ESL teaching. Everybody I met taught the Native American talking stick. At first I thought it was just plain hokey. But students were fascinated by the back story, and the behavioural effects were said to be extraordinary. Best of all, it was foolproof to teach.

So, when I brought my old talking stick into class one bright winter morning, having refitted it with a beautiful Blue Jay feather from the park next door, I was filled with a surge of new teacher enthusiasm.

It was going swimmingly at first. We had a full class of 19 students, and it was very crowded but still cold, because the radiator heating in our old building couldn’t keep up with the cold air leaking in.

Simulating a council meeting, the students were discussing a hypothetical power plant project for our community, and it was about evenly split between supporters and opponents. The talking stick was regulating the debate. It was turning out just as I had imagined. Then, one of the students tripped and fell over a desk and banged another student on the head with the talking stick. Blood trickled. The hit student scrambled to her feet, grabbed the talking stick and swung it at what she thought was her attacker. That's the last I remember distinctly, because chairs and desks and books and

handbags and coats flew about the classroom for the longest three-and-a-half minutes I've ever seen.

When the principal and school security rushed into the classroom to restore order, three students lay tangled in the tumble of chair legs and desk tops and two were slumped over their desks. The talking stick lay broken and bloody on the floor at my feet, while the lovely blue feather with its black bar markings, having come loose during the debate, had settled unruffled onto one of the upright desks.

*First published in Daily Flash 2011: 365 Days of Flash Fiction.*

"Alright, straighten up! Eyes to the front. Lose the smile. Matter of fact, remember. Stop fidgeting. Be still. Watch, listen, wait, just like we rehearsed."

"F___in' automaton. Think this is gonna go somewhere?"

"Yeah, if you'll shut up. And stay out of the way. We had an agreement, so cut it out with the tantrums. You just can't follow through with anything can you?

"F___ you! It's you that's always getting us into these holes, and then you blame me."

"That's enough. And get that nose hair. It's distracting."

"Owww!"

"We can't stand here all day. Besides, you'd have cut your nose off if you'd used scissors…. Where was I?"

"'Indispensable ass-istance' you said."

"No I didn't. But you're right I don't want to come across like a—"

"Why not? That's how it always ends up."

"What?"

"Nothing."
*Quiet knocking on the door.*

"Just a minute— Oh, did you pick up my shoes?"

"No Daddy."

"I'm sorry little man, I thought you were Mommy. Go tell Mommy I need my lucky shoes and I'll be ready in 5 minutes."

"Ok Daddy. Can I watch you shave?"

"Not today.  Daddy's in a hurry."

*Sound of a little boy calling his mother gets fainter.*

"Shouldn't always be ignoring him, you know. He's a good kid, and he doesn't have to turn out like you."

"Well, maybe that won't be so bad as you're always saying.  Look, I'll never quit trying, and if you'd just pull yourself together, maybe we could get somewhere."

"So now you're the optimist, huh?  That's not how you were talking last night.  Remember what you said?"

"Give me a break.  I'd had too much to drink and I was alone, which means I was in your lousy company, and you do bring out the worst in me."

"That's some memory you got. Guess you forgot it was me that reminded you of your wife and kid while you were mourning your life away."

"Ok, I appreciate that. But why can't you always be there? Like right now?"

"I am. I’m there all the time.  But you know I can't be there the way you want. Last Christmas, the Holiday Inn at the airport.  I was there, wasn't I?"

*Sound of water overflowing.*

“Sweetie, is everything ok in there?  We have to go if you want to catch the next train. I put your shoes at the foot of the bed.”

*Knocking on the door.*

“Yeah, alright.  We’ll, er, I’ll be right out.  Uh, honey, could you find the tie you gave me last Christmas?”

*First published in The Calliope Nerve, January 20, 2010.*

My sister wrote last week. I always enjoy her letters. She has a gift for understating things. When the hurricane hit, her house "suffered some serious damage." It was washed away. She was like that as a kid, too. I remember she broke her hand in the 3rd or 4th grade, and before a week was up she was writing with the other hand and showing off her pink cast.

She's a sport. Actually, she didn't write much this time, just "Here, found this in Liviabel's papers, and thought you might get a kick out of it." Inside was a 4x6 envelope, brittle and yellowed around the edges.

Couldn't figure it out at first. Why was she sending me this? The envelope was addressed in large block letters to Mr. Santa, and the 5-cent stamp was even cancelled. On the other side a week's worth of names in 3 columns—morning, afternoon, evening. The names were familiar, and it was definitely my father's writing, virtually unreadable to anyone but family.

Ainsworth, Huggins, Lawley, Rosen, Whitaker—first these, then the rest came back to me like a gust. These were folks my father used to visit long ago, before he got retired. Some of the names I didn't recognize, but those might have been from the nearby hospital or local jail.

And this was how the old man spent his time and why he never had time to play baseball or football and even missed dinner sometimes and forgot Momma's birthday once and wouldn't take us to the Gulf one summer and—

My resentment and bitterness were all coming back. It didn't matter that I couldn't remember whether I got the bicycle or the Indian or

the baseball cards. I probably did. It wasn't about stuff. It was about what was really important to him. For years I'd blamed him, and everyone thought I was scapegoating him like a jealous child, but now I had evidence. It wasn't just in my head.

I mean! Just imagine, an innocent little kid, 6 or 7, writes a cute little letter to Santa—probably the last year I actually believed in Santa Claus—and the old man takes the envelope and on the back scribbles down his schedule for the next week, which I bet was Christmas week, because work always came first and everything was always about work.

But—I can't see why he saved it. That wasn't like him. Ahhh yeah! It wasn't him. It was Momma. She saved it just like she saved all our stuff. He couldn't have been bothered. Too busy. Places to go, people to see. Everybody wanting his attention and getting it—at my expense.

Why did she send this? It isn't helpful at all. Only stirs up bad feelings. Don't know what she must have been thinking. I don't throw anything away anymore, but this sure came close.

"Hey, Stokes, I mean, Mr. Stokes. Has the Reverend been by yet? It's not like him to be late. You'll let me know? Thanks."

*First published in Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal, Volume #32 October-December 2010*

> "No full, accurate, and unprejudiced history of the war has ever been written." George Lewis

Professor Lewis, in his new book, *The Inland War of 1812*, claims to have authenticated what many military historians now consider irrefutable evidence that Mrs. Laura Secord was not in fact the messenger who alerted Lieutenant James FitzGibbon to the American assault on the British depot at DeCew House. In an extraordinary find, Professor Lewis has uncovered the handwritten and signed confession of Mrs. Secord's uncle dated 22 June 1813, which proves that he, not she, saved the British. While her motives were honourable, unlike his, the military value of her famous trek in defence of the Loyalist community was nil. This is the essence of Professor Lewis' latest research.

The record of Mrs. Secord's uncle has excited much controversy. Some claim there was no such person, others that he was Mrs. Secord's self-appointed guardian and neighbour, newly arrived from Massachusetts. Professor Lewis' discovery suggests not only that Mrs. Secord's uncle was real but that it was he who, albeit indirectly, warned FitzGibbon by means of a confession that was undoubtedly extracted through torture, a common enough practise at that time. The legend of Mrs. Secord and her 30-kilometre journey through the wilds of 19th century Niagara has always rested on uncorroborated evidence and this latest piece of historical evidence will undeniably further diminish her standing among historians. However, what is most damning to the legacy of Mrs. Secord are the alleged facts that her uncle was a collaborator and that it was a treasonous opportunist and not a courageous heroine who warned FitzGibbon and foiled the American attack.

Professor Lewis generously devotes a full four paragraphs on pages 45 and 47 to recount his revised history, weaving this new colourful thread into the traditional tale of Mrs. Secord.

> On the evening of June 21, 1813, three American officers arrived at Laura's house and demanded dinner, so she served them. During the evening, she overheard Lieutenant Colonel Charles Boerstler's plans, and before daybreak, she set out alone to warn the British. Just a few hours after she had left, her uncle came by to pay a visit to his niece and her husband, James, who had been wounded and left flat on his back since the Battle of Queenston Heights. Upon learning that Laura had gone to deliver information that could upset the planned attack on DeCew House, her uncle upbraided James, reminding him that the American sentries posted all around Queenston and the Indians and British guerrillas in the wilderness beyond were all of them capable of much violence, especially to a woman travelling alone. Of course he could not have told James the real reason for his concern. But in his confession, he reveals that he believed an American victory would virtually assure the American annexation of the Niagara Peninsula and richly reward any Loyalist who had switched sides.
>
> It was late afternoon on June 22nd and he had been following his niece for 12 miles, and now, through the worn soles of his boots, he could feel Black Swamp oozing between his toes. He knew that Laura would be coming this way and avoiding the high ground of the escarpment. It was dangerous country, filled with sharp rocks and rattlesnakes, and unless one was an Indian or a scout, one moved slowly and fearfully. She could not have been too far ahead. In a clearing, he stopped, hearing a familiar whirring. As he reached for his musket, an arrow went through his right shoulder and the gun dropped to the

ground at his feet. It was an old trick. The Indian scouting party surrounded him. Unable to make himself understood, he was treated like an enemy prisoner, robbed of his possessions, and stripped of his clothes.

At the Indian camp, he most likely did not know who his captors were, since he was not knowledgeable beyond the towns and outlying farms. Based on historical evidence from the period and place, he was likely questioned then tortured to find out what a townsperson like himself was doing in the wilderness all alone. An analysis of his handwriting appears to confirm that he was tortured. There is a jerkiness and intensity in his penmanship that has been noted in other torture cases. The torture was successful, as we now know from the confession. Once he had given up the American plan and his own effort to stop Laura from delivering the warning, an Indian messenger rode off to warn the British. Late in the evening, FitzGibbon received the warning and prepared an ambush for Boerstler and the Americans in a densely wooded area on the Niagara Escarpment.

The following morning, the day of the planned attack, Laura was captured by Indian scouts, but her insistence on speaking directly with FitzGibbon persuaded them to take her to him without harm. FitzGibbon listened to Laura and thanked her, but he did not say that he already knew about the surprise attack. Later that day, on June 23rd, the Americans were routed at Beaverdams by Mohawk warriors flanking the trail on the ridge of the Niagara Escarpment. The ambush was planned so well that FitzGibbon's guerrillas reportedly never had to fire a shot. They had only to guarantee the Americans that if they surrendered they would not be scalped.

In Canada, Mrs. Secord has long been recognised as a heroine of the resistance during the War of 1812, but until now her uncle's

treason had never been known. His body was never recovered. His name does not appear in any previous accounts of the battles around this time, and only now has it surfaced in this particular episode of the war. Professor Lewis speculates that the confession may have been suppressed in order to keep a traitor hidden and to protect a heroine's feat—"an inexcusable act of biased scholarship" as the American historian has put it.

*First published in The Copperfield Review, Volume 9, Number 2, Spring 2010.*

Tina woke up in a strange bed—alone. The bed was firmer than hers, but it was warm and comfortable. On the opposite wall, two oil portraits flanked a cumbrous television on top of a wide, low dresser. No mirror. The blinds on the window were closed. It was quiet. But it smelled good—like her grandmother's freshly washed linen.

Her throat was dry and she reached for a plastic water bottle, but there was only an empty glass tumbler with an upside down toothbrush in it. She started at that. On the other bedside table were pills of various shapes and colours, pigeonholed by day of the week in a plastic dispenser. There was water, a pitcher of it with ice cubes and a small fruit juice glass on a doily.

Lifting herself so that she could better take stock of what was going on around her, she felt stiff in every part of her body she could name. She filled a glass and drank it too quickly. The cold water seized her throat and put her into a coughing fit.

Finally relaxed, her breathing returned to normal, and she dried her eyes with a Kleenex.

She couldn't see well without her glasses, but she couldn't remember where she'd left them. So, scrunching up her eyes, she gazed around the room and fixed on the portraits. Leaning forward as far as her body would let her, she studied them. The woman looked like her mother, but her mother never sat for a painting. And the man? Oh my! That's German, but he must be 50 years old in that portrait. She raised her right hand in front of her face. Loose skin, liver spots, and blue veins stared back no matter how hard she squinted and shifted her head to find a true view.

*First published in 6 Tales, December 2011.*

It was a mistake, but who among us …? Anyway, now I'm reading the obits. That's how I get even. My granddaddy, grandma, and my old man—what a useless bag of wind he was—used to go through the obits in between games of canasta on the side porch with whoever they could drag in as a fourth. You know, it is kinda satisfying to see when you've outlived someone you knew your whole life. And, God, what a pleasure to read the obit of someone you hated, like Arthur Sanders. What a two-faced son of a— Bastard put me in retirement 10 years early. Said I had a drinking problem. "Well, how do you like that Mr. Sanders, sir?" Dog days, last summer … well now … that was the jackpot. The Reverend Milligan and Miss 'Prissy' Ducharme in the same edition. Got caught out, didn't they now? And by God, no less. For all those lies they told. God's justice I'd say, ruining my reputation, scaring kids. "Well, last laugh's on you isn't it now? Heard the gravediggers wanted to put you in the same hole, so they'd finish early." What a hoot! Almost up there with when J. Everett Singletary III's cremated remains got mixed up at the funeral parlor. They say widow Blankenship's 'Peaches' is still on the mantle at Singletary House. But today's just a waste of 50 cents. Only one obit. Nobody I know. Just this little kid, not even four years old. What a shame! Says he died two days ago. Hit by a car. What was he doing in the road for God's sake? Where was his mother? God Almighty! Couldn't be! No! That little curly-haired boy—brown eyes big as copper pennies—waddling out into the road after a— But I swear I saw him moving!

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

“Soma, capsules or tablets, on sale, $99 a pound.” I really saw this in a store—one of those high volume members-only discount stores. I was with a friend. An anti-depressant with a literary pedigree at bulk prices. Unbelievable! That was my first reaction.

“What’s with this? This is prescription medicine. How can they do this?”

“You still have to have a doctor’s prescription, but it’s open. Your doctor can prescribe as many pills as you want. We’re in a special economic zone, you know, so things are a little different.”

“Yeah, but are there really so many people who feel this kind of bottomless depression?”

“Hard to say. This was one of the first things that changed after the flood.”

“You mean they’re sedating people who’ve lost everything?”

“That was what some of us thought at first. But there was a devastating flood in China right about the same time, and though it didn’t get the coverage that we got, there were regular reports of suicides—not just a few … hundreds.”

“So, they were sedating people?”
“Like I said, that’s what we thought. But there was a side effect.”

“One Flew over the Cuckoo—”

“Hyperaggression!”

“That bad? I mean people lost—“

“Worse than you think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it! You lose your house. Your job. Your kids. There is nothing else to lose. And now this drug puts you right out there on the edge.”

“Suicide?”

“No! Aren’t you paying attention? Murder!”

“Murder? But I haven’t—“

“Of course you haven’t heard. They’re still recovering bodies from the flood.”

“But surely they can tell the difference?”

“Hm.”

“Can’t they?”

“Uh, yeah, yeah I guess they can. Listen, let’s go, I’m getting light-headed. Ever since the storm.”

“Sure. Let’s pick up some fast food and take it back to the armoury.”

“Ok, but I need to go back to the house this afternoon.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No! I mean, no thanks, I’d rather be alone.”

He was downright rude I thought.  Must be the side effect he was talking about.  That was my second reaction.

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

How much more can there be? Uninterrupted visual stimulation all day long, some days. That's if we can trust this neurological chronometer implant. On those days, no shadows, no colours, no shapes; no rest from the all-enveloping whiteness.

On other days, shrill, harsh tones dizzy our hearing, but we have no sight, no smell or taste or feeling on these days. Each day gives us only a single sense. The others are shut down.

Except for those days when every nerve tip is ignited, and all the senses are awakened for a split second, then shut off, then switched back on, over and over again. And so on, for days or maybe weeks. Long enough that we seem to have lost track of much of what is happening to us.

Where isn't known to us. Only what is allowed can be seen or heard by us, and only then on sight days or hearing days. There's nothing to smell on smell days but a noxious odour, but we can't cough or hold our breath. Taste days make us crave something salty or sweet, but we don't eat anymore. We try not to feel.

Who is behind this, we don't know. He or she or they or it might only be in our heads. But are we really real or is someone thinking us? Memory and imagination are useable, but mostly we don't know which is which.

Before there was one among us who described things that he said he really saw or felt or heard. He wasn't convincing though. He was with us for a while, but he's not here any longer.

He told us that he couldn't feel anything but his feet and that they always felt wet, and then he said he saw them in a clear plastic

tank on the table opposite. That shocked us, because we couldn't feel or see any of this—not wet feet or tanks or tables or rooms or buildings.

Before— Before what? Earlier. Earlier there had been a splash. An impact and the sound of us dropping heavily into water. The jarring we felt throughout. But we didn't see a thing. And then we floated to the top and stayed there, rising and falling until the water calmed.

Before the splash, a buzzing, grinding, vibrating, sticky, bloody procedure removed us from the skull.

Prior to the extraction, we lost control of our muscles, and our heart raced while our limbs jerked and flopped. The needle helped, but we were still awake—inside.

Before the needle, a squeaky hospital gurney carried us to the operating room.

Previously, we had been put in an empty room with no windows and not even an outline of the door.

There was another room before that with a chair and a table and on the table a pen and paper and our signature at the bottom.
Prior to the signature was the lecture hall filled with 200 students taking Professor Smartt's course in the Philosophy of Mind. The topic that day was Putnam's brain in the vat.

It all began with a posting on craigslist. "Students needed for pioneering multidisciplinary experiments into multiple personality disorders. Tuition fully paid on completion."

*First published in Danse Macabre Issue, Vol. 6, No. 7, September 2011.*

Standing on the edge of the building around twilight was a man. He winced.

An hour earlier, he was walking up the last flight of stairs to the roof.

In Room 714 half-an-hour before that, he was reading a letter that had been hand-delivered to the front desk.

Sometime between 2:00 and 4:00 that morning, some marauding kids were stripping down his car in the parking lot down the street.

A few hours before that he was being mugged while leaving the bar around the corner.

Two-and-a-half hours before that, he was moving into a dilapidated hotel near the mission, having just been released.

He was rampaging through the apartment a couple of hours earlier when the police arrived and took him into custody.

Around 5:30, the bartender was refusing to serve him any more drinks.

Twenty-six hours and seven minutes ago, he was being pink slipped and escorted off the floor where he was working moments before.

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I am making an early dinner for the boys when the call comes. He never could stick with anything. Drinking more than we could af-

ford, turning up drunk for work, or phoning in sick with that slurred speech and foul mouth of his. I am thinking this may be the end, wondering how we're going to make rent.

The boys are finally asleep, and I'm swearing that this'll be the last time he'll ever take it out on me like that. I say that every time, I know. But for sure next time, I'm calling the cops on the bastard soon as I see him at the door.

First thing in the morning and the super is banging on the door and shouting that the landlord is evicting us.

Mid-morning, thanks to that good-for-nothing piece of ___, I'm phoning around trying to find something better than one of those hell holes for women beaten by men.

Just before noon, someone from the police department is calling and talking about a car, registered to this address, that's been found vandalized in a downtown parking lot. I'm not worrying about this right now, and I'm telling them over and over to tow, impound it, or whatever for all I care—it's not mine!

Early in the afternoon—the boys are safe in school and are going over to a friend's afterwards—the hotel desk clerk is telling me that the man got beaten pretty badly. Good's what I say … under my breath. I mean it's not like he didn't have it coming. Besides, he didn't even go to hospital!

A few hours later—must've been around 4:30—I'm standing at the hotel front desk, and I'm asking the desk clerk if he's seen him.
Half-an-hour later, I'm sitting in a nearby bakery, watching from diagonally across the street, and waiting for him to show up and get the letter I left.

About seven or seven-thirty, I am following him up the last flight of stairs to the roof, and my heart is racing.

I am walking up behind him to the edge of the roof where he is looking down into the streets now emptied of cars rushing out of the city.

I am standing behind him, and I am pushing the gun hard into his right kidney.

*First published in The Calliope Nerve, June 11, 2010.*

Standing in the middle of a pile of garbage, he lays the clipboard on the floor and begins sorting.

Metal filings mixed with dirt and dust, twisted duct tape, rolled up sections of yesterday's paper, shims broken and splintered, disposable blue latex gloves, oily red rags, safety glasses with a lens missing, candy wrappers and empty chip bags, some rusted-out metal screws, an incisor chipped on the corner, dozens of yellow earplugs on blue strings—

At the temp agency, they said he'd be sorting recyclable material in a plant and to show up at 8:00 the next morning. "Just ask someone if you don't know. And don't forget to get your timesheet in if you want your cheque next week."

—a tangle of black electrical tape, a shrivelled blackened banana peel, a blood-stained tube sock, water bottles, clumps of reddish hair, dust masks torn and smudged, a couple of Coke cans, a foot from an aluminum ladder, a melon-sized mass of mucous-clotted tissue, some apple cores—

The blue shirts had ribbed him in the lunchroom just before the shift started, teasing him with names like garbage collector, litterbug, CSI wannabe, and maggot mate.

—a few soiled Band-Aids, coffee cups with the rims rolled up, some orange rinds, a used condom, a work boot with a nail clean through the heel, and a half-used roll of safety tape.

One of the old guys—wrinkled and leathery-faced but queerly futuristic with his safety yellow ear protectors pushed up and looking like they might be permanent—had come over to join him.

“Don’t mind them,” he said nodding in their direction. “They’re just blowing off steam what with shutdown coming next week. Every year around this time—at least for the last five anyway—the company does what they call an eco-assessment. It's a one-day garbage audit—what you’ll be doing. Ain’t nothing to do with the environment. Pure PR. See those plaques over there next to the Coke machine. That’s one of the stops they make when a tour—“

A loud buzzer interrupted everything and everyone on cue, and a swarm of blue funnelled through the double doors. The supervisor came up to him as the buzzer was silenced and walked him into the plant and over to a large roll-up door in receiving.

“It’s pretty straightforward,” said the supervisor, looking past him. “All you have to do is sort through and count up the paper, the plastics, the glass, and any non-recyclable materials. All yesterday’s garbage, including night shift’s—what you’re standing in right now—has been numbered and put on plastic sheeting here. But don’t worry. There won’t be any trucks today.”

“Oh,” said the supervisor who was turning to walk away, “you get two breaks and a half-an-hour lunch. Just follow the guys. Any questions, make sure you ask, OK?”

He watched the supervisor walk away, and then turned back to the garbage pile. With his boot he moves the clipboard a few feet further away. Sifting through the waste, creating smaller piles, he pokes at a rolled up piece of clothing at the bottom of the pile and lifts it with his garbage wand. Holding up a blood-soaked white t-shirt, he looks around to see if anyone else saw the ring drop onto the plastic.

*First published in The Fringe Magazine, August 2011.*

It took place every Wednesday afternoon at three-thirty in the 12th floor boardroom. Everyone had meetings, but this one was different. It had been going on for four years.

Sitting in the middle at the long table, her back to the window, was the former director of human resources, a bookish face framed by too-red hair, retired after 35 years and now a consultant, who never understood why no one showed up for her retirement party.

On her left was the very large and athletic interim project director who had been recruited for his precisely-articulated and intricately-ordered plans, but who routinely failed to secure budget commitments and never managed to build his team beyond one.

Opposite was the former interim project director, now senior advisor emeritus, a short but distinguished raconteur and pitchman with a familiar and sometimes risqué repertoire, whose self-promotion and calculated liaisons had always ensured his place at the table.

To his left was the self-described American dissident who had evaded an earlier Asian war but whose alleged anti-establishment views were embarrassingly incongruous with his corporate outlook as financial comptroller.

Next to the consultant, at the far end of the table, was the balding but still young and very ambitious senior VP for sales and marketing whose only fault seems to have been an attentiveness that vacillated between the cloying and the random.

At the other end of the table was the chief of technology, the legacy of an ancient merger, whose occasional outbursts, always irrele-

vant and mostly unintelligible, were tolerated, but just barely, by his brother-in-law, the chairman.

Opposite him at the head of the table sat the chairman, a tall impeccably-dressed man of middle age, who had directed the last 199 meetings. His secretary was absent, so there were no refreshments, and there was no one to take the minutes, not that anyone ever did. Following protocol, the chairman greeted each member, proceeding by rank, and then he stood up, excused himself, and walked to the door.

When the he opened the door, a security detail of 12 poured into the room and escorted the other six out to the elevator lobby. In the lobby, the chairman, without a word or gesture, handed each an envelope.

After the elevator had taken the last group down, the chairman walked back into the meeting room, sat down, and looked straight ahead. Then came the three knocks on the door.

*First published on the Short Humour Site, 2011.*

“Allison, did you remember to leave food out for Mrs. Easom so she can feed your creatures and that lizard?” Mother was using a mirror to guide the tweezers across her forehead.

“He’s not a lizard. He’s a gecko,” declared eleven-year-old Allison,” and, of course, I left out food—and feeding instructions. You know I don’t forget things like that.”

“Looks awfully like a lizard to me,” replied Mother, “but you’re right, dear. He’s a gecko. And I’m sure Mrs. Easom will be able to figure everything out.”

“Ok you two,” interrupted Daddy, changing lanes to pass a truck. “We’ve got 1603 miles to go before we get to the Grand Canyon, so you might as well settle down and enjoy the ride.”

“Alright Daddy, but you know how she provokes me.” Turning up the volume on her iPod, she pressed her face against the window.

“I’m sorry Allison” said Mother over her left shoulder. “I didn’t mean to provoke you. I just wanted— Here, let’s turn on the radio.”

“Good idea. Weekend Edition should be on.” He pressed one of the preset buttons and adjusted the volume for front and back.

“Oh my God,” sighed Allison.

The truck they were passing was carrying pigs—an upper and a lower level. The pigs were mashed up against sides of the trailer, and as her father pulled beside the truck, Allison could see the pink snouts, the floppy ears, even a curly tail poking through the metal slats, and the big, deep eyes.

“Oh, God!” cried Allison, losing an earbud as she jerked away from the window. “How horrible! I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“What’s wrong honey?” asked Daddy.

“Just a truck carrying animals to the slaughterhouse,” said Mother with a wink, which Allison didn’t see.

“Mother! How can you say things like that?” shrieked Allison.

“It’s just part of life, dear. I know how you feel about the zoo and eating meat and all that, but it’s nature. It’s natural. There’s nothing wrong with it.” Mother was getting fidgety and her stomach rumbled.

“Mother’s right, Allison,” said Daddy. “We’re at the top of the food chain, so every living thing below us that can be eaten is on the menu, so to speak.”

“Daddy! You, too? You’re both so— I don’t know, cruel. I can’t believe it. You’re different. Don’t you have any compassion?” Allison sobbed into her pillow.

“No dear,” answered Mother. “It’s not right or wrong. It’s just necessary, and, I’m sorry Allison, but I didn’t have breakfast, and I’m getting a little peckish. Daddy, let’s pull into that rest area ahead.”

Daddy pulled into the shady spot at some distance from the facilities. Before Allison could unbuckle her seatbelt and jump out, Mother turned around and plucked off the little girl’s head and popped it into her suddenly cavernous mouth.

“What’d you have to do that for?” yelled Daddy, his gargantuan green, wart-covered head now halfway through the roof. “You’re so impulsive! Besides, you know it’s my favourite part.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now who needs to relax?” said Mother. “You got the last one, remember? And don’t forget, you got to drive first.”

“But it wasn’t even ripe yet,” protested Daddy, “and she was such good company.”

“Get over it!” snorted Mother. “We’ll pick up something on the way. Now do something about your appearance. You look dreadful."

*First published in Flashes in the Dark, April 26, 2011.*

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

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

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

What distressed me most was the sudden appearance of another box. This one was much bigger — maybe four or five or ten times bigger — than mine. Its many layers were visible when the label was turned the other way. Time after time, when the drawer opened, the little coloured paper clips were lifted out of the large

round box, while I waited for my turn — the turn that I'd been waiting for so long.

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

First published on The Short Humour Site, 2011.

The coffee was cold. One side of the glass coffee table was littered with letters meticulously torn from the folded newspaper. In the midst of the abecedarian jumble was the word 'labyrinth' in the past tense—'labyrinthed.'

Two bald heads reflected the overdone fluorescent lighting. The younger wore frameless glasses, while the other, his eyes squeezed into slits when looking down at his notebook, should have.

"It's not a word, you know, but I think it should be," said the younger one. "To labyrinth—to arrange things in a spatiotemporal puzzle so that others must figure out or stumble on the hidden meaning. Labyrinth, labyrinthine, maybe labyrinthinely, as in 'He labyrinthinely constructed an alternative scenario—"

The older one wrote the word 'labyrinthed' and underlined it with two strokes. Looking up, his eyelids separated, and he nodded for the other to proceed.

"In high school we mooned and lettered. My parents radioed and telephoned. In grammar school we bused and rocketed, and now we google and text and tweet, so why not labyrinth? English is a bastard language—etymologically deficient—so what do I care about linguistic niceties?"

"And do you feel that other people understand you?" answered the older flaccid bald head.

"Do you?" asked the bespectacled bald head.

"Do you want me to understand you—I mean, what would you like me to know about you?" answered the older, wrinkled head, his eyelids rolled down again, as he readied to make notes.

"This is what I mean. Being labyrinthed. That's what's happening to me. Don't you understand?"

"I'd like to understand. Can you tell me what you're feeling, right now, for example?"

"Did you know that in one of the uncivilized regions of equatorial Tlön they don't even have the concept of person? No way to distinguish between you and me or me now and me five years ago. It's fascinating but I can't really imagine it for more than a few minutes at a time. It's like I'm programmed to see the world one way. Do you know what I mean?

"And how does that make you feel?"

"That's an irritating habit you have, you know?"

"Could you describe what it is that you find irritating?"

"When you describe someone—like me, for example, in your notebooks—would you say that you understand me?"

"Well, there are important differences. Description is just part of understanding. There's also causality."

"And identity?"

"I suppose, yes, identity is fundamental."

"So, if you got that wrong, you'd have everything wrong, right?"

"Uh, let's get back to—what are you're feeling? Could you describe that for me?

"That's not the question you should be asking. It doesn't matter what I feel. Don't you get it? What matters is that I'm not your patient. Your patient is gone. Meanwhile, you and I have been labyrinthed—swallowed up by something that is still incomprehensible, notwithstanding our paradigms and languages. I can't make it any more clear."

"Hmm. It may be frustrating trying to explain, but don't give up," said the other, his wrinkles doubling up as he opened his eyes wide, closing his notebook decisively. "I think we made some real progress today, so how about we pick up here next week?"

*First published in The Bicycle Review Issue #10, February 15, 2011.*

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

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

The nurse who just came by to check up on me is someone I recognized right away. I'd watched her walk by in front of my window every day for I don't know how long, and I remembered that she sometimes looked up and waved. Edith, she introduced herself as, told me that I was very lucky to have such a good neighbour. She

said I'd had a seizure and that the old man across the way had called 911 after he had seen me disappear from view.

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

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

#

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

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

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

The other exit takes a lot of patience, but I think you'll appreciate how much time I put into it. If you find this exit, it'll get you home safely if you can move faster than Felix. As a special reward, I've got a fresh block of old cheddar — non-toxic, I promise — waiting for you in your mouse hole.
Either way, you'd better move fast. Remember, the window will be open, and I'll leave a can of Whiskas on the fire escape to get Felix's attention.

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From a bank of 25 monitors, Walt and I could see every part of PPG every five minutes. It was very hard on the eyes and the nerves to watch the monitors loop through feeds hour after hour. By the time I left, I think I must have observed every square inch of

PPG 600,000 times. But that's nothing compared to Walt who claims to have viewed the PPG loop more than a million times.

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

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

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

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

watched the show after lunch between 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning, a statistically slow hour according to Walt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At first light, Abby heard me scampering down the hill and turned towards the woods. She didn't hide the Bible she'd been quietly reading but put it aside to ask how I had slept. I answered that the

incessant buzzing of mosquitoes had freaked me out, so I had to get away and slept great except for a really bad dream. She turned back to the canal and asked, "Do we frighten you?" "Of course not!" I said, in an obviously contrived tone, wondering what she might be talking about.

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

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

There was no one else on the path with us, and in fact only Griff and Beth had seen anyone since we'd started out. We'd sort of hoped to meet someone going in or coming out of the tunnel, but we were alone. Just outside the tunnel, we strapped our flashlights to our bicycle frames, switched them on and rode into the darkness, watchful to avoid bumps and ruts and debris that could catapult us into the canal. We couldn't see it, but in the damp blackness, we smelled it and felt how close it was.

Only half a mile or so long, yet it took us a good half an hour to get through. Abby's flashlight came loose and fell into the canal, so we all decided to get off our bikes and walk the rest of the way with her. The funny thing was that it was completely quiet in the tunnel,

and except for the flashlight episode, no one said a word. There was nothing but the crunching of the ground underneath and an rhythmic dripping from overhead.

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

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

The girls weren't concerned — I couldn't understand why (was it this faith thing?) — but I was, so I volunteered to go out looking for them. The blackness of a so-far moonless night swallowed all but the small ball of flickering golden light emanating from our miserly fire. As I refastened the flashlight to my bicycle frame, images of the fire last night came back, sending chills through me. I couldn't leave, but I couldn't go either. But I had to go, because there might — must — have been an accident or something. More importantly, I couldn't show my feelings. I wasn't going to be a coward.

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

summoning the anger I needed to go out searching the woods for our irresponsible companions.

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

On the face of it, I wasn't in such a bad predicament. However, there was something about these people. Later, my roommates couldn't believe I spent the night in the woods with two very attractive young women and nothing happened. Nothing except, of course, we — they — prayed out loud so I kind of participated, and afterwards, we slept together — but quite apart — in the tent, because outside the tent, the mosquitoes were unbearable.

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

It turned out that one of the scouts Griff and Beth had met the day before had broken his leg. Griff and Beth, both pre-Med and also

high school sweethearts, I finally learned, rigged up a stretcher for him and took him to the nearest road leading to Harper's Ferry. They caught a ride and went with him to the hospital and stayed with him until one of the scout leaders arrived. It was so late; they stayed in a motel, and headed back for the canal at daybreak. They were apologetic for staying in a motel. They seemed to feel guilty about that.

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

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

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

and people, lots of them, everywhere. But everything felt more remote now. This was the part I always hated.

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

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

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

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

There were lots of rules I ran into. So many I couldn't keep track. Besides most of the time, my head was filled with all sorts of other little boy thoughts. And my writing was 'ineligible' Mrs. Martin said and my spelling atrocious. In my final spelling test I wrote "Q-E-S-S" when the teacher sad "dress." Diphthongs were an issue for many years.

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

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

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

When I finally dragged in, my older brother, who was getting ready to cut the grass, took one look and growled, "Who did that?" One thing I liked about my big brother was that while he beat me up every now and then, he wouldn't let anybody else get away with it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The dates for these particular entries are April 30$^{th}$, June 15$^{th}$ and July 14$^{th}$. The April 30$^{th}$ entry, which inexplicably contains the

Faustian line, "*Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust, Die eine will sich von der andern trennen*" suggests the profound inner turmoil that Arnold must have felt and provides valuable context not only for the other two nightly episodes but also for the fateful decision that exposed Arnold's treason and which he ultimately came to understand more fully and defend vigorously.

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

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

A gap of nearly five months breaks the continuity of George's journal, but the existing historical record is helpful here. In September Arnold's bold plot to surrender the strategic American fort at West Point to the British was foiled and Arnold defected. On October 11th Arnold's famous open letter in defense of his changing sides was published in the *New York Royal Gazette*. In light of the farmhouse documents, it is now much clearer just how much he struggled with the decision that he now elaborates with great conviction. Once justified he never seemed to turn back. Two months later George's journal picks up with Arnold, by then a brigadier general in the

King's army, leading successful campaigns against American forces in Richmond, Virginia and New London, Connecticut.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We tried to talk her out but she hissed and spit and clawed like some kinda wild animal. She looked real sick and smelled like she hadna seen running water in weeks. We didn't wanna catch nothin from her. Let the police take care of it, that's what I said. Funny thing about those papers though. They was all the same date — tomorrow. And on the front page headline it said "Gas Explosion Kills 46."

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

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

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

We had our go ahead. Buildings clear, gas shut off. I'd like to have had my guys sweep 229 South one last time, but that would have risked offending the police, and I'd sworn never to do that again. The gas— I knew the guys. I'd worked with them many times before. Besides, the developer and the mayor's office — three calls from each in the past hour-and-a-half. Was I going to wait another half-an-hour? No! I might fire this son-of-a-bitch but not until we'd demolished these buildings. Crazy as he was, he was still one of my best demolition guys.

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

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

Herman's house was being taken down. The giant orange crab claw rhythmically dug into the shrinking house and pulled out the twisted, broken, and pulverized remains and dumped them into large steel bins. From my front window, I couldn’t see anyone operating the destructive machine. Several thickset men, with only their white faces unprotected from the cold, stood off at a distance, talking more with their hands than their voices.

Two doors down, right where two streets came together in a T, I had a good view. The sound effects were pretty good, too, especially when the jerking hydraulic claw dropped its heavy bucket load of debris. The sound reverberated through the naked trees, occasionally rattling the windows. With just a little imagination, the machine looked like a sea monster from the early days of Japanese horror movies. This one's name was Hitachi. I don't recall the name of the one Godzilla fought in the 1960s, but Godzilla would have been no match for what I was watching from my window. This thing was enormous. Its powerful orange arm, even flexed, was taller than the two-storey houses on either side, and fully extended it could probably top the blue spruce next to what had been the garage.

The machine monster was relentless in its demolition but remarkably under control. If it were to go berserk, the houses on three sides would have been summarily gutted just like Herman's. The round white-faced men propped up against their F-150s seemed to have trained this beast well. Every once in a while, one them would point or wave his arms or yell a single syllable command, and the beast would pause and then take a new course of action. I wondered if these things ever disobeyed or misbehaved—in real life, I mean, not in fictional horror stories and movies.

Just after five, when the last bin was driven off, and the machine monster had been loaded and chained in place on the heavy equipment hauler, the first real snow of the season started falling. It was sticking and probably covering the scarred land where Herman's house had been. If this kept up, I'd still be able to see out my window all night long, though now there'd just be a hole between two houses.

It's not as if I liked or disliked Herman. I don't even know if Herman was his name. We never spoke or waved or anything. He kept to himself, too. Years ago when I used to get out, I'd walk my dog past his house a couple of times a day, and he was always there at the window. That was it. Two doors down and that's the extent of our lives crossing. Nevertheless, I felt kinda sorry to see his house get ripped apart like that and treated like garbage. Maybe it's because I can see someone looking out their window one day and watching mine get demolished. I know it WILL happen. Watching Herman's house come down, I FELT it.

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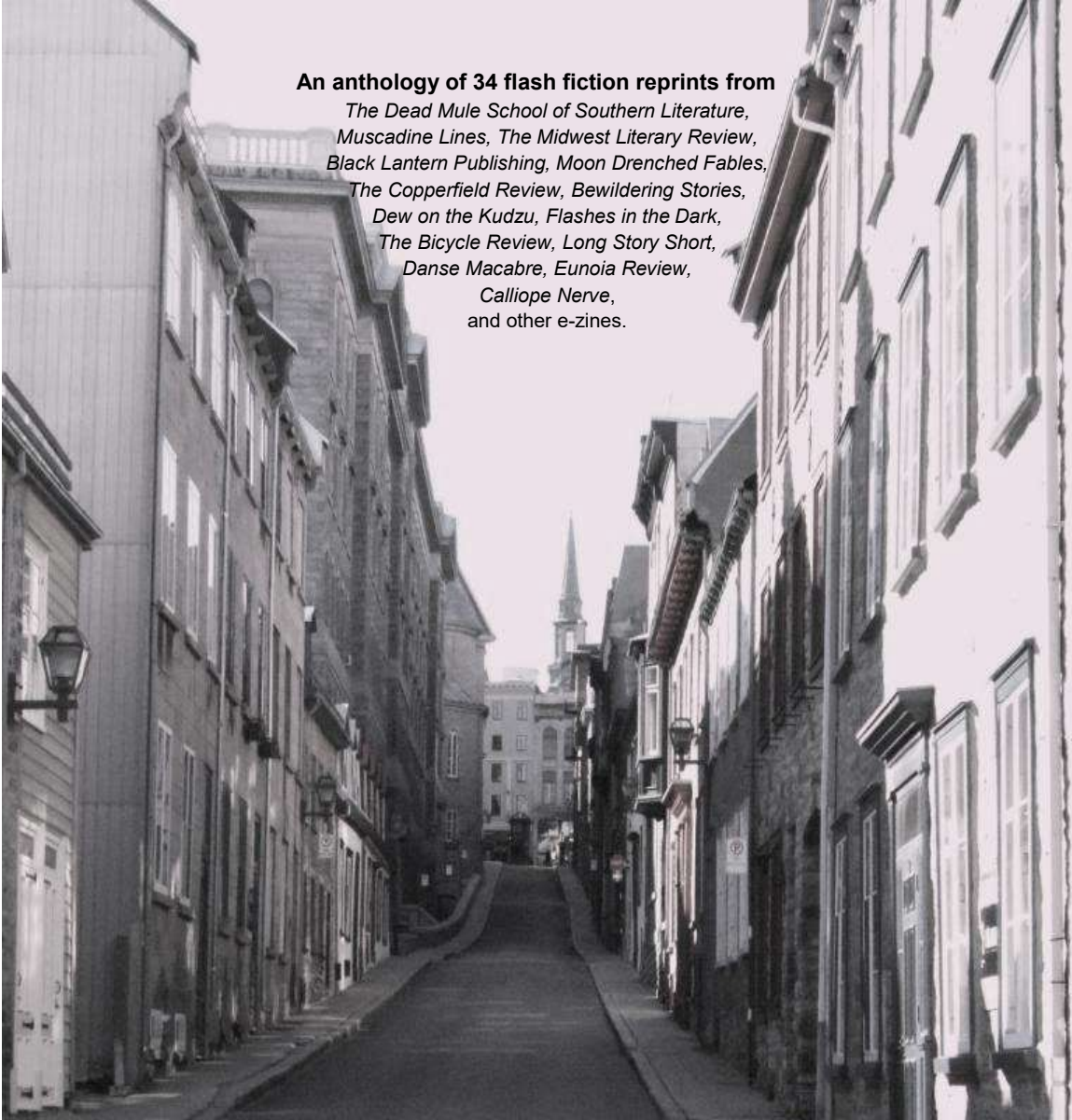

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Rue Ste-Famille Québec (photograph by author, 2011)