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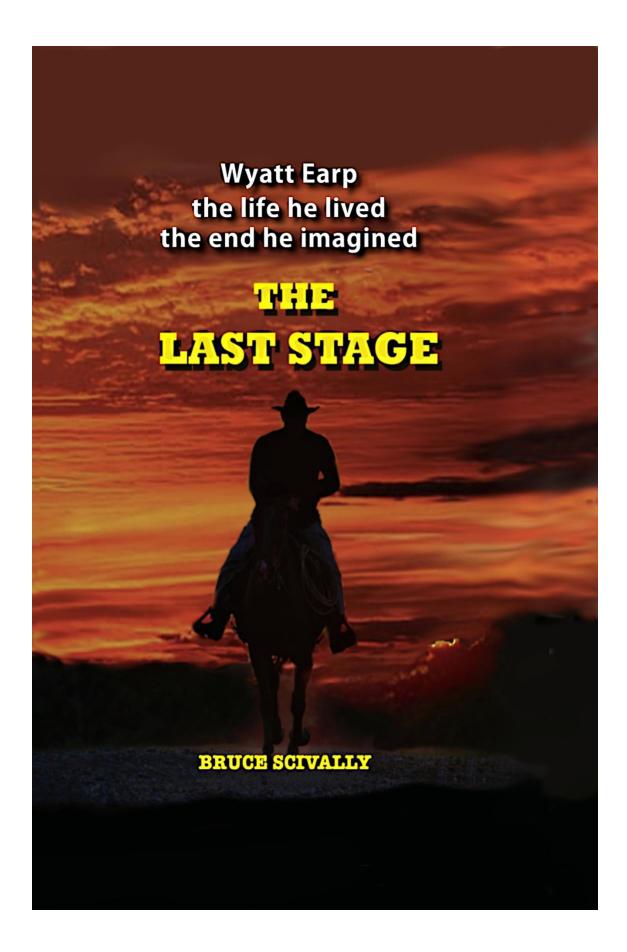
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THE LAST STAGE

BRUCE SCIVALLY

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Genre: Western, Historical Fiction, Romance

A genre-busting Western about the final days of Wyatt Earp and his Jewish wife, Sadie, as the legendary lawman faces his impending death and dreams of the way he'd prefer to make his final journey. A tearjerker with drama, heart, and uplift.

Chapter 1



SUPPOSE

January 12, 1929

Rain fell.

The night was dark as pitch. Far in the distance, a hazy light approached. It appeared at first as one white circle, then, as it came closer, it separated into two. They were the headlights of a 1928 Ford Model T, chugging forward through the pounding rain, engine thrumming.

The car rolled past dark streetlights standing like silent sentinels and stopped at the sidewalk outside a courtyard complex. The driver, Stuart Lake, a 39-year-old war veteran

who'd gypsied through a variety of jobs including newspaperman, wrestling promoter, press aide, and finally writer for magazines and movies, stepped out, wearing a rain slicker.

Up a few steps from the sidewalk were a baker's dozen of small single-story bungalows arranged like a horseshoe, with six on each side facing each other across a central courtyard, and a larger two-story one at the end. Like dandelions, thought Lake—ever since Hollywood became the nation's picture-making capital, these low-cost housing developments were springing up all over.

With a slight limp, he trotted up a walkway into the courtyard. There were no lights on in any of the homes, other than the glow of candlelight and lanterns. Lake stepped onto the porch of one of the bungalows, shook off the rain, and knocked gently on the door.

After a moment, he heard footsteps approaching from inside. The door was opened by Josephine "Sadie" Earp, a short, stout woman of 67, her hair dyed jet black. On all of his previous interactions with her, Sadie had come across as tough and severe, but tonight, for the first time, Lake saw her vulnerability; she was distressed, a hard woman made soft from the prospect of losing her lifelong companion.

"Mr. Lake! Thank God!" she said, dabbing at her red-rimmed eyes with a handkerchief. She held the door open for him. As he entered, he noticed something he hadn't seen on prior visits—a third of the way down from the top of the door, on the right side, was a mezuzah, a narrow decorative box. Lake knew the box contained a rolled-up parchment, upon which was written words affirming belief in one God: Sh'ma Yisrael, meaning "Hear, O Israel," from a prayer that continued "the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." Lake had enough friends in the motion picture business to be aware of Jewish customs, so before stepping across the threshold, he touched the mezuzah with his fingers, then touched his fingers to his lips. He saw the slight flicker of a grateful smile on Sadie's face.

Once inside, Lake wiped his shoes on a doormat and shucked off his rain slicker. Underneath, he wore a casual suit and necktie, dressed for paying respects. Sadie took his slicker and hat and hung them on a peg behind the door.

"Power's been out all afternoon," she said, trying to make small talk to normalize an abnormal situation.

Lake nodded. "Looks like it's off everywhere east of Fairfax."

The dingy room was small and cramped—a kitchen sink and stove in one corner, partially hidden behind a pull curtain, and a tiny bathroom in the opposite corner with a shower/bathtub combo, a wash basin, and a toilet all tightly packed together; the bathroom was the only separate room with a door. Near one wall was a dining table, on top of which was an unfinished puzzle and a Menorah. The Menorah had only a couple of partially-melted candles in it, casting a warm, faint glow.

As he quickly scanned the dim room, Lake saw some mismatched chairs, a small half-bookcase overflowing with books beneath a few weeks' worth of newspapers stacked on top, and a short cabinet supporting a gramophone. On the walls were a handful of family portraits, and a mirror covered by a black cloth.

Against the opposite wall from the dining area was a bed, a few chairs arranged around it. On the small table next to it, a single candle burned, illuminating the frail figure of a tall man supine beneath the covers. A black-coated doctor hovered over him, administering an injection into the frail man's inner elbow.

As Lake approached them, he was immediately struck by the slight, distasteful odor of ammonia noticeable around the bed, emanating from the slender man upon it. Even in the dim candlelight, the man appeared pale, with receding white hair and chevron mustache, lips slightly parted, eyes closed. It was Wyatt Earp, once one of the most feared lawmen of the West, now largely forgotten in an era when pulp magazines and motion pictures made heroes of outlaws like Billy the Kid and Jesse James.

Sadie came over to make introductions, saying, "Dr. Shurtleff, this is Mr. Lake. He's that writer I told you about." Dr. Fred Shurtleff, a clean-shaven, bespectacled man in his fifties, acknowledged Lake with a polite nod as he taped a piece of cotton over the injection site in Wyatt's arm.

"How is he?" asked Lake.

"Hanging on," replied Dr. Shurtleff. "Bout all I can say."

"He was moaning a few minutes ago, before you got here," said Sadie. "Expect he's in considerable pain," said Dr. Shurtleff. "The morphine should help." He put the hypodermic needle and bottle back into his doctor's bag.

A little brown-and-white Border Collie mix, Earpie, crawled out from under the bed and sniffed around Lake's shoes. Lake had met Earpie before, so the dog already had Lake's scent and didn't bother to bark. Lake bent down to acknowledge the affable pet, rubbing his head.

Sadie took a seat beside the bed, resuming her vigil. "I'm scared, Mr. Lake," she said. "He hasn't been in his right mind. Sometimes, I hear him jabbering away, talking to Doc Holliday, or Virgil, or Morgan. But no one's here."

Dr. Shurtleff looked at her with sympathy in his eyes. "They do that sometimes," he said. "Like the body's shutting down, but the brain's still active. Hallucinating. Or maybe... I don't know. I sometimes wonder if it has something to do with what people say about your life passing before your eyes when..."

"Don't say it!" snapped Sadie. Then, after a silent moment, she said quietly, "He'll pull through this. He has to." She looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. "He just has to."

Dr. Shurtleff cast a concerned glance at Lake, who moved to the other side of the bed and leaned down to speak into Wyatt's ear, "Wyatt— it's Stuart Lake." To Lake's eyes, Wyatt appeared to be comatose. More to soothe Sadie than anything else, Lake added, "Better get up now. I've got a few more questions for you." There was no response from Wyatt, no indication that he could hear Lake, or that he was even aware of anything happening around him.

Lake and Dr. Shurtleff took seats on either side of the bed, joining Sadie in her vigil. In their hearts, both men knew that, despite all Sadie's hopes and prayers, the odds were against Wyatt's recovery, and both also knew that she would be utterly lost without him. They were there to honor Wyatt in his final moments, but more importantly, to give support and comfort to Sadie—as much as she would allow them to—and guide her through this depressingly bleak ordeal.

Earpie jumped up onto the foot of the bed, waddled up beside Wyatt's prone body, and cuddled against his chest. After a moment, there was a slight twitching of the fingers of Wyatt's right hand. He extended his arm enough to touch Earpie's face, and rub the top of the dog's head with his thumb. Earpie licked Wyatt's fingers.

Seeing this, Sadie let out a little gasp, tears in her eyes. She reached out and wrapped her hand around his. His fingers slowly closed over hers.

"You see that?" she asked, astonished and elated. She leaned closer to Wyatt's ear, and said, "Talk to me, Shug. Speak to your Sadie-Belle."

Wyatt remained still for a moment, then his eyes fluttered, half-opened. With a hopeful note in her voice, Sadie said, "Wyatt? Hon?"

Wyatt's eyes held a dreamy, unfocused, faraway look. And when he spoke, it was in a faint but clear voice:

"Suppose...

...suppose..."

His fingers relaxed. His eyes slowly closed.

And his still-active mind descended into a twilight realm...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



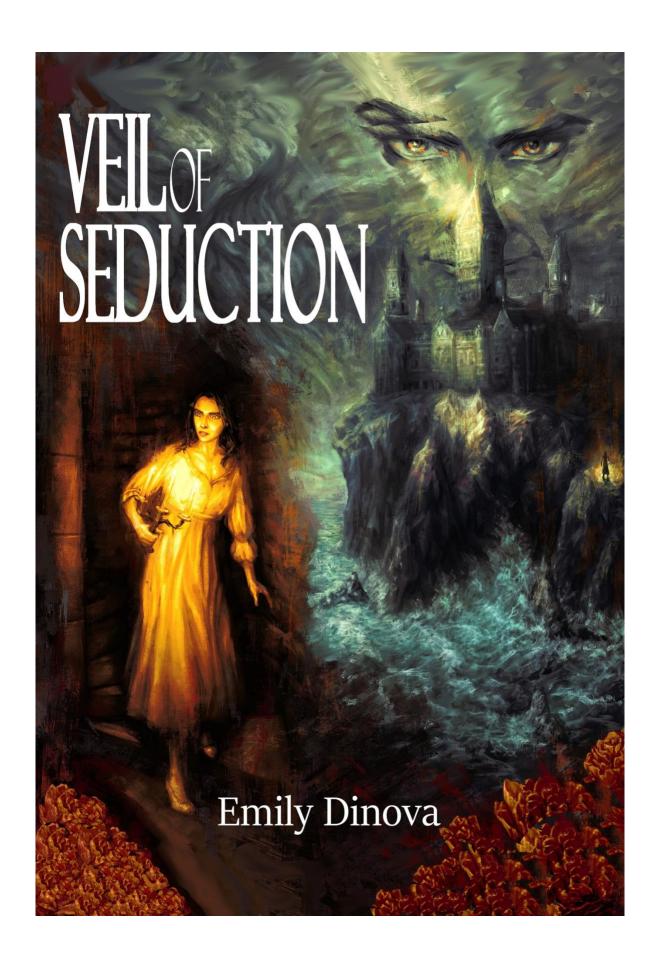


Bruce Scivally is a lifelong lover of tales of the Old West, both on film and in print. Born in Plevna, Alabama, he moved to Los Angeles to attend the University of SouthernCalifornia, and then worked in numerous positions in the film industry before becoming a teacher of scriptwriting and video production in Chicago. Since returning to Los Angeles in 2017, he has written several award-winning screenplays and is the founder, editor and publisher of Henry Gray Publishing.

THE LAST STAGE

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VEIL of SEDUCTION



The Tragedy of Romance

A Novel

Emily Dinova

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Genre: Gothic Horror, Supernatural Fiction, Mystery

A haunting and seductive tale involving a mysterious woman, a dangerous vampire, and a dark past unraveling through history

CHAPTER 1



Mercurial News

Newport, Rhode Island, 1922

It was a glorious late summer morning and Lorelei Alba was in excellent spirits as she wandered down the beachside lost in thoughts of adventure and mystery. Newport always

had that effect on her, ever since she was a little girl. The summers were short but they were magnificent and the grandeur around her only seemed to grow as she aged. When most young women were thinking about decadent parties and a rich young dandy to sweep them off their feet, Lorelei's mind would muse on all the scandals and secrets people with such wealth and power must hold, and how she could expose them; their corrupt, greedy and hypocritical ways. Her cousin Nina constantly scolded her for sticking her nose in other people's business and asking questions too blunt for a lady. Lorelei snorted at this; curiosity had always been in her nature. Besides, she wasn't a phony like some of the people who summered here.

Cousin Nina had taken Lorelei in when her parents died within months of each other from tuberculosis; she was nine years old at the time. Nina worked in Newport year-round for a moderately wealthy family, Mr. & Mrs. Laudernum—tending to their every need, managing their finances and keeping the property habitable. The Laudernums only came to the island for the summer months so Nina and Lorelei had the mansion to themselves for the remainder of the year. Jacob and Tiffany Laudernum were social climbers, constantly trying to overstep their means to rub elbows with the Astors & Vanderbilts, but they were very generous to Nina and in return she was able to send Lorelei to school. Lorelei only just returned from Providence after completing her education and as happy as she was to be home, she did miss the vast amounts of knowledge she was able to acquire on a daily basis.

Lorelei loved school, she loved learning, and more than anything she enjoyed really good stories. She wanted to be a reporter since the day she learned the word. And now, after years of having to just imagine it, she was going to be living it. Before going away to school, she hadn't realized how sheltered she truly was. When she was younger, she couldn't think of anything more exciting than uncovering a story. But now...what did she care if rich people where cheating at card games? Not when real problems existed in the world—a world where children starved and people were judged by the color of their skin. A world where women didn't have the same rights as men and said women went missing almost on a weekly basis. Outside of her cocooned life in a small port town, important things were happening. Lorelei realized she had to do something about it. More importantly, she wanted to. Desperately.

As soon as she returned home from school and Nina began nagging her about what was next, Lorelei started her research. She read the newspapers every day, and she went into town compulsively to find news where she could, whether that was at a café, a dress shop, the docks, or even the police station—Lorelei steamrolled right on in, looking for answers. The first story she settled on was one that had been digging into her mind with constant fervor. And it was no surprise why. She was shocked by the amount of people, especially women, who went missing from Newport. Lorelei snorted to herself with distaste—apparently no one bothered to keep official records of the missing women until about 18 years ago but even so, the numbers since then were staggering. So she sought names, tracked down families and tried to piece together the strangeness of her collective findings. Some slammed their doors in her face. Others looked scared and refused to answer her rapid-fire questions. Some were downright defiant, shouting off crazy superstitious nonsense that she didn't even bother to jot down.

It seemed almost all of the cases took place near water, which wasn't the least bit helpful seeing as Newport was an island. Lorelei realized it would be impossible for her to crack the older cases with stale information and lost time, so she waited with bated breath for the next time a person went missing. Then she would finally have a fresh trail and hopefully a little more information to go on.

Lorelei forced herself to turn away from the magnificent sea and head back into reality. She only had a little over an hour and needed to make a quick stop at the police station before her interview.

~ 0~

Lorelei skidded into town just as her watch struck noon, decked out in a very clever pantsuit she convinced Nina to let her buy. She felt the usual stares of women and men who were both shocked and appreciative of her forward thinking. She hurried into the station, putting on her most clueless face.

The place smelled of cheap liquor and sweat. Lorelei wrinkled her nose as she looked around for someone to accost. The chief, as she learned on her very first visit, was never available for any sort of comment. She'd never even seen the man. But that was just fine with her—she didn't need a hardened grumpy old fellow to contend with. The younger officers were more than willing to indulge her with information as she went doe-eyed and blinded them with her most charming smile. Lorelei's distaste for the station evaporated the moment she saw a new recruit heading her way. She noticed his shirt was inside out.

"Good morning!" she trilled, with the radiance of a supernova.

The man stopped in his tracks, momentarily blindsided by her beauty. Lorelei jumped on the advantage of his stunned expression like a wild cat.

"I was wondering if you have a little time to help a young lady?" she cooed, batting her eyelashes rather suggestively.

"Of—of course ma'am," he agreed eagerly, tripping over his own feet in an attempt to reach her.

"That's wonderful news. You see, I think a friend of mine is missing..." she lied with a worried and innocent expression slapped across her face. "And I was wondering if anyone reported it?"

"Your friend?" he asked with a small frown.

"Yes, a lady friend," she placated him with a soft squeeze on his arm. The officer turned bright red, though he smiled, clearly pleased with himself.

"Well, let me see what I can do."

"Oh, thank you so much!" she gushed. "I've been so worried, so scared..." she let a few tears well up in her eyes. "I am indebted to you, Sir!"

"Well now, it's no big thing, Miss. It's my duty to help pretty girls in distress."

She smiled at him adoringly as she dabbed her eyes and sighed. She watched as he went around the counter and began shuffling through papers.

"Missing...missing...let me see here...."

Lorelei waited with vast anticipation. All she needed was one missing person, and if she found out about them right before her interview— even better.

"Ah ha!"

Lorelei hurried forward, her eyes alight with triumph. But she pulled up short as his look of clarity disappeared.

"What? What is it?" she demanded in her sweetest tone.

"Well this one just came in this morning. But she's not technically missing."

"Whatever do you mean?" Lorelei asked, leaning over to inspect the paper. He was too distracted by her tanned chest to notice her snooping eyes.

"She ain't missing. She just didn't come home."

"I don't understand..." Lorelei pressed.

"Mary Bradshaw. That your friend?"

Lorelei blanked for a second.

"Yes. Yes it is. Where is she?"

"The asylum," he read off the paper, almost immediately realizing his mistake.

"What asylum?" Lorelei was oozing with curiosity. An asylum? Surely not the one that Mrs. Laudernum's friends used to gossip about over afternoon tea. It was a stretch to say this Mary Bradshaw was missing, but Lorelei would take what she could get.

The policeman hesitated, his fingers curling around the paper. Lorelei looked down—her fingertips were inches from ripping the document out of his hands. Instead of acting on her impulse, she leaned even further over to place her fingers against his chest. She looked up at him with big pleading eyes. "Please Officer, I'll never have a moment of peace unless I know. You wouldn't wish that on poor little me, would you?"

The officer swallowed hard and shook his head slowly as he glanced down at her lips before looking over his shoulder to make sure they were alone. Lorelei closed the space between them, giving him a light peck on the cheek. When she pulled back, the information was in her hands. "I promise, I won't tell anyone," she whispered huskily.

~ 0~

Lorelei marched into the *Newport Mercury* ten minutes later with her shoulders pulled back, her head held high and a slight smirk playing about her lips. The place was absolute chaos.

Lorelei managed to capture attention here just as she had at the police station—several reporters pounced on her like she was a breaking murder story. When she kindly informed them she was here for a job interview, they laughed in her face before turning back to their various tasks. That did not sit well with Lorelei. With a tight smile, she jerked her hand out of the grasp of a greasy-looking man who was regaling her with his long and illustrious career and turned on her heel to approach the receptionist, a rather haggard and impatient fellow with thick wire-rimmed glasses.

She was shown to the office of Shep Sanders, owner, editor, and head reporter of the *Newport Mercury*. Lorelei read several of his articles and was distressed to find that he was particularly conservative, occasionally biased, and extremely committed to writing about

subjects that would gain him money and exposure, regardless of whether they were completely true or not.

He did not disappoint. Mr. Sanders was exactly what Lorelei was hoping he would not be. His sandy blonde hair, overwhelmingly white fake teeth, and leering green eyes did nothing to make her feel comfortable. He was the kind of man she'd met too many times before; his energy was aggressive and held the air of masculine privilege. Shep Sanders also happened to adore the sound of his own grating voice. He droned on and on about the history of the paper, its greatness, his own achievements, and the *Mercury's* connection to Benjamin Franklin.

"Did you know, Miss Alba, that our publication dates back to 1758?"

Finally he asked her a question. She was beginning to believe this wasn't so much an interview as it was an opportunity for Sanders to stroke himself.

"Yes, I also believe you are mistaken about Mr. Franklin, Sir. It was actually his brother's wife who was publishing and editing the newspaper at that time." She just couldn't resist bringing the man down a peg or two while also showing him that she was not some ninny who needed explaining to; she was competent and more than qualified to work here.

Clearly Lorelei was exactly what Shep feared she might be. Educated. Intelligent. A threat. He cleared his throat, the charming, patronizing smile slipping quickly from his sunchapped lips.

"What can I do for you, Miss Alba?"

Though it was clear he was trying to remain in control of his temper, Lorelei could see the sneer begging to touch his lips.

"I want to report for this paper, join the team. I have samples here of several pieces I've been working on, as well as my portfolio from school—"

He pushed the papers she offered him away with a dismissive hand, his eyes now roaming over her figure with careless interest. He shook his head, clearly amused.

"What is it you like to write about? The opera? Dances? Womanly advice?"

Lorelei's eyebrows rose with indignation but she forced herself to keep her temper in check.

"Hardly, Sir. I'm interested in exploring topics that are of actual importance in our society, subjects such as the Molly Pitcher Club, the KKK, organized crime's influence in our government, things that need to be talked about."

He looked at her with suspicion and surprise.

"I'm sorry, but there's just no place for you here."

Lorelei gripped her portfolio as she sat up straighter, leaning towards his desk and putting the papers down on it before pushing them forward. He finally looked at them and smiled again.

"I must say, you have very pretty handwriting." He flipped a page over, while keeping eye contact with her.

"I have a passion," she said. "To do something. To help people, to create change. I'm not interested in writing about 'who wore what' or how many people attended some gala. I have a voice and I have something to say." She finished with gusto, forcing him to see that she was to be taken seriously.

"I'm sure you have plenty of things to say, Miss Alba. But you won't be saying them here." He picked up her portfolio, weighing it in his hand before dumping it into her lap.

"But what about what's happening? In our town—the missing people, surely someone has to look into it! I mean, just this morning a woman named Mary—" she started, an edge rising in her tone.

"How do you know that?" His gaze sharpened with underlying menace.

"I have my sources." Lorelei raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms in defiance.

He watched her for a few moments before shaking his head.

"My apologies," he insisted, looking anything but sorry as he rose from his desk to dismiss her.

Lorelei sat there, feeling her dreams dashed just because this man couldn't see her for what she was—a smart, driven person. To him, she was an object, something to play with but not to take seriously. She collected her portfolio numbly before rising out of the chair and turning to face him.

He once again felt the need to look her over most inappropriately. "Though if you are free for dinner, I'd be more than happy to tell you a few stories, Lorelei..."

He trailed off, watching her with hunger as he stepped into her personal space, lowering his hand to squeeze Lorelei's backside. What Sanders wasn't expecting was the ringing blow she dealt him across his face with the back of her hand. He stumbled away in shock, staring at her as he held his bronzed face; her ring cut him just under the eye and blood was beginning to run.

"You are a despicable man and an even more dreadful reporter. This paper survived the Revolutionary War, so I look forward to the day it will outlive you. And not a second sooner would I return here for a job."

She slammed the door in his shocked face and stormed across the building, back down a flight of rickety stairs and into the main offices. Lorelei could feel her hands shaking with rage. She couldn't believe this was what women were being subjected to in the workforce; it was as maddening as it was disappointing.

Lorelei reemerged in the busy front and watched as the reporters moved quickly in and out of frosted-glass offices at the back of the room. Doors slammed and voices shouted over the blaring telephones and clicking typewriters, snippets of conversation mingling with stale coffee and cigarette smoke. Lorelei sighed with disappointment. This was where she belonged. She leaned against the wall, pulled the report on Mary Bradshaw out of her pocket and examined the information—there wasn't much. She only just read the name of the asylum when a nervous, mousey-looking reporter came peeling out of his office and skittered into a small break room to her left. Lorelei moved closer to the door and peeked in, watching as the man filled up his coffee.

"Excuse me, Sir? Could I bother you for a moment?" she tried in her most dulcet tones.

If the man thought he was in luck to be happened upon by such a glorious creature, he was almost immediately mistaken as she began to question him about the asylum where Miss Bradshaw had gone missing. But Lorelei's normal charm didn't stand a chance with this reporter, whose name was Smith. She saw very clearly that his fear definitely outweighed his interest in her. That was when she dropped her act.

"Why the hell are you not doing anything about it?!" she raged, incensed that this man was in a position to create change but shirking his responsibility.

"There's nothing we can do, Miss. Morning Falls Asylum is untouchable. I was informed of that when I first took a job here. It's just not done. I'm sorry," Smith replied solemnly with

a nervous glimmer in his eyes. She watched as his gaze darted about making sure no one was eavesdropping.

"But what about this woman?" Lorelei cried desperately. "Her family is surely distressed."

"The way I hear it, her father is the one who put her there. If the doctor or whomever says that she's not ready to leave, maybe Cornelius should believe him."

Smith shrugged, grabbed his coffee and darted back to his office as fast as possible before she could ask one more question. Did everyone know everything about everyone except her? She glanced down at the report in frustration, but at least now she had a name.

Cornelius Bradshaw.

She would start with him.

~ 0~

Lorelei spent the remainder of the week finding out as much as she could about the Bradshaws. It wasn't hard considering they were one of the most influential families in Newport. Cornelius had made his money in steel out of Pennsylvania and in turn was able to raise his family to great heights of wealth. He was married and had one daughter. He also spent virtually no time at his mansion on the east side of the island. He preferred to saunter around town to every gentleman's club he could find, play cards, and gamble. So Lorelei waited, hoping for the moment she would run into him and pounce. She was getting antsy to hear the story from his mouth. The report was vague, as if the officer who took it down couldn't be bothered to record any additional information once this Morning Falls Asylum was mentioned. Lorelei found that suspicious. The Bradshaws were a significant family—it didn't seem possible that the police would take such a case lightly.

It wasn't until Sunday morning that Lorelei finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel. She watched Bradshaw, accompanied by several unsavory characters, enter a speakeasy a little after midnight. She waited until eight in the morning for him to finally emerge, alone and bleary-eyed. Before Cornelius could even put on his hat and step off the curb, Lorelei was off the bench and striding toward him with intent and purpose.

"Mr. Bradshaw!" she cried as she crossed the road with eagerness, earning her several agitated glances from two elderly ladies riding past in their carriage. Bradshaw turned suddenly at the sound of his name and his eyebrows rose with surprise as he saw a young

woman in pants running towards him. He frowned as she got closer; she was very pretty indeed with refined, petite features and a stubborn look about her. Her thick dark hair was coming undone in waves as she jogged in his direction. She was huffing and out of breath, her olive cheeks flushed by her exertion. Mr. Bradshaw was perplexed; what could this lovely lady possibly want with him?

"Mr. Bradshaw," Lorelei began as she attempted to compose herself. She straightened her stature up to full height. "My name's Lorelei Alba and I want to help you."

"Help me?" he questioned, giving her a once-over with a pompous glare.

"Your daughter, sir," Lorelei confirmed.

"What are you?" he asked reproachfully as he grimaced against the intrusive light of day.

"An investigative reporter."

"You don't write for that rag Sanders runs, do you?" he inquired with barely concealed contempt. "Bloody useless fellow."

"I don't." Lorelei saw the look of curiosity in his eyes. "I work...independently." He eyed her with a slight frown. She improvised madly, hoping there was a slight chance this man might actually take her seriously. "Really, I have several correspondents here in Newport, some at the *Mercury*, but it's they who rely on me to break the real stories," she said. He seemed desperate enough. She looked around suspiciously before pulling him close and lowering her voice dramatically. "Sir, I'm one of the best. You know you don't just go around shouting these things," she chided, giving him a stern glance. He withered a bit under her furious insistence.

"I've never heard of you," he bit out.

"Of course you haven't. That's what makes me good. No one ever suspects me." The gleam in her determined gaze caused Bradshaw to take a step back. She refused to break eye contact as she whipped her portfolio out and held it up to his face. "I'd be more than happy to let you sift through my credentials," she argued arrogantly, hoping to God that the play she performed in for an art credit last term was paying off. "Besides, what do you have to lose?"

Bradshaw eyed her intently for several moments before conceding with a slight snarl and a drunken hiccup. "Very well, Miss Alba. Since the police are useless and the *Mercury* has

refused to get involved...I've exhausted all further options. I suppose you're right. What is your price?"

Lorelei's eyes lit up with triumph.

"We can iron the details out later. Let's get you a pick-me-up."

She offered him her arm and he took it wearily as he followed her back across the street and into a small café. She giddily ordered them two coffees and then joined him in the back of the cozy shop. Her first story! She felt mystery brewing as she pulled out a pad and pencil before looking up at Mr. Bradshaw. The lines in his face told a tale of exhaustion and worry. Clearly the man had trouble sleeping. Maybe he was fighting some overwhelming guilt.

"Let's start at the beginning," Lorelei offered as she smiled gently at the distressed man.

"A few months ago," he began in a whisper, "when we first arrived in town for the season, Mary started acting up, disobeying her mother and I, sneaking out and eventually getting herself pregnant. You can imagine our horror."

Lorelei worried more about the horror that had come to Mary after she was found out.

"She's only sixteen. The man was some wretched bastard smuggler. She refused to let us handle the problem...so I had her committed. She'd have the child there and then she could come back. Two massive men came and took her. A few weeks later I got a letter saying Mary lost the baby. I wrote back to them, requesting they send her home immediately, but I was denied. Doctor Dreugue said she wasn't ready to be released and that he would contact me when she was to be discharged. And oddly enough, they would require no additional payments for treatment...inconvenience is what I would call it."

Lorelei kept her mouth shut at his callous words. If anyone had been inconvenienced surely it was his daughter.

"Mr. Bradshaw—" she began with trepidation.

"Cornelius, please," he amended quietly.

She nodded her head graciously.

"Cornelius, how long ago did you receive this letter from Doctor Dreugue?" She let the name slide over her tongue in wonder. She'd never heard that surname before; it was as foreign to her ears as it was her lips.

"About two weeks ago." He looked down to his shaking hands and pulled his mug of coffee closer to him as if for protection.

"And you contacted the police?" she asked, feeling last week's report she'd taken from the station still glued to the inside of her pocket.

His face crumpled with thinly veiled scorn.

"That no good prick, McGrave, some Chief. He's as corrupt as they come. Says it's out of their jurisdiction. I even tried to go out there myself. No one would take me, not even a private charter. Said the weather was too wicked, but I saw fear in every one of those sailor's eyes. They're afraid of that place. Morning Falls Asylum."

"Where is this institution?" Lorelei breathed, feeling an inexplicable chill run down her spine. She heard the name muttered over the years, but never really gave it much thought. It wasn't considered polite conversation to openly discuss such topics. And every time she'd asked about the place, especially to guests, Nina scolded her viciously.

"About thirty miles off the coast, to the south. It's a massive rock, jutting out of the ocean, cliffs and wild forests surrounding the place, so I've been told. Only establishment on the whole island. They keep to themselves with their isolation. Can't imagine it's any better than hell itself," he muttered darkly, taking a cigarette from his jacket pocket while patting himself down for a match.

"Yet you sent your only daughter there." The words were out of Lorelei's mouth before she even realized she'd spoken them.

Cornelius' face darkened. He paused his searching.

"Like I said, the circumstances were dire. Do you know what a scandal would have done to my wife's already fragile heart?" he hissed, looking around for prying ears.

She bit her tongue against a sharp retort; she was told that this man's wife was a scandalous hussy who spread her legs for anyone at least twenty-five years younger than her husband. Tabatha was her name. Nina's employer divulged that information over her third gin martini at afternoon tea just two days ago when she'd inquired.

"Can you help me?" he asked with blunt desperation. "We were supposed to be leaving town by the end of the week, but I fear we must stay behind until this is sorted out...the season is coming to a close and I hate to think what effect the lack of social activity will have on my wife."

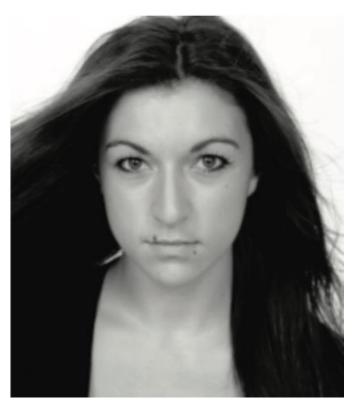
He closed his eyes, massaging his temples with trembling fingers. Lorelei felt an instinctual calling sweep through her. She would get to the bottom of this. She would expose

Morning Falls Asylum and this Doctor Dreugue for what they were: another corrupt institution taking away the freedom and choice of women. And Mr. Bradshaw was an accomplice whether he knew it or not. But her focus was to be on Mary, who was innocent in all of this.

"I will be looking into this immediately and promise to find answers for you, if it's the last thing I do." The conviction in her tone was enough to convince Cornelius Bradshaw that whoever this woman, this Lorelei Alba, was, she certainly left quite the impression.

about the author

Emily Dinova



Emily Dinova is a writer, actor, director, and producer. Her fiction has been featured in Haunted MTL's Horror Anthology and on Literally Stories as a "Saturday Special" (only six writers have received this honor). Her play Capture, a raw and visceral story of one woman's fight against domestic violence, was the recipient of the 2015 Fresher Writer Prize in the United Kingdom (Best Stage Play), and was also published by the Fresher Publishing Company. She is the cofounder of G&E Productions, established to create new and unique projects for the stage and screen. Look for her directorial film debut, Transit: A NYC Fairytale, currently on the film festival circuit. Emily is a member of Actors' Equity Association.

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THE UNDERSTUDY CHARLIE PETERS

THE UNDERSTUDY

CHARLIE PETERS

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Genre: Thriller, Mystery, Suspense

A slow-burn thriller in the Hitchcock tradition—on the eve of a high-stakes corporate merger, an employee is kidnapped and held for ransom. But are the kidnappers company insiders? And who is the mysterious kidnap victim at the center of the conflict?

MARTIN NEWMAN'S DIARY

I've turned a corner. My wife's death isn't hanging over me like it did for the last year. I'm still sad about what happened to her and of course I miss her, but not as much as before. I decided that soon I'm going to move out of the place I rented after she died and move back into our apartment. And I'm going to spend more time at Boundary, too. They were kind to let me work from home after what happened to Sophia.

Last week I bought a bunch of new clothes, joined a gym and decided to cut back on fast foods. I'm going to try out for the Boundary softball team, too. I did pretty good playing second base for them a couple of seasons ago. I picked up my guitar again and I even signed up to go rock climbing in Canada next month. Who knows? Maybe I'll meet someone new there, like I did when I met Sophia.

MONDAY

Ronnie Hewitt sat at one of the outdoor tables of a coffee shop in lower Manhattan's financial district. She sat there every morning drinking a plain black coffee, watching the same people walking quickly in and out of the shop, holding their drinks in cardboard cups, all eager to get somewhere important. The building that housed Boundary, the hedge fund where Ronnie worked as personal assistant to its CEO, cast its shadow on Ronnie's table. At Boundary's entrance across the street was a demonstration, a small, well-behaved one comprised entirely of women. A couple of the demonstrators held signs. Others pushed strollers. This was not unusual for Boundary or any investment firm like it. They all pissed somebody off.

On Ronnie's table sat a small box of Paul Smith socks that her boss had ordered. But neither her boss nor his socks were on her mind now. Ronnie was waiting for a call from Miriam Dennis, director of Jerrold House, the public nursing facility in Queens from which her mother had escaped earlier that morning. Carlotta Hewitt had been spotted on the street barefoot and in her bathrobe by one of the facility's janitors on his way home from the night shift.

Ronnie's mother suffered from the effects of a stroke and showed mild symptoms of dementia, but she'd still managed to walk herself out of the facility twice over the last month. And who could blame her? Jerrold House was a shit hole.

Ronnie went to the facility early that morning to calm her mother. Mornings there were especially bad. Orderlies ended and began shifts. Waking patients clamored for food and attention. The halls were mopped with an antiseptic that, as awful as it stank, was preferable to what it hid. A TV hung from the ceiling of every room like huge IVs that the patients stared at mesmerized. Ronnie spoon-fed her mother breakfast, a cereal made of brightly colored pieces of something from a box covered with manic cartoon characters. The cereal had turned the milk in the bowl a shade of light blue.

The last thing her father had asked Ronnie to do was to take care of her mother if anything happened to him. Something did happen to him. He died when Ronnie was fifteen. Carlotta had no work experience so she took a sales job at the glove counter on the first floor of Bonwit Teller. Sometimes after school Ronnie would secretly watch her mother working there, hating how the customers treated her. But her mother never complained. In twenty-three years she never missed a day of work. And Jerrold House is what she got for that.

If the condition of the nursing home wasn't enough to contend with, the facility's director Miriam Dennis made it clear that she didn't like Ronnie or her mother. Carlotta was English and even though she'd lived in America for more than forty years, her accent lingered, prompting Ms. Dennis to ask Ronnie, "What's a woman like your mother doing here anyway?" It was more an accusation than a question because, like many Americans, Ms. Dennis thought Carlotta's accent meant that she'd lived a life of tea and crumpets served by suited butlers in ornate BBC sets. She had no idea that Carlotta Hewitt's father and grandfather were coal miners in West Yorkshire and that her childhood made Ms. Dennis's youth in working class Harrisburg, Pennsylvania look like *Sesame Street*.

Ronnie thought about what she'd say when—and if—Ms. Dennis finally called. And if her boss asked Ronnie why she was late this morning she'd tell him that she'd gone to the boutique on Bleeker Street to pick up his socks even though she'd gotten them Friday afternoon. He wouldn't know any different.

Still, she had to be careful because in the last few weeks her normally predictable boss, Barry Kestrel, had become more difficult to read. That was because word on the street was that Salient, one of the country's biggest hedge funds, was going to make an offer for Kestrel's company Boundary whose smaller size made it perfect for a mega-player like Salient to snatch up.

No one knew how Kestrel would respond if and when the Salient offer was officially made. Would he take the money and relinquish Boundary? Or would he hold onto the company he'd built, like a child holds onto their toys even though they've become bored playing with them?

As Ronnie considered this, the call she was waiting for came. "This is Director Dennis." Ronnie put a broad smile on her face so that her voice would sound more pleasant, a trick

she'd learned while working cold sales jobs in college. "Ms. Dennis, hi, this is Ronnie Hewitt. I was there this morning."

"My staff told me." The woman was important; she had a staff. "You probably heard that my mother got out again."

"So I was told."

"I know your job is very difficult—"

"Good of you to say that."

"—but I don't understand how a woman like my mother who can barely walk keeps escaping."

"As I told you, we could put her in the security ward, but you didn't seem interested."

The week before Ms. Dennis had given Ronnie a tour of the security ward, where Jerrold House's most dangerous patients were kept. Many were violent; all were sedated. Life there for Carlotta Hewitt, a woman who'd never used the word "shit" once in her life, would be like, in the words of one orderly, "being eaten by a wolf and shit off a cliff."

"There's a waiting list to get into Jerrold House, Ms. Hewitt." This was Ms. Dennis's favorite threat.

"I appreciate how hard your job is, Madame Director," Ronnie said, trying to flatter the bitch, but before Ronnie could say anything else she heard what sounded like a door slamming. Or was it a gunshot?

"There's been an incident," Ms. Dennis said and she hung up.

Ronnie put her phone away, more determined than ever to get her mother out of Jerrold House and into Ledgewood Gardens, a private facility in the Connecticut countryside, a million miles from Union Turnpike in Queens. But Ledgewood was expensive and what Ronnie made as a personal assistant wasn't nearly enough to keep her mother at a place like that.

When she wasn't doing errands or fielding calls for Kestrel, Ronnie worked with Jubilee, an improvisational theater company she'd cofounded with her partner Alex and a dozen other performers. Jubilee was notorious for its political material. It had no favorites, left, right or center, which meant that their material managed to piss everyone off at one time or another and Ronnie prided herself on that. Like most small theatres, Jubilee's shows barely made enough to pay for rent and publicity. Their day jobs—hers working for Barry Kestrel

at Boundary and Alex's with a computer company called Nerd Nation—paid for food, rent and other essentials, leaving nothing to move her mother to private care.

Ronnie considered calling the agents who saw her work at Jubilee and were eager to submit her for the writing staffs on the late night talk shows. Women comedy writers, they told her, were in big demand now. But Ronnie preferred the freedom that Jubilee gave her. The networks, even the cable stations with characters that swore endlessly and had color, diversity and nudity coming out their asses, were beholden to big money. Let's be honest. They were big money.

She'd get the money she needed another way.

Ronnie could feel the tension as soon as she walked into the Boundary lobby. It was like a fog that had rolled in two weeks earlier with rumors of the Salient offer and it grew thicker every day. Since she was the CEO's personal assistant, everyone who worked there stared at her like a barometer, as if there might be something about her walk, her expression, her clothes, her make-up, anything that would give them a hint whether the deal with Salient was going to happen and if they'd still have a job if it did.

"Good morning, Ms. Hewitt." The guard, Pete, was in his fifties and old school so he never called her by her first name. She hoped that Pete would keep his job if the Salient deal came through.

Ronnie headed to the farthest elevator in front of which stood a younger guard in an expensive black suit. This elevator was private and it took you to the south wing of the fifth floor where Barry Kestrel's and the other board members' offices were.

"Morning, Ronnie," the guard said.

"Hey, Hector."

Hector, who had a small tattoo of a key on his neck, mimed holding the elevator door open. "You know if the man's gonna take the deal or not?"

"What deal?" Ronnie said, grinning.

Hector let the door close and the car began its rise.

Ronnie got off on the fifth floor. She went to her desk that was directly outside Kestrel's office.

Across from her sat Heidi Schulman who Ronnie met at NYU when they were both theater majors. Heidi had plans to become a Broadway stage manager, but like most of her classmates she quit the theater when she realized that what she wanted even more than a Tony Award was a steady salary, health care and an apartment with a bedroom. Heidi was Barry Kestrel's executive assistant for the last seven years.

Shelby Mason, Heidi's assistant, sat at a desk close to Heidi's. Shelby was petite, pretty and very pregnant. She came from the "deep south" which to most New Yorkers meant anywhere below Newark on I-95. Given her teenaged looks and "aw shucks" demeanor, Shelby could be surprisingly effective at her job.

Shelby was speaking on her headset when Ronnie sat at her own desk. "I told you, sir, I'm not able to do that," Shelby said to the caller. She looked at Ronnie and mimed shooting herself in the head with her finger.

Ronnie gestured to Shelby as if to say, "What's the problem?"

"Please hold a moment," Shelby said and put the caller on hold. "This guy's called twice already demanding that he speak to Kestrel."

"Who is he?"

"He won't say."

"Tell him Kestrel's unavailable and he's definitely not gonna talk to anyone who doesn't give his name."

"I told him that, but he won't listen," Shelby said. "And he's talking through one of those things."

"One of what things?"

"Those things that make you sound like Darth Vader."

"A voice modulator?"

Shelby nodded. "That."

"Then you don't know if it's a guy."

Shelby hadn't considered this. She frowned. "Is that sexist of me?" Heidi laughed at Shelby's question and said, "I'll bet you anything it's Jeremy Posner. He's such an asshole."

"Give him to me," Ronnie said and Shelby transferred the call to Ronnie who grabbed the receiver on her desk. "This is Veronica Hewitt, Mr. Kestrel's personal assistant. How can I help you, Mr.—?"

"I told the other girl I need to speak to Mr. Kestrel, not one of his secretaries." The person was speaking through a modulator like Shelby had told her. What they said and the way they said it led Ronnie to think the caller was a man.

"First of all," Ronnie said, "the person you were speaking to is a woman, not a girl, and I'm not a secretary, sir. I'm Mr. Kestrel's personal assistant."

"Wow." The voice modulator didn't hide the caller's sarcasm. "I'm impressed."

"Whoever you are," Ronnie said, "Mr. Kestrel will not speak to anyone unless he knows what it's regarding."

"Then shut up and listen to me," the voice said through its modulator. "Tell your boss that I have one of his employees."

Ronnie paused. What did the caller mean? Was this call real or a joke?

"Did you hear me?"

"If you don't identify yourself I'll have to report this call to security," Ronnie said.

"I'll state my demand once. That's all. Maybe you want to write it down in case it's too long for you to remember. We have an employee of Boundary's in our possession and I will call Mr. Kestrel at 10:45 to discuss the terms for his safe release."

As upset as she was, Ronnie had the wherewithal to say, "Use Mr. Kestrel's private line." She gave the caller that number and he hung up. Ronnie stood in place. Shelby saw the expression on her face and asked, "Did he say something dirty?"

Ronnie didn't answer, but instead walked quickly to a heavy, locked door that separated the board's offices from the security offices on the same floor. She punched a code into the door's lock, walked through it and closed it behind her.

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Barry Kestrel looked down from his fifth floor office window at the demonstrators circling the building's entrance. They were all women, a few pushing children in strollers that probably cost as much as a used car.

"Who are they?" Kestrel asked Joshua Rosenberg, Boundary's corporate lawyer, who stood next to him also watching the demonstrators.

"Angry mothers, Barry," Rosenberg said.

"The only thing more frightening than mothers: mothers with lawyers," Kestrel said.

In the room with them were Natalie Jenkins and Walter Shaw, Kestrel's two partners on the Boundary board. Ten years earlier Boundary was sued by an employee claiming that she was passed over for a promotion because she was a woman. The case was settled out of court but, hoping to put other suits like it to rest, Kestrel made Natalie Jenkins Boundary's CFO and his de-facto partner. She was excellent at the job.

Natalie looked at the protestors below, too, all of them dressed in casual but expensive clothes. She wondered if any of them were single mothers like her and, if so, how they managed? Were they as overwhelmed as she was? As depressed? Did they have husbands? Or, like Natalie, were they single and had found their child's father in a high-priced sperm bank?

Walter Shaw wasn't interested in the protestors. He was a numbers man and things like protests didn't interest him. No one could figure how old Walter was. His tastes and manner suggested he was far older than anyone else in the room, from another generation really. But his chubbiness smoothed any wrinkles on his face and he had thick white hair that was, in Kestrel's opinion, wasted on a man like Walter.

Kestrel was happy to let Jenkins and Shaw run Boundary's day-to-day operations. Only the most crucial decisions were made by Kestrel, decisions like whether to sell the company to Salient. He looked at the protestors and turned to the lawyer Rosenberg. "What do these women want?"

"They're demanding that we pull the catalogue."

Boundary had purchased a German conglomerate six months earlier. Included in the sale was the venerable New York store that had once sold fishing tackle and hunting gear to the upper class sportsmen of *Mad Men's* world. It now sold clothes to porno-drenched teens and middle-aged men and women desperately hoping to be mistaken for one. The protesters downstairs claimed that the latest edition of the store's catalogue, filled with semi-nude teenagers in provocative poses, was child pornography.

"How bad can it be?" Kestrel asked.

Rosenberg handed the catalogue to Kestrel. He opened it to a page on which a nearly topless teenaged girl sucked Lolita-like not on a lollipop but the tip of another girl's running shoe.

"My father used to buy trout flies in that store," Walter Shaw said.

"The protesters claim that it's pornography," Rosenberg said of the catalog.

"What the hell is pornography anyway?" Kestrel asked.

Rosenberg took the opportunity to paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart's famous remark. "The Supreme Court says they can't define it, but they know it when they see it."

"That's how I feel about a vagina," Kestrel said. "I couldn't define one for the life of me, but I know one when I see it."

"For God's sake, Barry," Natalie said.

Kestrel flipped through several more pages of the catalog. "It's true. Any man who tells you he knows how a vagina works is lying. All we know is that it's full of tubes and eggs and stuff. Like a magic refrigerator."

"Wonderful, Barry," Natalie said. "Now I'm an appliance."

"But a major one," Kestrel said and flung the heavy catalogue into a steel wastebasket, nearly causing it to topple over. "Pull the catalog, counselor, and send out a press release apologizing to all mothers throughout history. Except mine."

"Capitulation is very unlike you, Barry," Rosenberg said. "Would this have anything to do with the takeover rumors flooding the street?"

Kestrel ignored the question. "Do it."

"As you wish, sir," Rosenberg said, bowing with mock reverence and leaving the room.

Kestrel gestured at the protestors below. "The last thing we need right now is a bunch of pissed-off mommies messing up this deal."

Kestrel had a mole at Salient who'd told him that their board was split about acquiring Boundary. Some were eager to make the purchase; others were against it. Normally, Kestrel would tell Salient to go fuck themselves. But he'd become bored with running Boundary. And when his connection told him how much Salient was thinking of paying for Boundary any qualms he had about selling the company disappeared.

He told Jenkins and Shaw about the likely price in case they wanted to put a group together and buy Boundary themselves, but neither did. Natalie would be happy to take her millions and raise her daughter with other overprivileged children. Walter would take his money and spend his days immersed in his hobby: building miniature replicas of medieval cities, full of cathedrals and forts and knights on horseback. All three of them wanted very much for the deal to happen.

"So you really think Salient's going to make the offer?" Walter Shaw asked.

"Yes, Walter, I think they are," Kestrel said like a parent annoyed by a child in the car's backseat.

But Walter's default emotion was insecurity. "I hear that there are people on the Salient board who are against buying us."

"Christ's sake, Walter," Kestrel said. "You're going to be a very rich man soon. Granted, a rich boring man. But enjoy it for five minutes, will you?"

--• --

Louis Pike sat in Boundary's security office kitchen finishing the third chapter of a paperback copy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The rest of the company's security staff was downstairs at the building's entrance dealing with the protesters.

Pike was Barry Kestrel's driver. He was forty-eight years old, Black, and, as an ex-NYPD detective, licensed to carry a gun. So he doubled as Kestrel's bodyguard even though over the two years Pike held the job no one had threatened his boss. Kestrel wasn't flashy enough for most people to notice, forget recognize. So Pike drove him to and from work every day and sometimes to meetings, meals, his country home in Dutchess County upstate and the rare party.

Kestrel was polite to Pike, but rarely spoke to him. Pike wasn't offended. He preferred it that way.

The name on Pike's birth certificate was Romulus Louis Pike. Only his mother had ever called him Romulus. Only a mother would. In his four years in the army Romulus became "Mule" and for most of his years as a New York City cop his colleagues called him "Romy" until he married his surprisingly attractive wife, Claire, after which they called him Romeo. Claire, a dancer with Alvin Ailey, died from brain cancer three years after their marriage. Detective Second Class Pike retired after his twenty-first year on the force. At Boundary everyone called him Pike.

Currently he was taking a "Great English Novels" course at the New School. He loved reading. But only fiction. Nonfiction he didn't trust. His years as a cop taught him that everybody lies and, worse, most believe their lies. Talk to a witness long enough and they'll convince themselves—and maybe even you—of anything. Given the chance, Pike would happily spend the rest of his life doing nothing but reading. His current job was perfect for

that and, as proof, he sat in the small kitchen at ten-twenty on a Monday morning reading the Oscar Wilde classic when he looked up and saw Ronnie Hewitt enter the security offices.

Because his wife Claire had introduced her detective husband to a new world of independent movies, art galleries and Off-Off-Broadway theaters, including Ronnie's company Jubilee, Pike had seen Ronnie's work even before he'd officially met her at Boundary. He told her that he liked what he'd seen of it. She asked him to keep that part of her life between the two of them and not tell anyone else at Boundary about it. Pike did as she asked. He still went to see Jubilee's shows even though Claire was gone. Ronnie and Pike had become friendly over the last two years.

When Ronnie saw him she walked quickly into the kitchen. "What's up?" he asked.

Ronnie looked around to make sure there was no one else who could hear what she said. "Someone called and said they have one of our employees."

"What do you mean 'have' him?"

"Like in a kidnapping." She was uncharacteristically rattled. "They want money for him." "Did they say that?"

Ronnie thought. "No, wait, I don't know. Maybe they didn't. I can't remember."

Pike pulled up a chair for her. "Sit down." She sat. "Take a breath." She did. "What did he sound like?"

"I don't even know if it was a man or a woman. They were using one of those things you hear in the movies."

"A voice modulator?" Pike asked and Ronnie nodded. "Okay," Pike said, "let's assume for the moment it's a man." From experience he knew that there was a better than 99% chance the caller was a guy. "It's probably a joke."

Ronnie shook her head. "I don't think so. Kestrel gets prank calls all the time. And haters, too. But I never got one like this before. It was different."

"How?" "It just was."

"What else did he say?" Pike asked, casting the caller as a man. "He demanded to speak to Kestrel personally."

"What else?"

"He said he'd call Kestrel back at—" she looked at the wall clock over Pike's head - "10:45."

She bit her bottom lip reminding Pike that, like Claire, Ronnie was slightly gap-toothed. "Everything's gonna be fine," he said. Twenty years ago he might've called her "sweetheart" only to reassure her, but you couldn't say anything like that now. "Let's go see Mr. K."

Ronnie smiled weakly as Pike led her out of the kitchen and through the security office. In case this abduction turned out to be real, he was already making a list in his head of people he knew to call in both the NYPD and the Manhattan FBI office. When Pike and

Ronnie got to the security door Ronnie punched in the code. But she made a mistake and swore.

"Relax," Pike said to her.

She punched the numbers in again and the door unlocked. When they got to Kestrel's office door Ronnie asked Heidi who was in there with him.

"Jenkins and Shaw," Heidi said. "Why?"

Shelby saw Pike with her and asked, "Is everything all right?"

Ronnie nodded. "Fine."

_-• _

Kestrel was surprised when Pike entered his office with Ronnie. He went quickly to the window and looked at the street below. "Something happen with the protesters?" he asked.

"It's not them," Ronnie said.

"Then whatever it is can wait."

When Ronnie hesitated, Pike said to Ronnie, "Tell Mr. Kestrel." "Tell me what?" Ronnie looked at Pike before turning to Kestrel, "Someone called me just now." "So?"

"They said they have one of our people."

"Have him where?" Kestrel asked.

"It could be a kidnapping threat, sir," Pike said.

Walter stood up. "Good God."

Natalie was surprised, too, but her reaction suggested annoyance more than concern. "Seriously?"

Kestrel held up his hands. "Relax, everybody. Sit down, Walter. It's a joke." "I've gotten a lot of crank calls from people who don't like you," Ronnie said, "but there was something about this one that—"

"Trust me, Ms. Hewitt," Kestrel said, "if you were a man you'd understand. How can I talk to this guy?"

Pike turned to Ronnie. "He said he'd call back at 10:45, right?"

Ronnie nodded. Pike looked at the six identical industrial clocks on the wall that showed the time in the world's financial capitals. It read 10:42 above the one that said New York.

"I gave him your 859 number," Ronnie said.

"It's a joke," Kestrel said. "You ladies always overreact to shit like this." He pointed to the New York clock. "In three minutes I'll prove it to you."

They waited.

_-• _

It was Heidi who'd told Ronnie two years before that Barry Kestrel, CEO of Boundary, was looking for a personal assistant, essentially an errand girl. Ronnie got an interview.

She expected not to like him. She wanted not to like him. He was, after all, the kind of person Jubilee mocked in their sketches, the one percent of the one percent, the face of a system that produced nothing useful for anyone. All it made was profit, icing for the icing, with no cake underneath. It was the same system that had used her father and humiliated her mother.

But Kestrel surprised Ronnie. He was an enigma, neither the old school, Tom Wolfe-like, seersucker-wearing patrician nor the shaved-headed, workout-obsessed millennial clad in black.

He was staring out the window when she entered his office for her interview, his back to her like it was now. "Do you know why I put my office on the fifth floor instead of the penthouse like every other CEO would do?" Kestrel asked her without turning around.

"Why?" Ronnie said.

"I grew up in the city and if I build an office or buy a home in New York I want to see New York. I want to see the people on the street, real people, walking, eating, smoking, pissing, flirting, begging, spitting, arguing. Only rich Chinese and Russians are stupid enough to buy a place in Manhattan so high that all you can see from it is New Jersey. If I want to look at New Jersey, I'll buy a place in Hoboken."

Ronnie laughed and Kestrel turned quickly to her. Was laughing at him a mistake? She didn't care. There were other jobs. She met his stare and Kestrel grinned. He sat at his desk

and picked up her resume. "Theater school. Does that mean you can pretend to be interested in people when they talk to you?"

"How am I doing so far?"

This was a big gamble, but she bet that Kestrel would get it. She was right. He did. He smiled and hired her. Her salary was more than what she'd get doing anything else this easy and, like every personal assistant, she fudged her hours. While on an errand she could read or write or even oversee a rehearsal at the theater. Who would know?

She got to know Barry Kestrel well over the last two and a half years. He was fifty-three years old, never married and childless. He had no pets. He didn't even have plants. People made the mistake of trying to hug him only once. He could be funny, but he almost never laughed. He was unfailingly polite and unlike his younger colleagues who used the word "fuck" like a comma, he swore only when he was angry, something that happened rarely. He never made a pass at Ronnie or said anything inappropriate to her. And it wasn't because of "me too". It was how he was.

Of course she didn't want Kestrel to know about her work with Jubilee. So she'd been writing under the pseudonym Mr. Gladstone for the last few years. It was the name Dustin Hoffman used in *The Graduate* to book the hotel rooms in which he let Mrs. Robinson seduce him.

Ronnie looked at the New York clock. It read 10:44.

Pike absentmindedly flicked the pages of the Oscar Wilde paperback he held while he watched the others in the room. Kestrel leafed through papers on his desk. The others stared at the clock. Ronnie seemed the most anxious. She was, after all, the one who'd spoken to the caller.

Pike remembered the first time he saw her, his first day at Boundary two years before. Ronnie wore her hair very short like his wife Claire. Both women looked smarter when they smiled. A lot of women smile when they're confused. Claire and Ronnie smiled when they got it. And when Ronnie smiled she put her front teeth over her lower lip the same way Claire did.

It was 10:44 and Pike figured no one would call. It was a prank and whoever was behind it had made their point or chickened out. In a few minutes they could all go back to doing whatever it was they did everyday which, in Pike's case, was nothing.

Finally, the clock read 10:45.

"Where is this jerkoff?" Kestrel said. He hated when people were late. For another minute no one said anything. And at 10:46 they relaxed.

"Thank God it was a joke," Natalie said just as the phone on Kestrel's desk rang. Everyone tensed.

"Check this out," Kestrel said and punched a button making the call audible to everyone in the room. "Barry Kestrel here," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Like I told your girl, Mr. Kestrel, I have one of your employees," the caller said.

Kestrel looked surprised by the caller's voice modulator. Pike should have warned him that Ronnie said the person was using one, but he hadn't heard it himself yet. It was disturbing.

"Right," Kestrel said, "and you have Chef Boyardee in the cupboard and Mrs. Butterworth in the refrigerator. If this is you, Jeremy, I'm not laughing."

The voice was calm. "This isn't Jeremy and I'm not laughing either."

The mood in the room changed, but Kestrel tried to keep it playful. It might still be a joke and the last thing Kestrel wanted to do was to fall for it in front of the others.

"Your reaction, sir?" asked the voice.

"Are you talking through one of those voice things?" Kestrel asked. "No, this is what I really sound like, asshole."

Kestrel tensed, but all he said was, "If you're one of those protesters you can relax."

Walter leaned over Kestrel's desk and spoke into the phone. "We decided to pull the catalogue." Kestrel pushed Walter aside.

"I'm not a protester and I don't give a shit about your catalogue," the caller said. "Like you, Mr. Kestrel, I'm a businessman and I've got a deal for you."

Kestrel was serious now. "What's that?"

"I've got one of your employees."

"Who?"

"His name is Martin Newman and unless you pay two million dollars for his release we will not be responsible for anything that might happen to him."

Pike had heard things like this before, but the others hadn't. They looked at one another, unsure how to react. Ronnie quickly walked to a small desk on the other side of the office and booted up the computer on it.

"Did you hear me?" the kidnapper asked.

"Two million dollars is a lot of money," said Kestrel.

"That's why I suggest you do exactly what I tell you to."

Kestrel spoke cautiously, trying to gauge the person he was speaking with like he did whenever he was making a deal. Pike had heard him do this in the car countless times. "Why would I do anything else?"

"Because I know how men like you think."

"You don't know anything about me."

"I know you enjoyed your sirloin at Smith and Wollensky's last night." Kestrel swore under his breath. The caller had followed him to the restaurant where Pike had driven him to eat.

"Too much red meat," the caller said, "can't be good for a man your age."

"You don't scare me, you little shit."

The caller laughed. He'd gotten to Kestrel and he knew it. Kestrel knew that the caller knew it and that angered him even more.

"I'll let you think about it and I'll call tomorrow morning to discuss the payment," the caller said. "One other thing. My colleagues and I are all over your company's Internet system. Your personal accounts, too. We know everything you do. In fact I know that you're looking at Mr. Newman's file right now."

Ronnie said, "Shit," and stood up and backed away from the computer.

"That's okay," the caller said as if he'd just seen Ronnie's reaction. "Read his company file all you like. But if anyone investigates more deeply about him we'll know. And Mr. Newman will suffer the consequences." The caller paused. "We'll call you tomorrow morning, Mr. Kestrel, same time, same place."

"You do that," Kestrel said and punched the button on the phone. He kicked the wastebasket that held the discarded catalogue. "Sonofabitch," he said. "Of all the times to kidnap someone."

"When is a good time to kidnap someone, Barry?" Natalie asked.

"Not today, that's for damn sure." Kestrel sat at his desk. "Can we trace his phone?" he asked Pike.

"He's gonna be using a burner," Pike said.

"It could be a she, couldn't it?" Kestrel said. "Maybe that's why they were using a voice thing, so she sounds scarier than if she were just a woman."

Pike nodded. It was a clever reaction on Kestrel's part. "That's possible," Pike said.

Walter turned to Pike. "Will you call the police, Sergeant Pike, or should we?"

Ronnie looked up from the computer screen. "I can get the police on the line for you, Mr. Kestrel."

Kestrel shook his head. "No."

"What do you mean 'no'?" Walter said.

"No means no," Kestrel said. "Can't you see what's happening?

We're between a rock and a hard place. If we go to the cops with this it'll be all over the street in two minutes. The Internet would eat this shit up."

"So?" Walter asked.

"So it'd kill the Salient deal."

Walter frowned. "You said the deal was solid."

"Until something like this happens it is. Salient's board is already split down the middle. All the doubters over there would need is this and the deal's dead in the water." Kestrel was right. Everyone in the room knew it.

"So what do we do?" Walter asked.

Pike was eager to hear Kestrel's answer. They all were.

"We pay the ransom," Kestrel said.

Natalie was surprised. "Out of our own pockets?"

"Out of our own pockets. By week's end if everything goes as planned you're both gonna be worth at least thirty million. Maybe more. So don't be so damn cheap."

"What if it's not real?" Natalie said.

"I think it is real," Walter said.

"It doesn't matter if it's real or not," Kestrel said. "That's the thing in this social media world of ours. If someone says something's real, it's real."

Pike silently agreed with this. They all did. How could they not?

"The three of us can dig up a million cash no problem, right?" Kestrel asked Walter.

"They asked for two million," Walter said.

"I can get them down."

"You don't negotiate with kidnappers," Walter said.

"This is America. I can negotiate with whoever I want."

Walter shook his head. "This is not moral."

"Fuck moral." Pike had seen Kestrel angry enough to swear like this only once or twice before.

Ronnie interrupted. "Here he is." She pointed to a photo on the computer screen. He was a young white man in his thirties. There was nothing especially noteworthy about him. "This is Martin Newman," she said.

Walter turned to Pike. "The caller told us not to investigate, didn't he?"

Before Pike could answer, Kestrel said, "He said we could look at his Boundary file." He pushed Ronnie aside and stared at the man's photo. "What's his name again?"

"Martin Newman," Ronnie said.

The man's face filled the screen and the others circled the desk to get a better look at it. Pike stood behind the other four, as interested in them as they were in the man on the computer screen.

From the look on his face, Pike saw that Kestrel had no recollection of the man, but he probably couldn't recognize more than half a dozen of his employees.

"Never heard of him," Kestrel said. He looked at Natalie and Walter. "You guys?" They shook their heads. Kestrel turned to Ronnie. "You?"

"Not that I can recall, sir, no."

Kestrel looked at Pike. "What about you?" Pike said he didn't recognize him, either.

Ronnie began to read the man's file. "Martin Reginald Newman. Thirty-three years old. He's worked here for seven years."

"Which department?" Kestrel asked. "Research trader."

Kestrel frowned. "One of those assholes." "Is he married?" Natalie asked.

Ronnie answered her, "No."

Walter pointed to the screen. "It says he's a widower."

Pike noticed that Ronnie seemed surprised when Walter said this. "It does?" she said and looked more closely at the file. "It says it here. See?" Walter said pointing to the screen. Ronnie saw it and nodded. "Right."

"It says he has no children," Natalie said.

Kestrel said, "That's good."

"Why is that good?" Natalie asked.

"I don't know," said Kestrel. "Where does he live?"

"259 East 66th Street," Walter said.

"Really?" Ronnie asked, seemingly surprised by this information, too.

"Is something wrong?" Pike asked her.

"It's all so upsetting," she said to him.

"That's the Maxell, those executive apartments," Natalie said. "We rented some for the Tokyo executives when they came here last year." Kestrel pointed to the screen. "He graduated from Princeton." Walter looked more closely at Newman's photo. "Princeton? Wait a minute. I think I know this guy."

"You do?" Kestrel asked.

"He worked on the Hyperion merger with me," Walter said. "I'm sure of it. He's quiet." Walter remembered more about Newman as he spoke about him. "And he's got a limp like he has a short leg or maybe a war wound or something. He's the kind of guy who stays in the background."

"Wait a minute," Natalie said. "He has a limp?" She leaned over Ronnie's other shoulder and looked at Newman's face. "You're right, Walter. I remember him, too. He was quiet. I mean he is quiet," she said, correcting herself. "He didn't say much, but when he did he made his point."

Kestrel asked Ronnie if she recognized Newman. She looked at his photo. "I might've seen him around, too. In the cafeteria or somewhere. But he looks like a lot of the people here."

"What did they take him for?" Kestrel said. "He's a nobody." "Exactly," Pike said. Kestrel turned to Pike. "Meaning?"

Everyone was looking at Pike now. He had to be careful what he said. "It's a low-level kidnapping," he said. "Two guys sit in a car outside a private school. They grab a kid, call the parents and ask for five hundred dollars."

"That little?" Kestrel said.

"That's the point. Enough to score a hit of oxy or meth. What parent's going to bring in the cops and risk their kid's life for the cost of theater tickets?"

Natalie grabbed Pike's arm. "Tell me you're joking."

Pike shook his head. "So the parents pay 'em. No cops, no danger, nothing. Happens all day every day."

"Pretty smart when you think of it," Kestrel said.

Natalie had already crossed the office and begun digging through her handbag. "I can never find my fucking phone," she said before pulling it out of her bag and punching in a number.

"What are you doing?" Kestrel asked.

"Checking on Courtney."

"Your kid's fine, Natalie."

But Natalie had already reached her daughter's nanny. "Consuela," she said too loudly into her phone. "Donde esta Courtney?" "Hang up," Kestrel said.

Natalie ignored him. "Llevala a casa. Right now."

"I said hang up," Kestrel said and grabbed the phone from her.

He ended the call and handed her phone back to Natalie. "Your kid's fine."

Everyone looked at Natalie. "I'm sorry," she said. "I overreacted." She looked at Ronnie as if she, the only other woman in the room, would be the one person who'd understand what she'd just done.

Walter turned to Pike. "So you're saying that if we pay them then nothing bad will happen to Mr. Newman?"

"That's not what I said, Mr. Shaw. Only how it sometimes works." "Two million is not five hundred bucks," Kestrel said.

Talk of money refocused Natalie again. "Especially if we're paying it."

"I could make inquiries," Pike said.

"No inquiries," Kestrel said and pointed to the phone on his desk.

"You heard what he said. So here's what we do. This does not leave the room. Not a word to anyone until we know more. And when this asshole calls back tomorrow morning I'll offer him one million bucks."

Walter was confused. "Why don't we just give them the two million they're asking for?"

"I have to show strength, that's why. If I don't, it could put this guy in more danger." Kestrel looked at Pike. "Right?"

Pike shrugged. What Kestrel said only proved that he'd seen too many movies. "It's possible," Pike said.

"And they don't expect us to pay them the two million anyway." "How do you know?" Walter asked.

"Because I know people. I know how they bargain. They get their million, they release Newman and the Salient deal goes through," Kestrel said. "No harm, no foul."

Natalie's conscience made a late appearance. "That's not how this kind of thing is done, Barry."

"Who says? Martha Stewart? If what the Detective here says is right," Kestrel said, "then one million tax free is this scumbag's dream come true." He looked at Pike. "What do you think? Does one million sound good to you?"

"I don't have an opinion, sir."

"I'm paying you for your opinion."

"I would tell the authorities." Pike said.

Kestrel waved away that idea. "That's not gonna happen."

"I agree with Detective Pike," Natalie said. "We have to tell them, don't we?"

"We don't have to do anything," Kestrel said. "If we pay the money then our guy is safe. You said so yourself." Pike had said nothing like that, but Kestrel kept talking. "So we're agreed. This stays between the five of us in this room. If we do this right it'll be like it never happened. The deal goes through and this guy, what's his name—?"

"Martin Newman," Ronnie said.

"Newman," Kestrel said, "will be fine."

"What if someone found out what we did?" Walter asked.

"Then we'd look like heroes. Think about it. We sacrificed our own money for this guy's safety."

"You tried to bargain them down, Barry," Natalie said.

Kestrel ignored her. "So nobody says a word about this. Not to your wife, not to your boyfriend, not to your dog. We've got to do this right because there's too much on the line."

"This man's life is in our hands," Walter said.

"That too," said Kestrel. "What's his name again?"

"Martin Newman," Ronnie said.

"Right," Kestrel said, dismissing them all with a hand gesture.

As Ronnie stepped out the door, she heard Kestrel add, "And don't forget to pick up my suit at Zegna's."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHARLIE PETERS

Charlie Peters is a playwright and screenwriter who was raised in New York City and educated at Stonyhurst College in England, the University of Connecticut and Carnegie-Mellon University. His plays have been produced at La Mama E.T.C., Playwrights Horizons, The Edinburgh Festival, The Actors Theatre of Louisville and Primary Stages. Twelve of his screenplays have been produced and the casts in those movies include Sally Field, Bob Hoskins, Renee Zellweger, Burt Reynolds, James Caan, Morgan Freeman, Jeff Bridges, Michael Caine, Claire Trevor, Richard Dreyfuss, Diane Keaton, Frances McDormand, Jude Law and Maureen Stapleton.

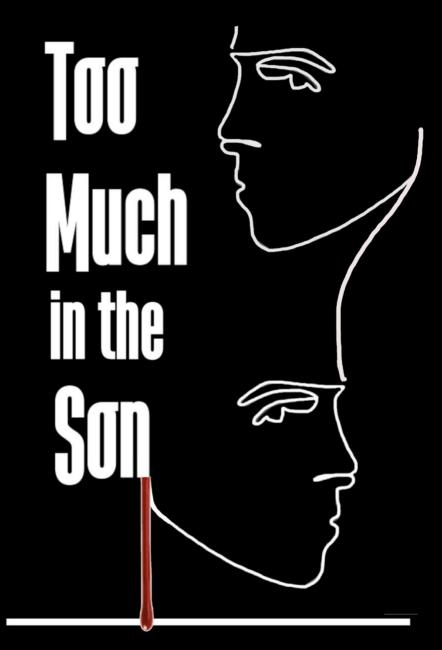
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Charlie Peters

Too Much in the Son

Charlie Peters

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Genre: Mystery, Thriller, Psychological Drama

A twisted story of a young man on the run who is mistaken for his murdered friend by the friend's parents—or is he? Who is conning who?

PART ONE

Martinique, 2003

1

Leo regained consciousness in the back of the panel van as it swerved over the island's unpaved and rutted roads, stones bouncing off its undercarriage, making it sound as if he were inside a tin drum. His hands were wrapped behind his back with duct tape and his head throbbed where he'd been hit. He could taste blood in his mouth. There was more blood, lots of it, on the floor of the van. But that blood wasn't his. Lying across from him on the van's rusted floor was the body of the young man whose throat he'd watched being cut a short time before.

The dead man's face was covered by a burlap bag, but Leo had no doubt it was Hoffman. He recalled the argument, the shouting and the fight. And he remembered seeing the blade slicing Hoffman's neck quickly and deeply.

It was only a few days before that Leo met Taylor Hoffman and he might have had more sympathy for him if Hoffman wasn't the reason that both he and Leo were in the van. Now he was going to watch him be buried. And more likely than not, Leo would be buried along with him.

2

Four days earlier, Leo stood at the concierge desk in the resort La Cachette where one of the housekeepers was telling him, half in the island's patois, "You are mistaken, *monsieur*, I give you your package *ce matin*." She turned to the concierge and told him, "I swear he wrong, monsieur. I give it to him after *la femme* in Room 107 give it to me."

The concierge smiled patronizingly at Leo. "Madame says she gave it to you this morning, Mr. Malone."

"Then why am I standing here asking you for it now?" Leo said.

"The fact of the matter is that I'm not able to answer that." Like many people, the concierge used unnecessary phrases when he spoke, hoping they made him sound smarter. They didn't. "At the end of the day, I trust my staff implicitly," the short man said and smiled at the housekeeper like a teacher might smile at a favorite student. She nodded her thanks to him before staring shyly, or guiltily, at the floor.

Leo was not officially a guest of the resort. But he'd left his passport in Janice Heller's room along with some clothes and cash when he went for a morning swim. If she had to leave for the airport before he got back, Janice said she'd ask the housekeeper to give Leo his things. Now the housekeeper claimed that she'd already given him what Janice had left for him. She was lying of course and Leo assumed that she'd already given his few clothes to her relatives and pocketed his money for herself. But the money or the clothes weren't important. What Leo wanted was his passport. He had no plan to go back to the States but, even so, you don't want to be anywhere without a passport.

"How am I supposed to get home now?" Leo asked the concierge.

"I can see how that might present a problem."

"I'll go up and look for myself."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Malone, but at this point in time the suite is occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Passenti. They're newlyweds," the concierge said with a conspiratorial smile as if he had any idea what newlyweds do. "Do you have any other business at the resort, Mr. Malone? Because, if not, I'm afraid Dr. Heller was the last single female guest staying with us at the moment." The concierge and the maid grinned knowingly at each other.

"I'm going up there," Leo said.

As precious as the concierge was, his access to the resort's security staff gave him the courage to step from behind the desk and stand in Leo's way. "If you go anywhere near that room, Mr. Malone, I will have no recourse but to alert security."

Leo wasn't going to fight him and the concierge knew this. So the two men stood there until a voice rescued them from their impasse. "You guys talking about this?"

They both turned to a young man who held a manila envelope.

"Voilá," the housekeeper said, pointing to the new man, roughly the same age as Leo. "I give it to him *ce matin* like I tell you, monsieur," she said.

The stranger was the same height and build as Leo. And even though his hair was a lighter brown and he didn't have Leo's scraggly, week-old beard, it was possible, likely even, that someone could mistake the two men. The housekeeper looked quickly back and forth between the new man and Leo and said, "*Ils sont freres*."

"Oui. More than brothers," the concierge said. "Almost twins."

The housekeeper nodded. "C'est vrai. Jumeaux."

The new man waved the envelope with Leo's name on it and pointed to the housekeeper. "This one here gave it to me this morning. I thought it was some tourist shit until I opened it." He handed the envelope to Leo who quickly confirmed that his passport was in it. So was his money. There was also a note from Janice Heller, handwritten on the resort's stationery. Leo counted the money and pocketed his passport. The note he'd read later.

"All's well that ends well," said the concierge.

The young man stuck his hand out to Leo. "Taylor Hoffman," he said.

"Leo Malone," said Leo, shaking his hand. "Thanks."

"No problem, bro."

Upon hearing who this new man was, the concierge perked up, his hands fluttering. "Welcome to La Cachette, Mr. Hoffman. I'm so sorry I wasn't here to greet you personally this

morning," he said, clasping the young man's hand with both of his. "But rest assured anything you need, anything at all, simply inform me or my staff and we will see to it immediately."

"Thanks," Taylor said dismissively.

Not reading the man's disinterest, the concierge continued to fawn. "We at La Cachette deeply regret that your parents had to cancel their visit, but I will personally do everything to make your own stay here as memorable as possible."

"Whatever," Taylor said.

"Merci," Leo said to the housekeeper and left the scene.

Taylor followed Leo into the lobby. "So you think they're right?" he said.

"About what?"

"That we look alike?"

"I don't know," Leo said and kept walking. But Taylor Hoffman grabbed Leo's shoulder and stopped him in front of a gaudy, mirrored wall near the entrance. Leo quickly shook off the other man's hand. He didn't like being touched by people.

"Check it out," Taylor said and pointed to Leo's scruffy beard. "Especially if you didn't have that shit on your face."

Leo looked at himself and at Taylor. Did they look alike? Who knows what anyone looks like to others? Where does your own eye go when you look in a mirror? First to your flaws—the unbalanced nose, those too-large ears, your pointy chin—to see if they're as bad as you thought? Or do you look at your strengths—your blue eyes, your full lips—none of which, flaws or strengths, are even noticeable to others? No one gives a shit what anyone else looks like. If people remembered that, their lives would be a lot easier.

Still, Leo had to admit there was a resemblance between Taylor Hoffman and himself. "Maybe we do look a bit alike," he said before he walked away.

Taylor followed him. "You staying here?"

"Not anymore." Leo walked through the front door held open for him by a tall Black man in a uniform like one you might see in a community theater production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. The doorman nodded a silent goodbye to Leo who headed to the road that would take him to his small apartment in the island's central town.

The shoes and cuffs of the two men sitting over Leo in the van were all that he could see of them, but their pants were the same dark green the island's police force wore. Leo recognized their shoes, too, as the imperfect rejects of an expensive running shoe donated with much fanfare by the manufacturer and the NBA star whose name was printed on their heel. They were brought here by an NGO three years after a hurricane called Heidi devastated the island's eastern shore, killing hundreds of people. *Heidi*? What idiot names these storms anyway?

When the hurricane struck the island, Leo had been working for a year on a Chickasaw reservation in Oklahoma. At a meeting about the residents' diets, Leo said that processed food had probably killed more Native Americans than any white man ever had or will. Given that one of the primary sponsors of the clinic was a multinational conglomerate whose most famous product was an iconic cookie made by elves, it was suggested Leo find another job. That same day he saw a notice on the chapel wall looking for volunteers to help hurricane victims on the island. He signed up, thinking it'd be a change for him and good for the island's people.

But less than a week after getting there, he lost his enthusiasm and not because of the work required. He was used to hard work and shitty quarters. The island's indigenous aid workers, recipients of the donations Leo arrived with, welcomed him. They saw in Leo a toughness that the other Americans, mostly high school kids looking for an experience to put on their college applications, didn't have. So Leo did what he could. But he quickly realized that the island's local leaders were as criminal as they were cruel. Canned food and clothing were readily accepted, but nearly all of the donated money disappeared. The politicians spent it on their whores who spent it on clothes they had nowhere to wear.

Leo stayed on the island, taking odd jobs, but mostly working as a guide to the tourists who came to the resorts like La Cachette. He volunteered three afternoons a week teaching reading in a local school. The kids liked him and the teachers, Carmelite nuns, were grateful for any time Leo could rescue them from the classroom.

And now, as a final mockery of Leo's good intentions, these two men in the van who'd been ordered to kill him wore the same imperfect shoes he'd brought to the island for them in the first place.

The two cops spoke in a deeply accented patois that Leo had trouble following. His head wound didn't help. But he could make out that the younger cop, who had a daughter in a class Leo taught, questioned why they had to kill him. Because their boss told them to, the other one answered. But the younger cop protested; the American had done nothing wrong. The older cop told his partner to shut up and again quoted their boss, a local police chief, who warned them more about tying up loose ends than about breaking the law.

That's what Leo was: a loose end to be tied up. But maybe he could say something to the young cop about his daughter and remind him why he came here in the first place. He could restate his good intentions, beg for their sympathy and promise both cops that he'd say nothing about what they'd done or what he'd seen. He'd give them money, American money, a lot of it by their standards. But they'd probably already taken any cash he'd had in his pockets and finally Leo decided it was better that the policemen, distracted like all subordinates by smoking and endless complaining, thought he was still unconscious while he planned what to do next.

The van went over a huge bump in the road, causing Leo to fly and linger momentarily in the air like the coyote in a roadrunner cartoon. The young policeman fell off his perch and swore. His partner laughed at him.

4

Two days before Leo met Taylor Hoffman because of the housekeeper's mistake, Dr. Janice Heller, a forty-three-year-old psychiatrist from Santa Barbara, arrived at La Cachette. Her plan was to get far away from her husband, an investment banker, who'd been arrested for something that involved a student at the public high school where Janice volunteered as a counselor.

Her first evening there, as she drank a Mai Tai at the poolside bar wondering if coming to Martinique was a good idea, a young man took the seat next to her.

The man, not much more than a boy really, introduced himself to her as Leo Malone and, being told that she'd never been to the island before, he asked if she'd like someone to show her and her husband around. Janice shook her head. She was here alone. Leo expressed surprise at that news.

The bartender, a local, interrupted to tell Janice that Leo had been showing La Cachette's guests around the island for several years and that he spoke the language and knew the islands as well as anyone did, especially the places to stay away from. "This man the best, madam," the bartender said. "Everybody, they say so."

"You like the book?" Janet asked Leo who was holding a dog-eared copy of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders,* a book she sometimes gave her younger patients to read.

He didn't say whether he did or didn't like it. All he said was, "She started writing it when she was only fifteen years old." Then he added, "The S.E. stands for Susan Eloise."

Janice pointed to the paperback. "You don't expect a girl called Eloise to write a book like that, do you? You'd expect her to be at a place like this."

Leo nodded. "Not Oklahoma."

This young man was pleasant enough to look at. He wasn't gigolo-good-looking, but he was fit without being muscular and unlike most men who prey on women, he didn't speak much. Words were not his weapon, if he even had a weapon. He didn't laugh easily and his smile was forced. When it appeared, it was awkward, hesitant. As they spoke about Hinton's book and the characters in it, he displayed a weary suspicion more normal in a man two or three times his age. Janice wondered if the resort's guests, women especially, chose him as a guide for that reason, out of sympathy more than intrigue.

No doubt Leo was smart, even literate, and she agreed to let him take her the next evening to one of the smaller islands where the migratory sea turtles laid their eggs after dark. She'd later wonder if she hired him only because the psychiatrist in her was intrigued. Or was it because she was alone for the first time in twenty years and wanted to do something new, something her husband wouldn't expect her to do.

"Just so you know," Janice said as she shook Leo's hand, "this isn't about sex."

Leo appeared insulted by what she'd said. "That's not what I do," he said. Janice apologized and blamed it on the drinks she'd had. She was relieved that the idea of sex was

put out of the way so easily. Still, if she were honest, she'd admit being disappointed that the young man had agreed to her request so quickly.

Leo preferred it that way. Most of the women he escorted were excited by the possibility of sex, not sex itself. For them it was like being strapped into an amusement park ride, one that makes you afraid of falling off, but you won't and you know all along that you won't. Still, you scream. And people like to scream.

Some of the women he got paid to escort thought Leo was gay. He said nothing to correct them. He'd worked for husbands and wives, too, but never for a man alone. An older gentleman on his own once offered to hire him, but Leo turned him down. The man understood. Groups of women who came down for "girls' weekends" were his most frequent employers. They teased one another about seducing the young man, but never did. Or even tried.

The resort's rooms were all large suites and Leo charged the women less for his guide services if they let him sleep on the pull-out sofa in their living rooms. Eventually many let him sleep in their suites for free. It played into their maternal instincts and they were happy to think they were taking care of the distant, but polite, young man

But that first night Janice Heller agreed to hire him, Leo walked back to his apartment in the village.

The next evening Janice met Leo at the dock and he paddled her in a kayak to one of the smaller islands where the migratory turtles laid their eggs. On the way there, they talked more about their favorite books. They both liked Flannery O'Connor.

"A sickly, Catholic woman in the deep south," Leo said. "There's an outsider."

"You know something about outsiders, don't you?"

Leo shrugged. "Some."

Listening to what Leo said or, more telling, what he didn't say, Janice couldn't help diagnosing him. She'd worked at a halfway house in Los Angeles for juvenile defendants. No one called them "delinquents" anymore, but like many of the young men she'd counseled, Leo exhibited symptoms of "emotional detachment" or "depersonalization disorder", a lack of trust in—and in some cases a pathological fear of—emotional contact with others. Leo

kept his distance from Janice, like those boys did. When she asked him about his family, Leo's answers were polite, but brief and without detail. He looked at her the way a dog might, reading her face and body for clues more than listening to, or trusting, anything she said.

On the small island, they watched the huge, leathery sea turtles bury their eggs in the sand and slowly waddle back to the water. Janice enjoyed it. Leo always liked seeing this, too. When they returned to the resort she asked Leo to have a drink with her in her room. The way she asked him, he knew it wasn't a come-on.

In her suite, Leo asked Janice about her thirteen-year-old daughter that she'd mentioned several times. She showed him a photo of her.

"She's beautiful," Leo said even though the girl wasn't, not especially.

"Oh, please, let her be anything but beautiful," Janice said. "She'll spend the first twenty-five years of her life lording it over everyone else for something she had nothing to do with and the next thirty years desperately trying to hang onto it." Then she said something few had before. "I don't want to talk about me, Leo. I want to talk about you."

Leo grinned warily.

"People don't ask you about yourself, do they?" she said.

Leo shook his head.

"And when they do, you never answer them, do you?"

She was right. Leo had a look that kept others at a distance, a look he'd perfected as far back as he could remember. The few times he told people anything about his life it was because he was obliged to—things like job interviews—but even then he made up most of what he said. When he did that he mimicked how characters in movies he'd seen had talked. He could almost hear a film's score playing behind him.

But it didn't matter because, like people everywhere, the guests at La Cachette preferred to talk about themselves. But every so often they'd ask Leo a question about his life, hoping he'd tell them a story they could bring home like the photo of a fish they'd caught. He was, after all, a part of their holiday. So to amuse these people he told them lies ranging from one about his parents having been rodeo clowns to another about being raised in a California religious cult. He got the details from books he'd read and usually the more interesting the lies he told, the larger his tips would be. To the guests, Leo's stories were the same as foreign money,

a moment, but worthless and forgotten like the coins they'd eventually stick unused in a dresser drawer.

Janice Heller was different. She didn't give up. "I dare you to tell me about yourself," she said.

This surprised Leo. The woman was a psychiatrist. Was this how she got her young patients to open up to her? Play a game of truth or dare with them? Why would she even have to? No one vomits themselves so willingly into a room like a teenager does.

Normally, Leo would have done what he always did and lied to her. So why on this night did he break his own rule and tell her the truth? Maybe shrinks like her had a secret trick for getting people to open up like the mentalist at a carnival does. The alcohol they'd both had didn't hurt, either. And maybe if he broke down and told her parts of his past, she'd give him a larger tip.

Whatever his reason, Leo told Janice Heller the truth about his parents being killed in a gas station robbery in Oklahoma when he was three years old. He'd watched them both die.

Janice's reaction was immediate. "My God," she said. "That's not even psychological. It's neurological. People will try to convince you that you can talk your way out of that. But they're wrong. Something like that is printed in your brain." Janice put down her drink. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've had too much to drink. I never should have said that."

Anyone else might have been offended and told her nothing more about themselves, but Janice's blunt reaction was different from that of any caseworker Leo had been forced to speak to. Instead of being put off by her reaction, Leo liked it. It meant she wasn't going to empathize with him. She wasn't going to hold his hand and wish that bad things had never happened to him. So Leo said, "I don't remember much about them."

But he said he did remember his mother's smile, her unexpected laugh and her warm breath on his neck. A local beauty queen, Carlotta Jane Diminski was as gorgeous as her husband Bobby Licklighter was handsome. She'd just turned nineteen when she was killed. Bobby was twenty-one.

He told Janice how, after their deaths, he was taken in by his mother's older sister Iris, her abusive husband Jack and their three children in Oklahoma. Leo's cousins hated him being there and they showed it in the cruelest ways they could.

Iris had never liked the more beautiful Carly and she hated the publicity that followed the three-year-old survivor of a notorious crime. But what would people say if she didn't take Leo in? She was a Christian and the boy was family. One afternoon, Iris watched a video she'd found. Leo watched, too. It was of Leo riding on his father's shoulders, the little boy wearing a red cowboy hat and grinning widely. Leo's beautiful mother snatches him off his father's back, plops the cowboy hat on her own head and peppers Leo with kisses while singing The Doors' *Light My Fire*.

Iris mumbled, "Bitch," and shut the video off before it finished. Leo never saw it again. A Cotton Bowl game that the Sooners lost was taped over it. Leo lived there for two more years until Jack was arrested for selling meth the same week Iris gave birth to her second set of twins.

Both those events sent five-year-old Leo into the Oklahoma foster system that included six more families before he was sixteen. Most of those families only took him for the monthly check they got from the state. Those were the best. The ones who wanted to save him with their love were the worst. They hoped Leo, like a rescued shelter puppy, would make up for—or at least distract them from—their own shitty lives.

"I wasn't difficult or violent like a lot of kids who got shuffled around the system," Leo told Janice. And he wasn't. He'd learned from his first day that the smartest choice was not to rock the boat. Be quiet. Shut up. If you're lucky, no one will bother you. They won't even see you. Most of his foster siblings, desperate for attention, broke every rule they could. But why fight city hall? You can't win. And if you're silent, you're safe. A hunter will tell you it's the wounded animal's squeals that attract the predator.

"So why'd you end up in so many homes?" Janice asked.

His caseworkers asked themselves the same thing. If only all their kids could keep out of trouble like this boy did. The words they used among themselves to describe Leo were "solitary" and "dark". But when they'd try to convince a family to take him, they called him "independent".

The families Leo was placed with saw him differently. Far from placating them with his silence, Leo confused them. Anger these people knew. Rage they were comfortable with. Silence not so much. And when a child like Leo refused the love of an eager Evangelical

mother it was worse. It couldn't be her fault. Christ wouldn't let it be. Something had to be wrong with the child. Consider how his parents died.

So his foster parents, their own children and the other foster kids imagined the crimes this boy with his dark history was hatching in his silent stare. They told the caseworkers how much the surprisingly pretty boy frightened them. But Leo scored a zero on the PCLR test for psychopathy, lower than most of his foster parents or their own children would have scored. There was nothing wrong with the boy. He simply had nothing to say. And as if proving that was still part of his makeup, Leo stopped speaking. He'd already told Janice too much. "I'm tired," he said.

Janice wasn't surprised. All she said was, "Thank you, Leo. I know that wasn't easy for you." She didn't take his hand or hug him like someone else might have done and he was relieved when she didn't.

Because she was leaving La Cachette early the next morning and knew that Leo would swim at dawn, she offered the pullout sofa in her suite's main room for him to sleep on. He thanked her for her generosity.

Janice went into her bedroom and closed the door. It didn't bother Leo when he heard her lock it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHARLIE PETERS

Charlie Peters is a playwright and screenwriter who was raised in New York City and educated at Stonyhurst College in England, the University of Connecticut and Carnegie-Mellon University. His plays have been produced at La Mama E.T.C., Playwrights Horizons, The Edinburgh Festival, The Actors Theatre of Louisville and Primary Stages. Twelve of his screenplays have been produced and the casts in those movies include Sally Field, Bob Hoskins, Renee Zellweger, Burt Reynolds, James Caan, Morgan Freeman, Jeff Bridges, Michael Caine, Claire Trevor, Richard Dreyfuss, Diane Keaton, Frances McDormand, Jude Law and Maureen Stapleton.

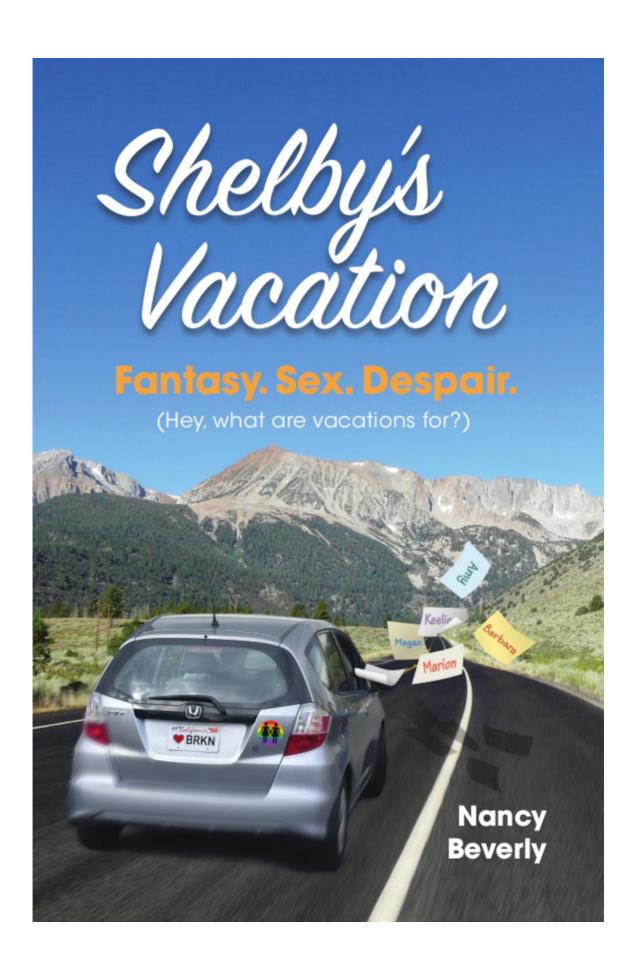
TOO MUCH IN THE SON

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Shelby's Vacation

Nancy Beverly

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Genre: LGBTQ Romance, Contemporary Fiction

A warm, insightful story of a woman on vacation who discovers unexpected love, personal truth, and the courage to face change.

Author's Note

Many years ago, I was driving back to Los Angeles from the Grand Canyon and stopped for a break in Kingman, Arizona. My passenger side window was down, and after I parked the car and opened the driver's door, all of my directions and maps flew around like crazed birds. Some years later, I thought this moment would be a great beginning of a story. Granted, when it happened to me it was before the internet, so losing your directions was way scarier. But still, it was a good image to get a tale rolling.

I first wrote *Shelby's Vacation* as a feature-length screenplay, using California for the locations instead of Arizona. And then I let it sit for a number of years, unsure of how to get a lesbian film out into the world back then.

I went on a camping trip with a bunch of lesbians several years later up to Rock Creek Lake in the Sierra Nevada Mountains (or as you will soon learn, just call it the Sierra Nevada). I fell in love with the place and thought, "Hey, this could be a great location to film *Shelby's Vacation!*"

I got the script out, did some rewrites and entered it into Chicago's Pride Films and Plays competition. Lo and behold, I made the semi-finals. Even better, the script was hand-picked by that contest's exec director for a staged reading at a gay pride event in Randolph, Vermont, in the summer of 2011. I flew to Vermont and had such a wonderful experience, I decided to really give things a go to get *Shelby's*

Vacation made as a feature film. I learned how to do a film's business plan, how to court investors and production companies, but even with a talented director attached (Vickie Sampson), we still couldn't get the film financed.

I came up with Plan B. I told Vickie we could shoot a short version of *Shelby's Vacation*-and then I would write the whole thing as a novel so I could tell the complete story of the characters.

Vickie and I were very successful in raising the money from friends and loved ones to make our 40-minute film in 2016. We had a great cast and crew and are very proud of how the movie turned out.

We premiered in 2017, were featured in over a dozen film festivals, and won some awards to boot.

The next step was to write the novel and polish it. And, hey, I didn't have to worry about budgets, locations, forest fires, or actors dropping out.

So here we are. And a couple of final notes: While some of the places in this novel are real-the California towns of Bishop and Lone Pine, the hike up to Kearsarge Pass to name a few-the characters and where they work and live-Pacific University, Sierra Glen Cabins and Little Pine-are fictional.

And please do not try hiking in the Sierra Nevada without proper training and equipment.

Enjoy the journey!

Part One





Red Rock Canyon

Chapter One

Marion, Mojave & Mini-Coop

She had freckles on her neck. Shelby had never noticed that before. But then she'd never stood this close to Marion before. Marion was a brunette, not a redhead, so freckles weren't a given. This was bonus material.

She could also see the color of Marion's bra strap. Fuchsia.

Shelby and her boss Marion were standing side by side in Marion's office at L.A.'s Pacific University, bent over Marion's glass-covered wooden conference table in early June. They were laying out the seating chart for the Summer Splash Alumni Dinner.

Even though Marion was only twenty-seven, she'd taken over the school's Alumni Relations like a seasoned pro four months before and had injected rocket fuel into a sluggish department. Shelby was thrilled (in more ways than one...) to be working for someone so dynamic, someone who could pull off wearing leopard print pants while breezing into a staff meeting in "sky-high" high heels with the confidence of a runway model.

It didn't bother Shelby at all to be working for someone who was ten years younger. In fact, being around Marion made her feel ten years younger. She could also feel a tingle in her nether regions as Marion's arm brushed hers while moving a Post-it.

"Am I standing too close?" Marion asked, her voice seductively low.

"No, I like you close," Shelby coyly responded.

"Want me closer?"

"That could work."

Marion unzipped Shelby's gray dress slacks and—

"If we put the Melvilles here...we can put the Wilsons there," Marion said, adjusting the neon yellow Post-it squares with names of Alumni donors on them. Shelby snapped back to reality and covered by saying, "Bad move, they're feuding." She deftly plucked the Post-its and made a series of quick chess moves to keep the Melvilles, the Wilsons and a few other donor diners at a civil distance from one another.

"Shelby! Life Saver!" Marion grabbed Shelby's arm. They giggled at one another.



"Ma'am? 'Scuse me? MA'AM? Are you buying those Life Savers?"

And now Shelby snapped back to the present. She'd been fingering a rainbow package of Life Savers at the AM/PM mini-mart gas station in Mojave, California. The teenaged clerk behind the counter pushed up her thick glasses and waited for Shelby's response.

"Uh, no, no. Just the gas, thanks."

The clerk handed Shelby her change and Shelby angled for the door, leaving behind the Life Savers and her thoughts about Marion.

The wind buffeted Shelby as she made her way back to her black Honda Fit. She remembered the winds of Mojave from her childhood vacations. Her dad would announce, "Batten down the hatches, we're stoppin' in Mojave!" The desert town was the last best place to get gas before heading up Highway 395 and on into the Sierra Nevada Mountains, according to him. "Everything's overpriced in those damn foothill towns," he'd announce. "They see us tourists comin' and they jack up the prices!"

About a half hour north of Mojave on the current road trip to escape Los Angeles in late July, Shelby looked out the car window to her left and saw the formations of Red Rock Canyon State Park. When she was eleven and her sister Roxanne was fifteen, they had camped there once with their parents. The formations had names like "The Sultan's Turban" and "Camel's Head." She and Roxanne had a field day naming some of the others: "Dog Poop Pile," "Tilted Cupcake," "Dragon Fangs," "Pointy Boobs."

Shelby glanced in her rearview mirror for one final glimpse of the burnt umber and cream-colored formations and then noted the time on her dashboard clock, 10 a.m. She looked quickly at her typed itinerary on the passenger seat: Official Snack Time. She carefully moved aside her map and trip notes, opened an air-tight Tupperware container,

and pulled out a cheese and cracker sandwich she'd made fresh that morning—buffalo mozzarella on Triscuits.

And just when she had a hefty cracker snack in her mouth...a royal blue Mini-Cooper convertible appeared suddenly in the passing lane. Shelby glanced over: a blonde, midthirties, hair blowing like crazy, who had rock 'n' roll cranked up so loud that Shelby could hear it inside her own car.

I wish my hair was that shade of blonde, Shelby mused. I've been cursed with, what's the phrase, dishwater blonde? Who comes up with shit phrases like that? I wish my hair had curvy, wavy natural body like Marion's.

Shelby quickly chewed the snack and contemplated if she should make eye contact with Miss Mini-Coop. *Wave? Smile? What the hell, I'm on vacation,* Shelby thought. She nodded at the blonde.

The blonde nodded back. And smiled.

Yeah, a vacation. Time for a new start.

"Isn't it time for you to move from manager to director?" Marion said, as they finalized their list of dinner attendees at the wooden table in her office.

"Oh gosh, Marion...."

"You've been here at the university how long?"

"Since I graduated."

"Let's get on it! Tonight we're going to our favorite Santa Monica restaurant—"

"—Lotus Flower," they both said simultaneously in low sexy voices, followed by giggles.

"And over sizzling rice..." Marion said, at which point Shelby did a "sizzle" sound effect, which resulted in more giggles. They had this whole routine down.

"...With a touch of saffron," Marion continued, "we will discuss your future. Our future."

"Our?" Shelby asked. It took every ounce of her being not to envision a white picket fence, the house behind it, and a U-Haul-It truck in the driveway. Okay, she did envision all of that.

"Yes, I need a good director."

"Director. I like it," Shelby said. And she decided to take the leap. After all, they'd been doing the office flirting thing for weeks now.

"Is that the only thing you need?" Shelby asked, with a seductive spin, her cheeks flushing.

Marion playfully answered, "No, I need a dinner reservation."

"I'll go make a dinner reservation," Shelby said, winking.



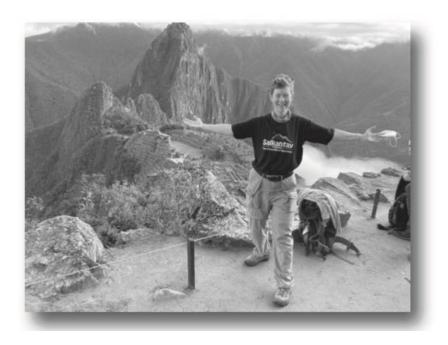
I wonder where the blonde is heading, Shelby thought. Wouldn't it be cool if we were both going on the same hiking tour? She looks like a sturdy, capable person, firm jawline, no fancy nail polish. Outdoor equipment is stuffed in the back of the Mini-Cooper, and she's wearing a hiking shirt....

And then the blonde pulled away, taking the fantasy with her, effortlessly nudging the Mini-Coop up to eighty-plus. Shelby tried giving her ol' Honda Fit a little extra gas, but the engine started to ping. Oh, the joys of driving an eight-year-old sedan. *You know what,* she thought, *BLOW HER AWAY, BLOW THEM ALL AWAY.* With that, she pressed the window button down to get some fresh air.

Except the button she pressed was for the passenger side window. She then pressed the driver's side window button down...and got a huge rush of crosswind, which resulted in every one of her detailed notes, itinerary, map and brochures flying around like crazed birds. Finally, the pièce de resistance: a motorcycle caravan of ten roaring Harley Davidsons ZOOOMMMED by to Shelby's left, adding a little extra oomph.

The papers all flew out the passenger side window. "SHIT."

About the Author



Nancy Beverly's professional life began at Actors Theatre of Louisville where she worked as the Assistant Literary Manager, reading thousands of scripts and acting as dramaturg on Humana Festival plays. She also had several of her own short plays produced in the ATL showcases. Since then, she has worked in television with stints on hit shows *Roseanne*, *Blossom*, *Desperate Housewives* and *Ghost Whisperer*, and has written plays that appeared in the Hollywood Fringe Festival, the Rainbow Festival at Asbury Park, and Bloomington Indiana's Blizzard of Short Plays. Her play *Handcrafted Healing* was workshopped by the Athena Project in Denver and her L.A. writers' group Fierce Backbone. Her 2019 short film *Shelby's Vacation*, from which this novel was adapted, won the Audience Choice Award at Perth's Dyke Drama Film Festival in Australia, Best Acting Duo and Best Romance Short at the Olympus Film Festival in L.A., Best GLBT Film at the Erie International Film Festival, and the Best LGBTQ Film award at The Lady Filmmakers Festival in Beverly Hills, among many other awards. *Shelby's Vacation* is her first novel.

SHELBY'S VACATION

Find it on Amazon:

https://tinyurl.com/4rn8vw4j

Find it on Barnes & Noble:

https://tinyurl.com/4dc3k96s

A KENT STIRLING THRILLER

STEVEN

The Man From Belize Steven Kobrin

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Genre: Action/Adventure, Spy Thriller

A fast-paced, explosive thriller featuring a retired spy, now a surgeon, who finds his life in danger when the organization he once worked for dispatches an assassin to eliminate him. Perfect for fans of James Bond and Matt Helm thrillers.

1

LOS ANGELES

A brisk, balmy afternoon. Perfect weather for a ball game. The stadium was mostly filled. Some openings in the nosebleed seats, otherwise it was a full house.

Art Jensen was a fan. He loved the game. A fit, appealing man in his forties, nothing gave him a bigger thrill than to watch his home team play like champions. This was not one of those days. The feeling in the air wasn't quite right. He knew there was a presence at the stadium. Something or someone that didn't belong. It was cool out yet beads of sweat ran down his temples.

Tanya, his beautiful, much younger wife, couldn't help but notice that he was distracted. "What's wrong?" she asked.

He glanced over at her nervously, reluctant to acknowledge that anything was amiss. "Sorry?" he said.

"It's like 70 degrees outside, and you're sweating as if it were summer in the Yucatan."

Art managed a slight but nervous smile.

"I'm fine. I just can't believe this game."

Tanya chuckled demurely. She leaned over to whisper in his ear, "They might actually win this one."

With sweat covering his face, he looked into the eyes of his companion. He couldn't help but think how lucky he was to have found her.

They tenderly gave each other a small kiss.

Tanya reached into her purse, pulled out some tissue and handed it to Art. "Just dab yourself with this. Stay cool."

"Thanks." Art began to wipe his brow, feeling slightly embarrassed.

Something was off. Art sensed some anomaly ahead of him, across the way in the section near right field. He gazed at the seats with a cold, hard stare, striving to tune out everything else around him. Then the sound captured his attention. As loud as anything going on at the stadium. The cocking of a sniper's rifle. Despite the din of the crowd, he heard it clear as a bell.

The beads of sweat began to roll more profusely, and then...

The bat smashed the ball like a thunderclap, echoing across the stadium. The sound was particularly sharp behind home plate, where Art and Tanya were seated.

The whole stadium rose to their feet to clap and cheer, including Tanya. The batter scored a double streamed right down center field. But Art remained in his seat, the only one behind home plate who didn't rise to see the team get on base.

The crowd was now anxious. It had suddenly become anybody's game. As the cheers gradually began to subside, the fans took their seats. But Art's focus was no longer on the action on the field.

"Honey, get me a drink," said Tanya. Art, staring out towards left field, didn't respond. So she repeated, "Art?"

He suddenly snapped out of it. "Sorry?"

"Could you please get me a drink?"

"Oh yeah, sure. Sprite?" Tanya smiled and nodded.

Art flagged down the vendor. Bought a couple of sodas. The vendor was a happy man with a sincere smile and pleasant manner. The total was seven bucks. Art handed him a ten spot, saying "Keep the change."

He took his seat again, trying his best to focus on the game. After all, his team looked as though it actually stood a chance.

His cell phone buzzed, on vibrate. He reached into the breast pocket of his coat and retrieved it. It was an older style flip phone; Art Jensen wasn't a fan of technology. He preferred to keep things simple.

"Hello?"

No response.

Is anyone there?" Silence.

After a pause, the call went dead. Art tapped the "Recents" button and glanced at the phone curiously. It was an unknown number.

Then his attention was once again riveted by the unmistakable sound of the cocking of a sniper's rifle. To him, it seemed to echo from every corner of the stadium, yet no one else seemed to hear it—only him.

He looked straight ahead towards center field. Then, as if out of a nightmare, a single shot permeated the air.

Art bolted from his seat. The rest of the spectators in his section remained planted, the ones nearest him gazing at him curiously. Tanya grabbed his hand and gave it a tug, signaling for him to sit back down.

"You didn't hear that?" he asked.

Tanya was puzzled more by his tone than the question. "Hear what?"

Art was baffled. How could she not have heard the shot? Maybe he was losing it. Hearing things.

"You mean did I hear how this crowd is going nuts because your team may actually pull off a fuckin' miracle and win one?" she laughed. "Yeah, I heard that."

Tanya could always lighten his mood. They smiled to each other. He began to rub his brow.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

Art looked at her, his face suddenly showing concern. "I, uh... I think I need to take a walk." He rose from his seat.

As he stepped across his lovely wife, she once again reached for his hand and gave it a tender squeeze. "Hey..."

Art glanced back at her.

"Love you," she said. And she meant it. Theirs was a truly special bond, and they both knew it.

He winked at her and continued toward the aisle. She kept her eyes on him, watching him. She loved his strong physique and undeniably masculine presence. Women in the surrounding seats also turned to gaze at him as he strode up to the back section of the stadium.

The home team scored another hit. This one went back deep into left field. A home run. The crowd went completely insane. Art Jensen paused on the steps and joined in the applause. As he turned to continue to the exit door, a little blonde girl accidentally dropped her large soda. It instantly covered the step she and her father were standing on and began trickling down the steps below. It almost splashed over Art's shoes but he dodged it just in time. The girl's father, embarrassed by his daughter's clumsiness, glanced at Art, saying, "Sorry about that."

"No worries," Art responded, continuing past them as the father flagged down an usher to alert them to the mess.

Art weaved his way around several fans, some heading for the bathrooms, others meandering towards the concession stands or searching for souvenir vendors. Art suddenly found them suffocating. He just wanted to find a quiet spot where he could be alone and clear his head.

Eventually, he reached the entrance of the stadium. It was much quieter there. He could actually hear himself think. He paused for a moment. His pensive mood was not easily broken despite the overriding pandemonium at the game.

He pulled out his phone and stared at it.

Then he made a call. His determination was undeniable. Art Jensen was looking for closure. The phone rang on the other end. Once. Twice. Three times.

Then a click as someone answered. "This is Jensen," he said, trying to be discreet. "I think I have a tail...Of course I did...Look, I didn't find the fucking thing!!" His voice was rising. He looked around to make sure he wasn't stirring up too much commotion.

"Just listen to me, please. Listen...I want to come in. I have information that would be useful to you...Who?"

A look of deep regret heightened his moody, scornful eyes.

"As far as I know, yes he is. For some time now...almost ten years. That's right. One of the heads of the facility. He's made quite a name for himself... But look, I just want to come in and be done with this, all right? I'll give you everything I have and believe me this shit matters!!! You want me to come in! You need me to come in!!"

There was an extended response by the person on the other end of the phone. It seemed to bring a great sense of calm and security to Art, as though it were exactly what he wanted to hear. "When? Fine...And then what?"

A confident smile spread across his handsome face. Now he felt better. Things were starting to look up.

"You can count on me," he said. "Yes sir, I'll be there...No, thank you. Bye."

Art ended the call, relieved, feeling like a tremendous weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Now he could relax. Breathe easier. Now...he could go back inside and enjoy watching his favorite team actually win one.

Yes, indeed. Things were looking up.

He walked with more confidence and authority as he moved back towards the section where Tanya was waiting. Then the sound rang out like a storm at midnight. Another base hit.

The crowd again leapt to their feet. It was the bottom of the ninth. Some people were already beginning to clear out—the ones who didn't want to get trapped in heavy traffic leaving the stadium—so it was a bit more packed in the back section as Art pushed through the fans beginning to clog the exits.

Among the people exiting was a strange-looking man in his twenties with aviator glasses and a grey leather coat, also trying to navigate past the sea of people. But as he did so, he eased closer and closer to Art.

Art was about a half-dozen steps above his row—aisle 11—when the strange-looking man stumbled as though bumped from behind and fell against him. It was a rough hit, abrupt and easily felt, colliding with Art's chest. Art flinched, winded. Seemingly embarrassed, the man gave a quick, apologetic wave and moved on, swiftly disappearing into the departing fans.

Wincing and clutching his midsection, his eyes beginning to flutter, Art turned to get a better look at the man with the glasses and grey coat. No sign of him at all. He was gone. Art continued down the aisle towards his seat, but he felt off, increasingly weak. He moved very gingerly down each step, grabbing tightly at his waist.

The man with the aviator glasses reached the exit door. Before pushing it open he retracted a curved blade back inside his jacket sleeve. He already knew what Art would very soon discover—the blow was fatal. As he'd bumped into Art Jensen, the man had sliced quickly and deeply into his femoral artery. And now he was dissolving into the throngs heading for their vehicles in the crowded parking lot. Soon he would be gone.

His mission was complete. He had dispatched the target.

Art found his way back to his seat and slumped into it.

Tanya was bubbling with enthusiasm. "Man on third," she reported excitedly, bringing him up to speed. "One more hit and we've won."

Her eyes riveted to the game, she hadn't noticed the color draining from his face, or the sweat now flowing in rivulets from his temples and brow. But she turned her head when she heard his erratic breathing, and saw that he was fighting to keep his eyes open. "Art, are you sick? What is it? What's wrong?"

A few rows behind, an older woman looked down at the spilled soda which hadn't yet been cleaned up. As the dark, syrupy cola slowly flowed down each step, there was a noticeable red streak running through it. She put on her glasses to get a better look.

Art turned to his wife for what he already knew was the last time and then...

A base hit! The man on third dashed towards home. It was the winning run the home team needed. The game was theirs! The crowd rose to their feet and cheered wildly.

Art tried to say something to Tanya, his visage growing increasingly pale. "I..."

In that moment, his head slumped forward. Tanya noticed his hand still tightly clutching his thigh, and saw the immense pool of bright red forming around his jeans. She pulled his coat away from his waist and was aghast and terrified at the sight before her. A small crimson lake had formed, increasing as blood pulsated from the femoral artery where the blade had penetrated.

He was bleeding out. And it was already too late. Art Jensen was dead.

Tanya screamed. Her tears flowed freely.

Art was the love of her life, and now he had been ripped away from her.

The crowd around and behind Art and Tanya Jensen was oblivious to the tragedy which lay right before them. Tanya tenderly held her husband's head in her hands and cradled him close to her chest.

It was over.

As was the game.

The home team won.

THE MAN FROM BELIZE

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DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS:

Love of spy novels, thrillers, actionadventure stories, and sci-fi. Also expert on spy films.

OCCUPATION:

Author of action-adventure thrillers.

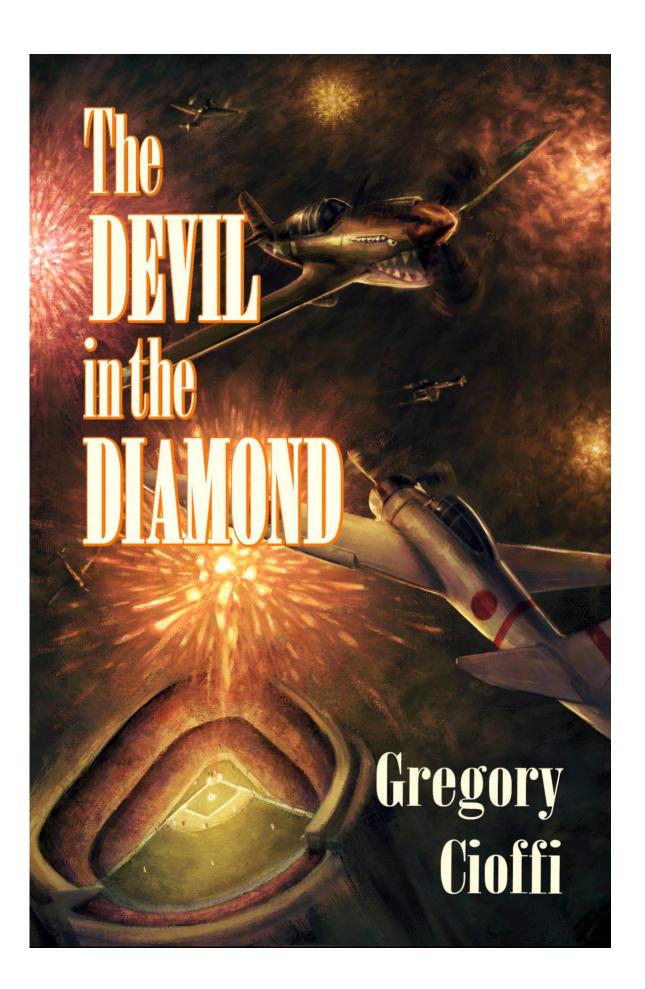
CURRENT MISSION:

THE MAN FROM BELIZE

UPCOMING:

More adventures of Kent Stirling,

THE MAN FROM BELIZE



THE DEVIL in the DIAMOND

Gregory Cioffi

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Genre: Historical Fiction, Baseball, War Novel

A gripping World War II-era story of a friendship forged in war where two combatants—one American, one Japanese—bond over baseball and ultimately face off against each other in a post-war baseball game.



The
DEVIL
in the
DIAMOND
Gregory Cioffi

"Love is the most important thing in the world, but baseball

– Yogi Berra

is pretty good, too."

Prologue

The Morning of May 25th, 1945

Spectacular. That was the only word that came to Yuujin's mind as he admired the flaming crimson-coral that gleamed brilliance, now slightly above the horizon. Although it ascended and descended daily, Yuujin wondered why today of all days he appreciated it the most. It reminded him of the vibrancy of a rose with the robustness of a wine. It continued to gradually escalate and a glorious red

hue dispersed over to the East and onto the land and nearby ocean. It was a moment frozen in time, or so he wished.

Yuujin also felt more attuned with nature as he marveled at the Luchu pine and Tiger's Claw, thorny deciduous trees that contained dense clusters of scarlet flowers and black seeds. He recollected how his mother used to warn him how the seeds were poisonous. When cooked, however, they were quite delicious. His father would often take the raw seeds and feed them to fish to benumb them, making them easier to catch.

Suddenly, a dark brown woodpecker with red-tipped feathers sprinkled with white spots soared past him and rose upward. Its head was a paler brown than its body and was topped with a dark red crown. Yuujin expected the creature to chirp as it often did but today it let out a raucous screech. The bird glided through the air, silhouetted as it positioned itself against the backdrop of the rising sun.

Yuujin turned to look at what he, along with many others, was protecting: Shuri Castle. Although the dazzling and elegant dwelling had been neglected in recent years, it was once the palace of the Ryukyu Kingdom. Being one who appreciated history, Yuujin recalled from his studies how this kingdom once thrived in the golden age of maritime trade.

The red tiles of the crimson castle that stood atop the hill provided a strategically sound headquarters for the Imperial Japanese Army. Yuujin, however, wasn't overly concerned with public spirit; his true dream was for this war to cease so he could go back to his hobbies and pleasurable pastimes.

Yuujin grabbed the base of his rifle and wrapped both of his hands around its butt. Imagining a small sphere with twine-covered cork covered by stitched horsehide, he gently swung the rifle while conceiving of the fanciful and extravagant notion of connecting so squarely that the hypothetical ball sailed deep into the air, towering so tall that it too became silhouetted in sunrise.

An outburst echoed in the morning breeze. Yuujin turned towards the discord and for a few moments detected nothing. Abruptly, however, a deafening detonation erupted in the not so far off distance. Yuujin could see other soldiers stirring about. One came jogging up to him.

"We are being shelled by a battleship off the coast!"

Yuujin gazed at the cardinal symbol of strength; he suspected his kin would wish to fight at Shuri to the death, as it would not be in the best traditions of the Japanese Army to withdraw.

Another blast of artillery fire fulminated, this time a little closer than the last. Yuujin knew this was only the beginning of a full-scale bombardment. He also knew that the loss of the remaining

positions on the east and south of Conical Hill made the defense of Shuri extremely difficult and perhaps it even tipped the scales of battle.

Private Yuujin Miyano grasped his rifle in a more traditional manner and hoped the words of his brethren proved true and that the ghosts of his warlike ancestors would enter his heart and guide his hands in battle. He wondered if such an inheritance of honor was even possible before beholding the sunrise one last time.

Chapter 1

Clash for the Crest

Sugar Loaf Hill The Morning of May 15th 1945

Private First Class Eugene Durante sat crouched atop the crest of Sugar Loaf Hill. The night before had been a horrific ordeal to say the least, as forty-four good men climbed upwards, towards the top of the hill, constantly hurling grenades into the nearby caves. Once they reached the top, they could hear the grunts of the Japanese as they too flung their explosive hand-weapons. A speedy preemptive strike allowed the Americans to, for the moment, remain atop the crest. Their commander had warned them if they didn't take the hill last night, the Japanese would drive them away in the morning. Morning had sprung and fifteen soldiers remained.

Eugene did not sleep a wink as mortars and sniper fire cut into the night, and his compatriots.

His heart had pounded rapidly before, but what he experienced the night prior was different. He never imagined an organ could palpitate so fast for so long without full-scale cardiovascular failure. Eugene suspected this was the new normal. For a moment, at some point in the night, his heartbeat lowered to a normal rate; it felt as if his heart ceased beating all together. This distress, within itself, caused his heart to once again vigorously ramp up. Eugene wondered which was worse.

About a month ago, Eugene received word that the troops of the 96th Infantry Division and the 763rd Tank Battalion had captured Conical Hill, an eastern anchor of the island. He was currently on the opposite coast and understood the importance of holding his position as these two locations exposed the Japanese around Shuri on both sides.

A small rock caught Eugene's eye. He picked it up, feeling the weight of it in his palm. He imagined how far he could throw it and with what velocity. Eugene thought up a scenario of utmost excitement.

The bases were loaded. He was on the mound facing the batter, his feet on the rubber. It was a full count. He took a step back with his right foot, his right shoulder pointing towards home plate. He lifted his front leg, bending at the knee, before tossing the round object to the catcher, his foot making an explosive step forward in the process. He released the ball.

You're out!

He could hear the cheers.

And then all he heard was silence. Of course he never really threw the pebble. Nor did he wind up. He just sat looking at the inanimate object, wondering what sort of sport could be had if this were all a very different situation.

He let the stone slip out of his hands. It clattered back onto the craggy terrain.

Eugene took a deep breath, in through his nose and out through his mouth. The pit of his stomach knew nothing was over. Any second, any minute, or any hour, all hell would break loose once more. He surmised it was the waiting that was the worst part.

That's when he heard it. The word resonated in the morning air, piercing the peace that was so short lived.

"Counterattack!"

Eugene had thought too soon.

Japanese combatants came storming up the hill; grenades began bursting immediately.

Through the intermittent blasts he heard someone yell, "Hold this position!"

Eugene began shooting down the hillside, somehow surprised at the number of enemy soldiers heading towards him.

The private first class sent a scattering of bullets from his submachine gun into the bodies of numerous attackers. Those he hit quickly lost their balance and went tumbling down the hill.

When his 30-round magazine expired, he grabbed a hand grenade, pulled the pin, and rolled it down the ridge. Before it could even blow, he reached for another. With a precision that became almost automated, Eugene repeated this seemingly mechanical process relentlessly.

One by one the pineapple-style weapons staggered down, rotating randomly towards the scaling men. Explosion after explosion halted the Japanese for what seemed like a mere moment before they were replaced with new men in the same spots.

"You could have been a grenadier!" he heard someone yell out.

Eugene could not feign a smile although he would have liked to; a chuckle, even a fictitious one, could be invaluable to morale.

An enemy soldier leaped up, almost making it onto the peak of the hill. Instinctively, Durante grabbed a grenade, pulled its pin, and gripped it with his index and middle finger like they were set on a line. He placed his thumb directly underneath the grenade as if it rested on smooth leather. He clutched the grenade hard and hurled it directly towards the upcoming aggressor. The Americans protectively threw their heads down as the explosive weapon struck the soldier directly in his chest, which was precisely where Eugene had aimed. His accuracy had not failed him.

Eugene looked away as the charge did its job. He could feel the aftermath splatter on him, as the soldier had been dangerously close.

His heart skipped a beat, which he quickly attributed to the fact that it couldn't possibly pulse faster so that was the only next logical course.

The momentary lapse had allowed more of the Japanese to gain ground.

Durante reached to find another grenade. This time, however, there were none left to be seized.

He speedily reloaded his weapon as he could hear the yells of nearing danger. Japanese soldiers began climbing onto the peak of Sugar Loaf Hill.

Eugene, having just replaced the .45 ACP cartridge, looked up to see an adversary practically on top of him. As his barrel collided with a stomach, he fired immediately. The weight of the now-deceased body coming down over his weapon knocked Eugene to the ground. His gun inadvertently cemented itself within the clutch of the man it had just killed.

Hordes of the Japanese fighters were uniting atop the hill.

Eugene stood, foregoing the fastened gun; it would be of no use in close-quarter combat.

In an instant he could hear the ceasing of all firearms. For that brief period of time, there existed a peaceful sound, a millisecond of serenity. It was the flash of calm before what would surely be a very bloody storm.

Eugene grabbed his combat knife as bayonets came jabbing at him. The long knives were fitted on the end of the Japanese rifles, making them extremely deadly when close.

Durante grabbed the wrist of an attacker and pulled him away, avoiding the blade, while striking down with his own.

He turned to see a familiar face, a corporal, who was ramming a number of enemy soldiers, like a defensive lineman, all the way to the edge of the hill. With a forceful groan, he knocked a hand-full of them straight off; sending them tumbling onto their backs, down the ridge.

"Still got it!" he called out.

A punch interrupted the corporal's ceremony and sent him staggering back a few steps. The opponent was in for a rude awakening, however, as the corporal soon sent him flying over the bluff too.

Eugene continued to slash as an onslaught of sharp edges came narrowly close to penetrating him. He noticed his ground on the hill was inevitably being pushed farther and farther back. Judging from the numbers, he knew he would not be standing on the highland for much longer.

A bayonet jabbed him in the leg. His knee buckled for a moment before he overcame the pain and stabbed the trooper in the neck. As the unfamiliar man went down, Eugene couldn't dislodge his knife.

Durante swung his fists valiantly, hitting and kicking everyone he came across. He felt a stabbing sensation again, this time in his lower back. He looked to his rear to see a rifle coming towards his face. He sidestepped and grabbed it, throwing it out of the hands of the man wielding it. The infantryman countered by unsheathing a sword out of a painted wooden scabbard.

Fierce strikes sent Eugene back even more until he found himself on a precipice. Not knowing exactly how to defend himself against the sword-wielding soldier, he froze at cliff's edge.

As his foe charged, the corporal that had moments before manhandled those numerous men, came surging in and barreled into the Japanese serviceman. Eugene, relieved for just a moment, gasped for air.

That's when he heard it. A single shot from a pistol.

An instant later, he felt it.

Eugene had been shot in his shoulder, the impact forcibly pushing him backwards. There was, however, no more ground for him to step on.

Private First Class Eugene Durante violently tumbled down the side of Sugar Loaf Hill. When he hit the base, he let out an emphatic cry. Supine, he looked up to see his brothers on the side of the slope, retreating back down.

He tried to move but could only let out a painful shriek. He closed his eyes, convincing himself a wound to the shoulder was not terminal. The stabs from the bayonets were not deeply pierced. At the moment, he believed he had no life-threatening injuries.

Eugene mustered up the strength to get up. He stumbled on the attempt but nonetheless stood his ground. There were other Marines at the hill's base.

He heard one scream, "Stem the attack!"

Eugene knew a stand would be made, here, on the Marine lines. He could also see there were men pinned down on the side of Sugar Loaf. Instincts took over and he proceeded onwards.

"Where are you going!?" one American yelled out.

"Back up that damn hill!" Durante retorted without looking at the soldier who asked.

Eugene reached for his pistol. As he began to head upwards, he aimed towards the crest and fired a series of shots.

He sprinted up the side of the hill as best he could. Every few steps he stopped to let off a couple rounds above him, as if to provide himself cover.

He continued to trek until a small nearby explosion caused Eugene to halt. He looked up. The Japanese were rolling grenades down the slope.

Eugene continued his ascent, visually dodging the spherical assassins and their outbursts. Adding to the cacophony, he could hear gunfire erupt; the Marines at the hill's base were no doubt trying to keep the Japanese at bay at the top of the cliff and the enemy was returning fire.

Durante suddenly felt something against the tip of his boot. It felt different than a rock or a stone. He looked down. It was precisely what he feared it to be; it was a grenade.

Eugene froze up like a deer in harm's way, his eyes transfixed on the bulbous bomb. Similar to the hoofed mammal, he did not know what to do so he simply did nothing.

Durante knew he could not stand upright forever. He was either going to get picked off with a rifle any second or the hazard under his foot would activate. He deduced the only logical course of action was to assume the grenade was defective.

Eugene slowly lifted his foot. The device nudged, signaling that it was going to trickle downwards immediately after clearing his leg. He let out a sigh and completely revoked his foot.

He watched the grenade languidly rotate beyond his foot and down the hill. When it was a good fifty feet away from him, it exploded.

Dozens of small metal fragments launched in every direction.

A razor sharp piece of shrapnel grazed Eugene's leg. His footing promptly gave out and the private first class went down hard, his head striking down upon a large rounded worn boulder.

His body convulsed to its side and then, somehow, he found himself on his back once again.

Looking up, Eugene could hear all the sounds of war. He couldn't, however, move. He noted that the sky was particularly blue that morning. Soon, however, the beautiful blues turned into deep purples before being overtaken entirely by complete and utter blackness.

Private First Class Eugene Durante awoke as his eyes gently opened. His first sight was not unlike his last. Darkness surrounded him. He could, however, make out white specks amongst the obscurity. After a few seconds, he came to realize those specks were stars in the sky. It was nighttime.

His head tilted to see his corporal comrade only a few feet away. He was on his side looking directly towards Eugene. Durante was about to attempt to move when he noticed the corporal's eyes. His optics sent a silent but chilling message. It was the look of imminent danger.

It was then that Eugene realized he was still on the lateral surface of Sugar Loaf Hill. It was also then that he heard them: a sequence of footsteps all around him.

Eugene tensed up. He noticed the corporal purposely close his eyes and he did the same.

Blinded, Eugene sought to go over the situation in his mind. They were out of contact with the rest of the Marines. The Japanese were currently swarming all sides of the hill.

He recalled how earlier in the day he felt like a deer. Now he was playing possum. Perhaps one day he would feel like a human again.

Durante wondered how long they could fool the Japanese. He imagined they would shoot all of the bodies as a precaution.

He shook his thoughts, attempting to only think of productive ideas.

For whatever reason, his father popped into his head. He wondered if he too faced a similar challenge while in the First World War. He didn't talk about it much, which Eugene finally comprehended. He was born seven years after his father returned from battle and by that time he had adequately shoved the whale of war down to a place of containment. In that moment, Eugene hoped he would have the opportunity to do the same.

Thinking of his father provided an inkling of contentment. A small impulsive smile crossed his face.

A Japanese boot landed on the edge of Eugene's face. He did his best not to breathe.

Eugene's hand was being grabbed. He felt a loosening of some sort before he realized what was happening. His wristwatch was being removed. The wristwatch his father had given him.

He could hear his dad now, screaming at him to let the damn trinket go.

He obeyed. He had no choice.

Eugene could hear the soldier put the wristwatch in a pouch. Suddenly, he felt his jacket pocket being touched. The hand of the Japanese officer was searching for valuables.

Eugene anguished over the very real possibility that the soldier was about to feel his pounding heart if he couldn't already hear it.

The hand traveled upwards.

The Japanese soldier abruptly snapped back without grabbing anything.

Eugene's mind raced on what to do. Should he open his eyes and attack, take as many out until his certain death? Or should he continue laying still and hope it was not his heart that the Japanese man felt?

Eugene fully expected a bullet to penetrate him at any moment.

He heard the soldier take a few steps back and grunt in disgust. He was walking away.

Eugene opened his eyes to see the back of the enemy soldier. He was angrily flicking blood off of his fingers.

The gunshot wound from his shoulder and the red bodily fluid it generated had momentarily saved his life.

Eugene knew the battle for Sugar Loaf was far from over, as the Marine line would eventually reach them. He, and his corporal friend, just had to stay calm and motionless until that happened.

The sky painstakingly transitioned from total darkness to the blood orange of a sunrise, and this time Eugene was conscious for all of it. He could feel the warmth on his face. He was content to allow this feeling, the heated glow of the sun, to be his last. He could currently imagine no greater sensation from which to exit this very complicated life. It even felt like an appropriate departure from the nightmarish inferno of Okinawa. A day had passed and absolutely no cavalry had arrived.

It was then that the private first class remembered the brother that lay beside him. Perhaps he hated the radiation that was beaming upon their faces. Maybe he desired a very different exit strategy. Eugene hadn't checked if the corporal was still alive, as his eyes hadn't opened in many hours. He could nevertheless feel his presence, looking over him. Eugene just hoped that it was indeed the corporal and not Death incarnate, scythe at the ready, prepared to carry him away.

A couple of hours later, Eugene reminisced about a time he was playing catch with his father. He ascertained that he was about five years old. It wasn't the catch itself that kept lingering in his memory but the brief conversation that followed.

Eugene had asked his father why he liked baseball so much.

His father answered, "Baseball is great because it's unusual. Most sports have time boundaries. Baseball doesn't. You can be out there all day and all night. You're never truly sure when it's all going to end. The only sudden death comes in extra innings but even then only once both teams have had a crack at batting. It's a game of strategy and inches. It's beautiful really."

Durante could recall the breeze that day and the lemonade he had after his father's explanation. He would give anything for a glass of lemonade right now.

Eugene longed to see anything of beauty in his current state—a butterfly, a hot meal, the face of the girl he left back home. The mental mirages of these things provided him the slightest fraction of satisfaction in comparison to their palpable real-world counterparts.

With his eyes closed, the private first class clandestinely breathed in, something he was forced to do every now and again. It became a time of deep stress on each and every occasion; dead soldiers don't breathe.

As Eugene surreptitiously exhaled, an abundance of shooting swiftly transpired. He could hear yelling and screaming, and not just those of the Japanese. He heard Americans.

His eyes jolted open. He was but bedrock amidst a full-scale assault. He looked around and saw a pistol. It was an arm's length away.

Eugene gathered up the energy he needed to obtain the weapon. He grabbed the loaded gun and reverted back to his position.

He turned to view the corporal whose eyes were still sealed shut.

Durante lifted his head; he could see a line of distant troops wearing familiar fatigues.

To his left, a Japanese soldier fired round after round towards the incoming 22nd Regiment. Eugene lifted the pistol up and aimed.

The soldier, as if feeling the presence of death, turned to face him. As the enemy swung his weapon around, Durante fired. And then fired again.

The first shot nailed him in the abdomen, the second in the chest.

The combatant fell to the ground.

Eugene looked up once more and his eyes interlocked with an American in the distance. He could see the soldier pointing and yelling something to the others.

His head crashed back down onto the crag as the deafening barrage continued.

Private First Class Durante wasn't sure how long he had been lying there on that jagged hillside when he felt a tetrad of arms lifting him up. He was being placed on a medical stretcher.

"I can still fight," Eugene sluggishly exclaimed.

"No doubt," the combat medic responded. "You'll be right back out there once we patch you up, don't you worry. We got it from here."

Durante could feel his muscles relax for the first time in what felt like forever. He felt safe within the olive canvas cocoon.

Right before he was about to fall asleep out of pure exhaustion, he remembered.

"The corporal! A corporal was next to me!"

The combat medic smiled, looked down at Durante and responded, "We got him too. He's going to be just fine."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



GREGORY CIOFFI

Gregory Cioffi (SAG-AFTRA, AEA) is an actor, director, and writer. His works have been published in various literary magazines; many of which have been archived in numerous libraries including Yale University's Beinecke Collection (Rare Books and Manuscript Library). His poem *Confined But Commemorating*, written about Memorial Day during the pandemic, won third place in the Nassau County Poet Laureate Society Poetry Contest. Greg's film *The Museum of Lost Things* won awards at The Long Island International Film Expo, Global Shorts, and The Madrid International Film Festival. Be on the lookout for his next film, *The Concertgoer*, which is currently on the festival circuit. Greg is an Adjunct Professor of English at Long Island University, an Associate Professor of Literature & Composition at

Post University, and he also teaches Creative Writing, Poetry, and Basic Acting at Nassau Community College.

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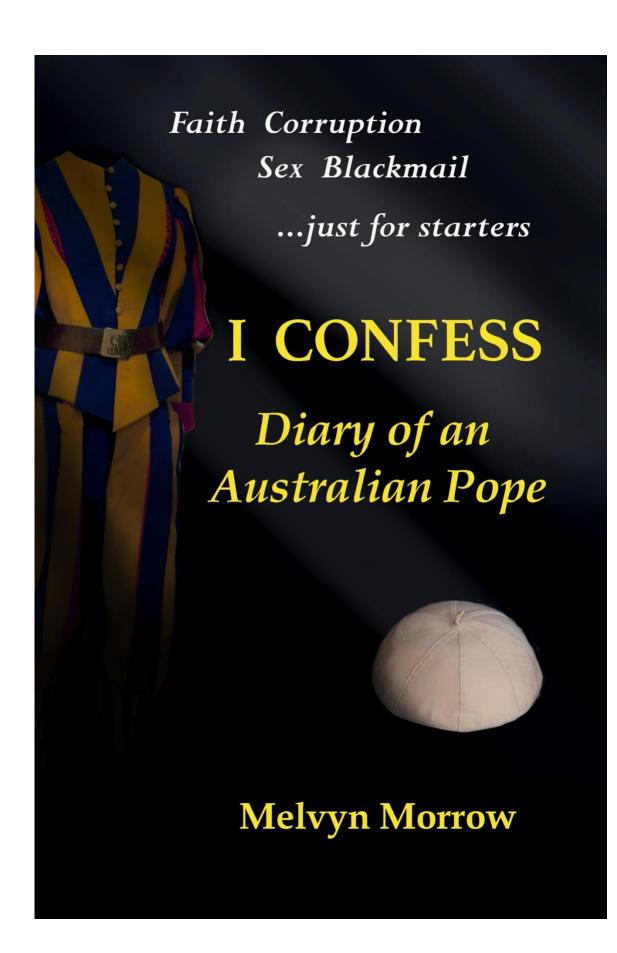
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I CONFESS

DIARY OF AN AUSTRALIAN POPE



I CONFESS

Diary of an Australian Pope

Melvyn Morrow

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Genre: Religious Fiction, Mystery, Political Intrigue

What happens when the Pope is from Australia—and has a secret past? A controversial novel of religion, politics, and redemption.

Monday, December 1

Feast of St Edmund Campion (1540–1581) and St Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916).

Campion is surely the greatest of the English Jesuit martyrs. Towering intellect. Magnificent preacher. A priestly Scarlet Pimpernel. Hideously tortured then hanged, drawn and quartered. The hero I could never be.

Charles de Foucauld, Jesuit educated aristocrat—a long way from Christian Brothers Wollongong. Dismissed from the army for misconduct. I can relate to that. Became a priest in midlife. Worked in Morocco. Translated the gospels in local language. Shot in the head by a 15-year-old bandit. Such is saintly life.

Not mine, I hope.

And so to something I've never before done in my life: keep a diary.

Wrong.

It's not at all like that—a sudden whim, a bright idea.

Oh, no. Far from it.

I've been knowingly avoiding this all my life because deep in what's left of my heart, I know what a volcano of fear, confusion, hatred, love, hypocrisy, struggle and jagged truth will explode over my carefully disguised persona.

Once I start, I know precisely what this will become: my cv of shame and confusion; a map of my soul; the hollow resounding echo of my shallowness; the catalogue of my failures; the unpacking of my emptiness... and the relief of the saying, the naming, the acceptance.

And, crazy as it sounds, the gratitude.

Even crazier, this morning in my chaotic mind, I had the original thought that in this world, not too many people get to become the pope, and from a few months' brief experience, I have an inkling of what it's like to be one—and to date, I don't recommend it—so it might be quite revelatory to myself to explore what it feels like.

Well, at least what this pope feels like.

Who knows what I might find out?

I do.

Note to self: always remember this isn't your day book, your checklist of what you imagine you've done—even achieved, ho! —over the papal working day.

That's a mere calendar, and Dario looks after that with his amazing efficiency.

No, Mario, this totally private monologue is the conversation of your secret self, your spirit, your essence, your journey with God.

So, what do all these ingredients say?

The first step is the hardest, in which case, best take that first step before the last one pops up unannounced.

I've been put in a creative mood by tonight's reassuring dinner cooked by my housekeeper, friend and bizarrely angular commentator on my life as a mere pope, Sister Angelica.

She's the chief papal cook and bottle washer, and tonight's farfalle pasta with asparagus, chilli and garlic (yes, there is a God, and garlic is God's blessing on most crises) was in every way satisfying and was appropriately accompanied by a glass or two of a modest barbaresco... well, maybe three, but who's counting?

Deep in what's left of my heart...

My heart.

Where did that go?

If it ever existed.

And to whom?

God help me.

Already, I know I'll regret this commitment to truth.

Truth.

Firm as rock, which is what the church and popes are supposed to be all about.

And slippery as life.

Aye, there's the rub.

When sinners become popes...

The Jamesons, I'm thinking.

Deo gratias.

Which is why I know I'll regret this... confession to myself.

Can a pope forgive himself?

God only knows.

Cheers!

And go, God!

Yes, a top-up, Mario. Why not?

So, Mum, guess who?

How much do I love you and thank you and pray for you—to you, indeed—for being what's left of my possible salvation!

You spent your whole life embracing me, protecting me, encouraging me, hiding me from myself which you somehow always understood and you just loved me for all the Wollongong fucked-up mess I was—and still am—and that disastrous whatever-it-was which resulted in this disastrous whatever-it-is... yes, as both of us still refuse to believe in real life... that confused little Illawarra wog—that irritatingly clever little photographic memory wog—is now pope!

Yes, beyond madness, Mum, but never beyond your love.

I'm glad you're in heaven, Mum, because on earth, this ongoing craziness beyond belief continues.

I mean, the ultimate insanity of a world and a church not even God could come up with after half a divine eternal lifetime of angels singing endless praise.

You couldn't make this nonsense up.

Fucked-up confused Wollongong son, lost adolescent, let's skip over the after-mess of that, but somehow or other this accidental priest becomes accidental bishop becomes accidental archbishop becomes accidental cardinal becomes accidental Pope.

OK, yes, my fault. Absolutely. If only you knew the half of it. Well, maybe not. Yes, of course I know mothers know, but mothers also know what not to know. Well, now—and a shorter top-up prayer of thanks to Saint Jameson of Bow Street Dublin.

Don't worry, Mum. You can take the boy out of Wollongong but they'll never take the Wollongong out of Mario Gino Pietro Francis Xavier Castaldi.

Or the pope!

Mum, let's both laugh as we share the mysterious bond that's the proof of both mystery and love. I weep in gratitude, laugh in disbelief, pray in hope... and start each day wishing that your always accepting love will guide each moment of what will most surely be my beyond unbelievable next twenty-four hours.

It's like that now. An hour is crisis, and a day can be World War Whatever in the surrounding holy madness I surreally inhabit.

Fortunately, Wollongong's North Beach surf remains my cleansing grace. There is a God, and how grateful can an accidental pope be for Wollongong's North Beach surf?

Totally.

And so, Dad, are you there? Listening?

Good. Then listen up.

From one infallible household male legislator to another, hello again and welcome back to the well-intentioned universal cluster-fuck which was...is our mutually painful worlds since birth or whenever before.

No, Dad, for once in your life, shut up and let your eldest son explain...not to mention all those gazillions of other—what shall we call ourselves?—tragically eldest sons of even more tragically fucked-up Catholic fathers...the whole damn lot of us all lined up and still volcanically waiting to explode.

No, for once in your controlling life, listen to me, Dad.

I love you, right?

There, I've said it. So now for the rest.

Another tiny Saint Jameson, I'm thinking.

Dad, yes, you meant well, but as a father, you were an Aussie-Italian disaster, and now half a world away from Wollongong, here I am, still the pathetic absurdity that despite Mum's gentleness, you helped produce.

So my beloved elder sister, Maria, was killed in a road accident when she was six. God loved her so much, God somehow was so clumsy up there that God needed her in heaven.

I'm still coming to terms with that justification.

And Mum died in agony of cancer.

And you and bloody Father O'Buggery praised the Lord for her heroic endurance (that blasphemy still stings beyond faith) and to top it all off, little Tonio, your favourite because he was such an Aussie sporting legend and spoke better Italian than I did, my little brother, Tonio, hit adolescence head-on and just about wiped himself off the map by the time he was 17.

And I haven't heard from him since.

For all I know, he was swallowed by a crocodile in north Queensland or maybe died of AIDS.

It'd be nice to find out.

And just to top it all off, muggins here is now the Pope. Pope John the Twenty-Fourth, better known in these parts as Pope Vegemite the First and Last, an Italian-Australian-Irish Catholic fiasco.

Sorry, Dad, but that's where your son is now.

In my heart, I know you meant well, but I guess that's how an Australian De La Salle Brothers' education prepared you for fatherhood, and why you might have hoped that the Wollongong Christian Brothers would do a better job on me and Tonio.

Bad luck.

What we got dumped on us was a lifetime load of God-bothering torture and eternally hell-bent sexual guilt.

I couldn't even enjoy my first jack-off without fear of the eternal fires of hell, and I reckon it was the same for all our class. Probably the whole school until we left. And God knows, wanking was the home industry.

And looking back, how did Brother Edmund know so much about those everlasting flames?

But let's leave all that for the moment—the fact is that this diary, this act of clearing and cleansing is to myself and for myself.

Still, in the best of my good faith, each day before making my entry, I'll read through the brief lives of the saints of the day—our church has many saints, so they all have to cosy up and share each feast day—and I'll choose one, try to relate to them in some way and also ask all the other saints of that day to pray for me because God knows, I desperately need their prayers.

I'm exalted by saints.

I'm also driven nuts by them.

I think I see through all this saint stuff and I see through all this contemporary saint denial stuff, yet with every heroic and saintly life I reflect on, even as pope—especially as the first and almost certainly last Wollongong pope—I have to ask questions that deep in my mind and deep in my soul lacerate my faith.

You see, Dad, I'm the questioning pope.

It's like this.

Whenever I read the oh-so-pious lives of the saints, my mind flashes danger. I simply can't help myself. I chuck out all the holiness stuff and try to imagine that particular saint as someone I've just bumped into and whom I would like a bit of a frank and fearless chat with, leaving aside all the treacly hagiography.

I mean, I'm the pope, so why can't I give myself permission to explore the truth?

Let's call it spiritual therapy—the unintended pope's necessary adventure under the confessional seal of this diary.

And just for the record, at some future time I look forward to frank and fearless discussions with the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity about the integrity of the papal conclave voting procedure.

OMG!

Anyway, in the blessed event of my death, should this ongoing confession to myself not have been destroyed by this penitent on-screen diarist, I have left a personal letter with my dear and faithful friend, Cardinal Dario Silvestrini, now appointed by me Secretary of State, instructing him to destroy this testament without reading any further.

And dearest of dear friends, Dario, I know you will, so now read no more, loyal confidant, and please delete forever, this, my sad soul's searching.

And God bless you, friend of my heart.

And so to the unburdening.

Dad, you always told me that January 1st was the Feast of the Circumcision.

At a certain moment—maybe in Year 7—I understood the words, but not why that bizarre feast was celebrated. Why was I, a ringbark, to be praised and my uncut mate, a roundhead, unworthy of the divine blessing of a feast day?

I mean, since Jesus and I were ringbarks—and apparently that snipping was some kind of weird feast—would all the roundheads go to hell?—in which case it could be crowded and with some pretty innocent victims but bloody good blokes and probably more confident lovers.

I wish.

Perhaps my first theological question. Plato's Republic in the Wollongong swimming pool showers; the unspoken concerns Catholic pubescent boys wrestled with while masturbating on the highway to hell.

Well, this one sure did.

And so to today.

The first Sunday of Advent.

A new church year begins with an Australian pope in the Vatican and the guarantee of all-out civil war with our uncivil service: the comfortable, conservative, controlling and diabolically crafty curia (I prefer to deny them that capital C they use to describe themselves) versus the pontifex minimus whom they dismissively mock as Pope Vegemite the First and Last.

Still, all petty squabbles aside, I must believe that we're a civilised convocation adjudicating on this life and in all humility, faithfully projecting to the next.

Dangerous territory, as history has shown and death will eventually adjudicate on.

OK, Dad, all my school reports observed that I was a worthy student—just remind me what student is unworthy?—and, Dad, you may remember that you always told me that second-class honours in the New South Wales Leaving Certificate meant second-rate in life. In retrospect, not the most encouraging spur to an immature seventeen-year-old, but, yes, God knows you had your reasons, and they made you who you were. While helping make me the mess I became. And still am.

Over time, I've come to understand and eventually forgive how religiously messed-up I became because, I mean, just how screwed-up at the time was the Australian Irish Church? Not to mention those well-intentioned, football-mad and spookily—no, disastrously—celibate Christian brothers who belted the fear of God into us.

As you sow, so shall you reap. The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the sons. Doesn't seem all that fair to me, but them's the rules according to...

Don't get me going. 'Visited on the sons.' Dear God, where does your bewildered but faithful servant start? I mean, leaving aside the daughters who now are the blessed cohesion holding together what's left of the rapidly disappearing western church... where was I?

Where I've been for so long.

Dad, I managed a second class result in Honours Latin, and to my shame and stupidity, I believed I was therefore second class. So how right was your prediction?

In my clerical career, I fulfilled your prophecy.

To cite the corridor gossip in these parts, 'forgettable Bishop of Wollongong. Charmingly ineffective Archbishop of Adelaide. Compromise cardinal of Sydney, then out of the blue, whisked off to Rome as Cardinal Protector of Pilgrims and Patriarch of Relics—even by Vatican standards, a laughably useless job awarded as a consolation prize in the red hat stakes. A comfortable retirement for an ecclesiastical nonentity.'

Learn the ropes, do as you're told and don't rock the boat—as if you could—and most of all, ensure that you serve good wine to your brother cardinals. Which just goes to show where second-class honours in the 1959 New South Wales Leaving Certificate Latin can get a conflicted lad from Wollongong.

Pope.

Your triumph, Dad.

My bewilderment. Until recently, Dad—the papal conclave six months ago—and I kept asking myself what went right?

Or wrong?

And, Dad, now I don't need to ask—and it's no vote of faith in me, because from the moment my frankly ridiculous vote in the papal conclave suddenly began to surge—from idiot nothing burger to odds-on favourite—from that moment, I knew why.

After the papacy of Francis, a pope of vision and an administrator with a purposeful agenda, the church needed to pause and breathe. The conservative faction—the majority of Vatican civil servants known as the curia—had two strong candidates. One was my former friend from seminary days, Cameroon-born Olivier Gabriel Foncha, who brought most of the African cardinals' votes with him. Face it, Olivier is the pope from central casting: handsome, black, eloquent, ambitious and in all too robust health—though the latter isn't always a plus for a pope as it augurs a long papacy.

From the same right-wing faction but quite the opposite in his austere personality was the second candidate: Ernesto Mendoza, old, Spanish in name though Italian by birth, white and reportedly in dicey health.

Mendoza is brilliant, literate, forensic and a workaholic. Problem is, he sees his role as Prefect of the Congregation for the Defence of the Faith as that of The Grand Inquisitor. Worse: Gestapo *Obergruppenführer*. Nothing escapes his investigations, and he's 'exposed' dozens of progressive contemporary theologians for heresy and then brutally silenced them into the bargain.

That should have made him an ideal stop-gap curia candidate since discipline and obedience are the clerical markers of God's church triumphant, but two strong candidates of the same side can, ironically, cancel each other out, hence the eventual election of the warm, human and holy Italian Archbishop of Florence, Renato Carosella, who took the name of Leo XIV.

To the curia, 'holy' is important in a pope: it means he's malleable and with clever advice from his heads of dicasteries, he will enact the 'right' decisions—'right' in every sense—to reinforce the Vatican status quo.

Why we have to call departments here 'dicasteries' I forget, but I guess it sounds important and may even suggest divine overtones, though such association has to date eluded me.

After 13 ballots—proof that it sure is the devil's number—the two implacably opposed conservative candidates stalled, neither team of backers willing to shift their vote, and so our lovable Pope Leo was eventually elected.

There was just one unforeseen problem in Leo's election.

Curia strategy envisioned a relatively brief papacy—three or four years—during which time either Olivier or Mendoza would emerge as the next strong pontiff—the Vatican is always about the politics of the next papacy—but what they didn't take into consideration was COVID. And in God's wisdom, the God of equality of all creation permitted the passing of gentle Pope Leo in under a year.

Back to square one.

Another provisional pontiff required: beige, inoffensive, low profile and controllable. What's the term?

Second-rate.

And here I am, Pope John XXIV.

On the positive front, I must confess that though my Wollongong Latin has improved out of sight, I still need a Roman classicist to brush it up to papal *motu proprio* standard, and my chosen Secretary of State, Cardinal Dario Silvestrini, is just the man.

Oh, and Dad, a papal *motu proprio* is a document about some special subject the pope's interested in. Not definitive church teaching or infallible or anything razzle-dazzle like that, but His Holiness sounding off and expecting the troops to smarten up and take his opinion on board. Which, of course, plenty do and plenty don't, these days the latter being increasingly vocal and issuing their own individual *motu proprio*'s to anyone who'll read or listen to them.

But back to Dario. He's an outstanding scholar; a conventional but progressive-leaning theologian; a diplomatic yet exceptionally efficient administrator; loyal—not a virtue much practiced in these parts—and a colleague I'd trust with my life. And the icing on the cake: a bon viveur with an excellent wine cellar yet enjoying all things in disciplined moderation. Well, friends have to differ over some issues.

Yes, Dario is my best appointment and my greatest supporter. And I'm sure I'm the only person in the Vatican who knows his best kept secret—his amazing double life of priesthood and fatherhood. No wonder he's so sane. Puts me to shame. I'm blessed in his friendship and allegiance.

And so, Dad, here we both are: you, dead, and hopefully in whatever heaven is, and your second-rate son, alive and desperately treading water in the Vatican.

And for the record, after six months of oleaginous Vatican obsequiousness, I have to say their chilling and elegant diplomatic obstruction of every initiative I've tried to introduce leaves me wondering whether there's a difference between purgatory and hell.

Dad, what do I have to do for you to be finally proud of me?

Hopefully, this December to December diary of your Australian pope son, sentence by painfully truthful sentence is the answer. Somewhere, somehow, you'll read it as I write. There's always hope. There has to be.

So, today's positive.

Ennio told me in beautiful simplicity of his love for his partner, Mirella.

It wasn't confession. No. Sadly, Ennio's generation isn't into that. Rather, it was a spontaneous and glorious outpouring... an acclamation of passion, trust and faith by a

twenty-year-old Swiss Guard from Lugano, talking about his twenty-year-old lover of three years.

Three years!

O oriens. O morning star, splendour of light eternal: come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness.

O Ennio, my secular confessor, how I envy you your youth and your liberated love life! Grace sometimes descents from where we least expect that gift.

Yesterday. Solemn High Mass. Full house, of course, and concelebrated with Cardinal Gino Luciano from Sardinia, arguably the campest of curia cardinals—quite an achievement—and Cardinal Marcel Brulé from Paris: smooth, sharp, academic though, I suspect, capable of Gallic ambivalence. One, I think, who watches whichever way the papal wind blows, but that said, a mind admired by many waverers for its informed balance.

What's the French for *Vichy?*

Stop it, Mario!

Oh, and also, the even more anodyne and affable Cardinal Archbishop of Luxembourg, His Eminence Jean-Franz Hoffmann.

If anyone can determine what this convivial man of God does or doesn't believe in, I'd be fascinated to read the dossier. Better still, the abstract. Which indeed it would be. That said, we chatted briefly after Mass, and I have to say I like Jean-Franz enormously. A man to have on side—if ever he'd declare his hand.

Anyway, my sermon seemed to hit the mark. The shock of the brief. If you can't say it in under two minutes, you don't know what you're talking about—and conciseness especially annoys the old guard... a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Choir energised. O Rex Gentium moving as always, though 'the king of nations' royalty rubbish stings.

Mind you, Christ the President sounds even sillier.

Superficiality, Mario. For your penance, Mario, three Hail Mary's.

Next, Christmas present to self: remove that Maltese Dinosaur, Cardinal Paulo Di Giorgio, Prefect of the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments and install someone remotely connected to the twenty-first century. Di Giorgio's part of Benedict's fifth column to subvert the Second Vatican Council and restore the Latin Mass.

St Pope John XXIII, pray for your Aussie successor.

This 24th Pope John won't go down without a ding dong Aussie barney, and to replace Di Giorgio, Cardinal Thierry Etcheverry of Reims is just the man.

He lays down the law and doesn't take any prisoners. But isn't that more than half of the problem? 'The man'?

Can I appoint a woman—after all, I am the bloody pope?

Steady on, Mario.

No!

By now you surely know that 'steady as she goes' means nothing changes, even if the change is decreed by the pope. Despite his secretarial efficiency, not even Dario seems able to turn my commands into eventual action. The bloody curia know how to stall till doomsday with questions and draftings and committees and the rest of their age-old delaying road blocks.

So, from now on, it has to be action stations. Summon my good generals to the front, fixed bayonets, go over the top, storm the enemy trenches and occupy their territory.

Oh, and while you're at it, Mario, canonise General Haig. Now there's a worthy papal thought for the first Sunday in Advent.

'My good generals'. Indeed. Who and how few?

Dear God in heaven, how on earth did I land this shithouse gig?

The triple tiara's a bloody crown of fucking thorns.

Thanks heaps, God.

Sorry, Sister Angelica.

Yes, five decades of the Rosary.

And so to bed.

I CONFESS

DIARY OF AN AUSTRALIAN POPE

Find it on Amazon:

https://tinyurl.com/44rwpc7h

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

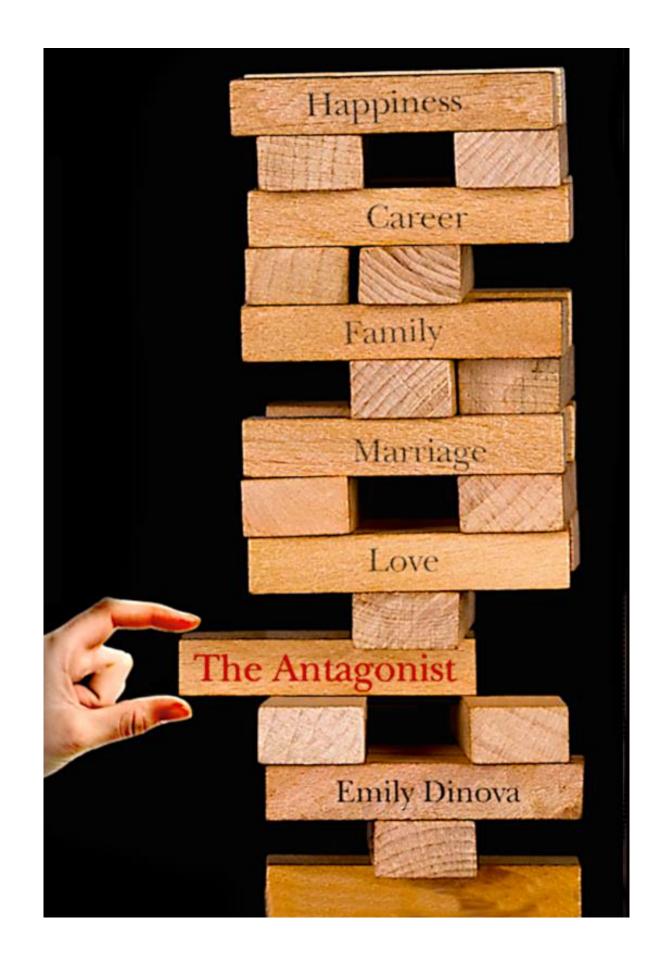
MELVYN MORROW

Melvyn Morrow's first revue scripts were for Australia's biggest TV satirical hit, The Mavis Branston Show. Melvyn's musicals (books & lyrics) include: Postcards From Provence, Offenbach In The Underworld and seven Christmas at the Opera House pantomimes including the nationally popular Santa Meets The Bushrangers. His musical A Song To Sing, O, the story of Gilbert and Sullivan and George Grossmith, was produced by Dame Bridget D'Oyly Carte at London's Savoy Theatre and directed by the author. It then toured Australia. He has adapted book and lyrics for Opera Australia's G&S productions. He received the Australian Writers' Guild Award for Best Libretto for his musical, Shakespearean Idol. He is the co-writer of the Australian musical hits, SHOUT! and Dusty-The Original Pop Diva. He wrote book and lyrics for and directed the musical *Dorian Gray Naked*. Melvyn is an international member of the Dramatists Guild of America.



He co-wrote the musicals *Peter Dawson-Off The Record* and *Here Comes Showtime* and the lyrics for the song *Lest I Forget* (*Rebel* the movie starring Matt Dillon). Melvyn's plays include *Beating A Retreat, A Touch Of Paradise, Vice, Acts of Faith* and *Pope2Pope.* His Victoriana vaudeville, *Dickens Down Under*, premiered at Sydney's Genesian Theatre. He devised and directed the cabarets *Broadway Bard, Tae Kwon Shakespeare*, and *mozart and ME*. In 1996, Melvyn was nominated for a Mo Award for Outstanding Contribution to Australian Musical Theatre.

He was producer, writer and director of *Cabaret in the Day* at Mosman Art Gallery where seasons have included: *Glorious Mud!* (Flanders & Swann), *Our Glad* (Gladys Moncrieff), *Gilbert & Sullivan Forever!* (starring Andrew O'Keefe), *Of Bing I Sing* (Bing Crosby) and *Poisoning Pigeons in the Park* (Tom Lehrer). With composer Dion Condack, he wrote and directed the musical *Dorian Gray Naked*, starring Blake Appelqvist. The musical received rave reviews and was the only original Australian musical nominated for the 2019 Glugs of Gosh 2019 Sydney Theatre Awards.



THE ANTAGONIST

Emily Dinova

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Genre: Psychological Thriller, Mystery

A slow-burn, edge-of-your-seat novel where obsession, manipulation, and dark secrets converge with fatal consequences.

Prologue

Late Autumn 2017

The fresh and radiant glow of dawn descended on Parrish Street and Dave Collins knew in that moment, the one between blue hour and brilliance, that it was the most beautiful sight he could and would ever recall seeing. For that day was the start of something uncontrollable, unstoppable—a thread had been pulled, the tug of a string was unraveling and derailing his carefully planned life—it was only a matter of time before he was condemned by all those he once thought to trust.

And for what, what had he done to deal himself this hand?

This was the alarming thought that sounded in Dave's mind as he walked along the silent street that morning, knowing deep in his guts that today would be the end. He braced himself as he was met with the spectacular blaze of fury that gleamed with hope and light... he was plagued with the terrifying notion that this might be his last sunrise.

Dave Collins was wrong.

He would live to see many more sunrises.

And every morning from this morning on, he would beg for death.

Part I Black Olives and Paralegal Pleas

Early Autumn 2017

1

The morning routine was the same as it had been for the last five years. Unaltered, blissful—just as Dave knew it would be. He awoke early as he always did and went about preparing a

scrumptious breakfast. Dave truly believed that it was the most important meal of the day, the fuel the body would need to consume to keep up with the energy of everyday life.

Regardless of that life being the same every day, there was no denying it was a strenuous one. Filled with chaos and noise and even a little bit of madness. But that was completely acceptable to Dave, being the average—and one could argue slightly boring—person he was. This was perhaps why Dave chose to surround himself with those who existed and thrived in temperamental, unpredictable states.

This morning's meal would be French toast with raspberries, one of Georgette's favorites—his beautiful and currently slumbering wife. Unlike himself, Georgie was perfectly happy with sleeping her mornings away. She was unbothered and unconcerned with things as trivial as sunrises. She told him a million times she preferred sunsets anyway. Having been the daughter of an oil billionaire her entire life, Georgie was not actually concerned with much. She lived the life of an artist without any of the talents to accompany it, though she was kind and caring and spent most of her time and money doing for others. But the one thing she absolutely demanded was sleep. And a Bloody Mary. As soon as Dave finished with his breakfast preparations, he would concoct Georgie's preferred wake up call with Gorgonzola stuffed olives and an extra shot of vodka. He had no idea how she stomached the stuff first thing in the morning, but like Dave, Georgette Collins also believed in breakfast, it just happened to be a liquid one.

The TV clicked on in the living room and Dave was alerted to the other, and much less enjoyable presence that lived in their 'small 'mansion. Samantha, or Sam, as she demanded Dave call her, was as sixteen and angst-filled as they came. She usually only had time to snarl in Dave's direction—especially if he attempted to engage her in conversation before she had her coffee. Always black with too much sugar. But Dave made sure it was prepared long before she descended from the third floor.

To be fair, they had come a long way in terms of a relationship since he married her mother five years earlier. Dave was hoping Samantha would continue to soften towards him as time wore on—he made sure never to tell her what to do, or come between her and Georgie. He did not try to replace her father who had been described to him as a vile maniac, but did offer to step in if she needed help. She'd gone from telling him she hated him every night to now mumbling "yeah later," before stomping off to bed.

Dave's patience was boundless, all he had to do was put himself in her shoes and imagine how crap life had been before her mother had fled and saved them both from the abuse. He couldn't assume that just because Georgette was happy now that Sam was too. So he was careful not to cause

any further dissonance. Both of these women were hurt, and they were healing. He would do anything for them, as Dave took family matters quite seriously.

"...Beauty in death, they say there's something romantic about putting someone in the ground..."

Dave was barely listening to whatever morbid program Samantha had stuck on as he made his way across the freshly polished marble floors, keeping time with the schedule. Up the stairs, to the left, down the corridor and through the third door on the right, a silver tray with Georgie's cigarettes and morning Bloody balanced precariously on his steady palm.

Dave flung the shades wide, giving him the spectacular view over their immense backyard that ended a few hundred feet away at the edge of a dense forest. The high ceilings of their chamber were illuminated with sun as Georgie groaned in protest and rolled onto her stomach, head buried under the pillow even while wearing an eye mask. She always complained she could still see through the damn thing.

"Good Morning, my love," Dave cooed as he went about picking up after her.

His wife had the horrible habit of always stripping bare and falling into bed, leaving her clothes and accessories in a trail across the floors.

"Already?" she whined. "Oh please, honey, another hour at least, I didn't get to bed until almost 4."

Dave smiled as he listened to the soft honey twang of her voice. Originally from Oklahoma, her accent was still the least bit detectable, though she left home at eighteen and had spent the last thirty-eight years gallivanting around the globe.

"What were you doing up so late?" he asked with amusement, "I didn't even hear you come to bed."

She huffed and propped herself up against the pillows, slowly peeling back her eye mask to reveal a grumpy green glare.

"I was working on the charity gala if you must know. I have meetings all week at the shelter and I'm still trying to make sure Margo doesn't get sent back to that piece of shit husband of hers, he's been sniffing around the home for the last few weeks."

Dave frowned in thought. "Worst case scenario, she could always stay here for sometime."

Georgette gave him a brilliant smile as she leaned over and snatched the cocktail he'd left on the bedside table. She took a long, slow sip, clearly savoring.

"And that's precisely why I married you."

Dave raised an eyebrow. "My bartending skills? Or offering our home to abused women?"

"Mm. I'll let you decide." She reached her arms out for Dave, who was more than willing to comply and allow his lips to fall against her own.

Although Georgie was 16 years older she looked just as good, if not better than Dave. Both worked out regularly, allowing them to maintain their physiques.

It was still unbelievable to him, even five years later, the circumstances that had brought them together.

Their story was one for the books.

Dave rubbed Georgie's feet as she lit her first cigarette— she blew back the smoke and Dave marveled at the way the wisps took form. His wife breathed a deep sigh before looking down at him with absolute adoration.

Dave glowed back, enjoying the praise and love she bestowed on him—his devotion to her so achingly endless.

"Is Sam up yet?" Georgie asked as she tousled her short blonde hair. The light bouncing off her curls reminded Dave of an ethereal creature.

"Yes, in the kitchen, having her coffee just the way she likes it: in peace."

Georgie's lips lifted into her trademark smirk, "So considerate of you, as always."

"I don't like to stir the pot. I'm happy to stay out of her way if it makes her feel more comfortable."

"Is she being a little bitch to you?" Georgie glowered as she started to rise from the bed. "We'll have a chat about it right now."

Dave hid his smile at her eagerness to come to his defense. He playfully moved in front of her, blocking her with a warm embrace.

"Honey, it's fine. I'm not here to pressure her. Or force her to like me. She tolerates me and that's perfectly okay. I have no right to ask her for more."

Georgette's features softened as she reached out to stroke his freshly shaven cheek—a look of awe crested her eyes.

"How did I get so lucky?"

"I'm the lucky one."

And Dave meant that. He was very fortunate and very lucky, not just because his wife's outrageous wealth allowed them to live a very comfortable life, but because he genuinely loved this woman, and even Samantha, for all her faults, he knew deep down was a good person.

He could have lounged in Georgie's presence for the rest of the day but there was work to be done. With a last kiss and the promise of a delicious meal that evening, Dave took himself back downstairs to prepare for the inevitable confrontation.

THE ANTAGONIST

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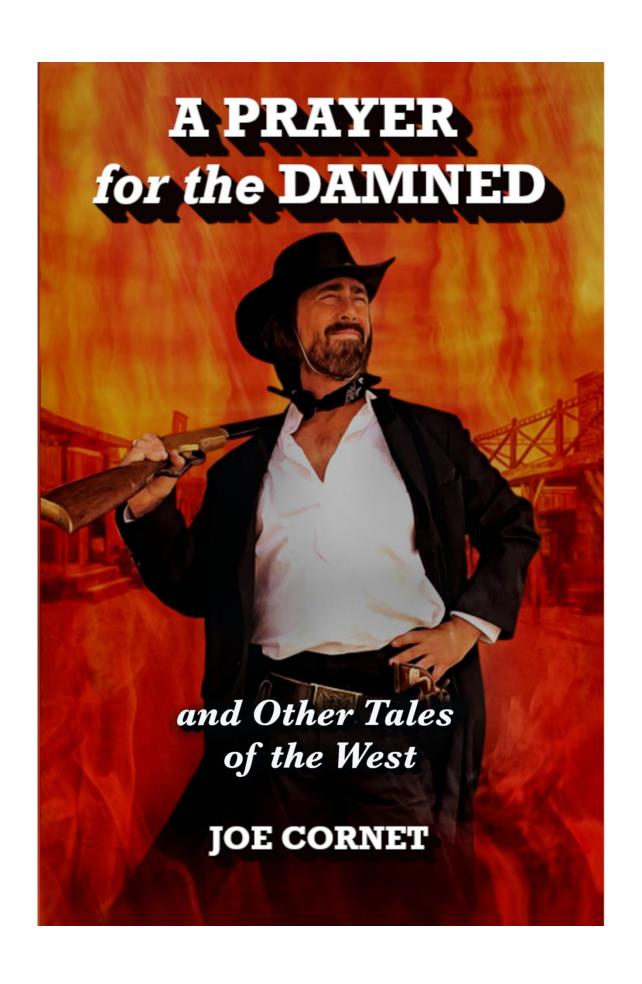
about the author

Emily Dinova



Emily Dinova is an artist who lives in Hoboken, NJ with her sociopathic pet eel, Ivan the Terrible. She enjoys the beach, cooking, practicing martial arts, and is currently working towards a license in psychoanalysis. Emily's debut novel, *Veil of Seduction*, was published in 2022. She is also the co-founder of G&E Productions, a cinematic and theatrical production company.

www.gandeproductions.com/emily-dinova



A PRAYER FOR THE DAMNED

and Other Tales of the West



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Genre: Western, Action, Redemption Story

A hard-hitting Western about a man seeking redemption in a brutal land. Guns, grit, and a prayer for those beyond saving.

Chapter 1

Remembrance

Daylight was ebbing. Mattie sat in her favorite rocking chair on the porch. Harold, the boy who lived next door, had left a box of groceries in the tiny kitchen at the back of the modest house. "Let me know tomorrow if you need anything else, Miss Mattie," he said. "My folks and I will be at church in the morning, but I'll stop in just after the service."

Mattie waved him off and assured the young boy that she was just fine. She had not even yet put the groceries in the pantry. The tea kettle next to her, on a small table, was still warm. She poured

another cup. At this hour of the day, the kettle always contained a dram of whiskey, a fact the neighbors would never have suspected for such a kindly woman in her final years.

Most people who knew her had no idea of the life Mattie had led years ago. A young life filled with violence, cruelty, and tears. Yet there was beauty as well, and love. As she sipped the spiked tea, she wondered: had it really been that long ago? Was it real, or was it just a dream? It certainly felt like a dream, hazy and ethereal, but one series of events was indelibly imprinted in her mind – a grand yet terrifying adventure which culminated in an event that would alter the intended course of her life. And so her mind turned back to that terrible and wonderful time.

Chapter 2

Sudden, New Mexico Territory (Thirteen years after the Civil War)

othing ever happened in Sudden. A copper strike in 1852 produced about a dozen tents in the area. When the copper ran out a year later, a small town sprouted up in this spot for no reason. The town expanded again in the early '60s when word spread that a Confederate barracks was to be located nearby. That never happened.

The war came and went without ever affecting this section of the territory. More people arrived for no reason, and they stayed. Still, nothing ever occurred until that one day, thirteen years after Appomattox.

The lone rider approached Sudden around mid-morning. The heat was already oppressive, which was why no one was about in the streets of the town. Only a mute boy drawing water from the public well gave away the fact that people actually lived here. The boy looked into the distance and saw the lone rider as he entered the far end of the main street.

The rider seemed uneasy in the saddle atop a magnificent blue roan at least seventeen hands high. As he rode nearer up the main street, the boy sensed something was wrong. The rider swayed to and fro as if intoxicated, but it was more grave than that.

The boy dropped the bucket down the well and ran to the rider. The face of the rider was clearly in a daze, and as the boy ran behind the horse, he could see blood stains on the rider's back. The horse stalled. The rider wiped the sweat from his brow, and then he fell off his mount, face down, into the dusty street. The boy could not cry out, so he ran into the general store to alert someone.

This was how the town of Sudden was introduced to Cole.

Chapter 3

We Won't Be Needing This Today

A shingle hung in the midsection of a wooden door that read:

DOCTOR JULY HARRIGAN GENERAL PRACTITIONER, SURGEON

The interior of Dr. Harrigan's office and examination room was cluttered with the tools of his trade. A skeleton suspended from a rack watched over the examination room. The shelves were packed with medical books, journals, specimen jars, and a myriad of bottles containing medicines.

Cole lay face down on an examination bed, the back of his shirt ripped open, and his backside covered in blood. Dr. Harrigan pondered the shot-up mess in front of him. Various trays of medical probes, clamps, forceps, and other tools stood at the ready. Dr. Harrigan chose a particular forceps and used it to extract lead from the patient's various wounds. He did this repeatedly, dropping each lead slug into a metal pan with a tinny thud. He dropped the forceps into the tray to grab a small rag to mop the sweat from his brow, which he then used to mop up the excess blood on Cole's backside.

Dr. July Harrigan picked up a decidedly nasty bone saw and looked at it, as if with a sigh of regret. "Well, I guess we won't be needing this today." He took a beat, then grabbed the forceps yet again to go back to work.

"The situation might have been worse as I was scheduled to go to Tucumcari with my wife and family this morning, but that damn train was delayed again. My fellow medical colleague here in town

came down with the diphtheria last week. That would have left you high and dry for any treatment. Fortunately, for you, I am still here due to a failed railway timetable!"

Cole winced at each probe as a beautiful woman with straw-colored hair held his hand tightly.

The doctor dropped another slug into the pan with another tinny thud. "I've been waiting three weeks for the ether to arrive from St. Louis. My sincere apologies for the use of medicinal spirits in lieu of a stronger anesthetic. If you want to scream, go right ahead. The music teacher upstairs is out for a recital this afternoon. Calls to mind when I practiced in a tent in Abilene. In those days, the patient could caterwaul his head off as those streets were noisier than a Chinese laundry."

Dr. Harrigan's fingers fiddled about the tray in front of him, and with a great deal of flourish, he chose another probe. "Yes, sir, I've treated them all. Soldiers, sailors, and now you shootists. I just don't get what motivates you boys. Seems like an awful risk for a net result you fellas usually have to split up with another confederate. Still, it's a living."

Cole rolled his eyes at the woman with the straw-colored hair and continued wincing as the doctor wielded his probe.

"Some of these authors of the penny dreadfuls are trying mighty hard to elevate you boys to some kind of mythic status. Like noble Greek gods dispensing a kind of frontier justice through extreme acts of bravery. Frankly, I just can't see it. Take my grandfather, now there was a true hero. He spent his youth crisscrossing the Cumberland Gap. In those days, the Indians eviscerated the pioneers they caught. Believed that would prevent their souls from entering the spirit world. Yep, that took some real courage and fortitude to face old Chief Dragging Canoe."

Cole had had enough. He started to raise himself upward with his arms and screamed out, "Jesus Christ, Mattie! Can't you tell this son of a bitch to shut up?"

"I think you just did, Cole," Mattie shot back at him.

The doctor pushed him back on the table. "Easy there, fella. You start moving around, and the lead will sink in deeper."

Cole laid back down with a sigh.

"Just makes my job tougher. I can't dig in there much past an inch. That's what the manual says. You got yourself into this condition, now let me do the repair work." Dr. Harrigan paused to choose another instrument. "Like I was saying, Chief Dragging Canoe was a real terror. It's a wonder that any whites survived that Henderson Treaty land. The old chief declared it was to be a dark and bloody ground."

The doctor changed instruments yet again. "My family left Kentucky after all that. Headed further into the West. Texas, to be exact. Now this was before Travis and his boys glorified that old mission. Yep, my family just kept moving. After the Mexicans gave up at Vera Cruz, that was a sign to push farther west. By God, you know I was the first of my family in two generations to see the East Coast again? Went back east to get my medical education. That decision kept me behind the lines after Sumter. After '63, there were so many men sent back for loss of..."

Cole snapped back, "Listen, can we skip the history lesson?"

"Who did this to you?" Dr. Harrigan inquired.

"Ever heard of The Preacher?" Mattie asked.

Dr. Harrigan made a whistle. "Hardly a soul in this territory who has not heard of him. I thought he was a legend, a bogey man, like Prestor John back in medieval times. A religious myth to keep the faithful in line."

Cole shook his head. "Believe me, he exists."

"I first heard of him at a temperance union meeting in Denver. Some fire and brimstone pastor ranted about this preacher smiting the wicked and cleansing the Southwest of sin," recalled Dr. Harrigan.

Mattie nodded, "That's his reputation, Doc."

"Well, he's got his work cut out for him in this den of iniquity." He changed instruments again. "Did you report this to the law?"

Cole shook his head.

"Seems the sooner you lay this in the lap of the sheriff, the better off you'll be. I'll get you patched and send for Sheriff Duncan to take your statement. You sure don't want that Preacher doing this to anyone else, with perhaps more deadly results. Were you tracking this man?"

Cole replied with a weary voice, "No, but we're on the trail for the same thing."

Doc Harrigan scratched his head. "My God! Well, like I said...I can't see what motivates you shootists. Whatever you seek, is it worth the risk of running up against a demon like that?"

"For him, it is, Doc," said Maggie soberly.

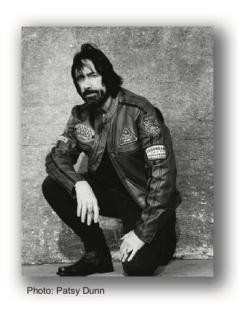
Dr. Harrigan shook his head and probed the last wound. Pulling the lead out, it stuck to his forceps so that the good doctor had to shake it off. "There's a sticky one on my forceps." The lead ball dropped into the pan. "You fellas and your ill-gotten financial pursuits. Seems to me a stable job like a dry goods salesman would be a better life. Fact is, we need a good dry goods man here in Sudden.

You might want to entertain that idea for a more reliable career, that is if you two folks would like to settle here. Would be a more Arcadian lifestyle than your current vocation."

The doctor dropped the forceps with a loud clank into the tray and grabbed another rag. "Now then, that should do it. Let's get you closed up. I'll supply you with a bottle, make that half a bottle of laudanum to quell any lingering pain. You folks have any lodging in town? The Byzantium Hotel is quite comfortable. The new owners just took delivery of fifteen new beds to replace the old ticky ones. They even have a faro table in the lobby."

Dr. Harrigan looked over at Mattie. He pointed to a bottle of liquid on the shelf next to her. "Let me see that bottle, little lady." Mattie passed the bottle to Dr. Harrigan. He uncorked it and took a swig. "We're almost done here."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR JOE CORNET



Joe Cornet is an accomplished filmmaker, having directed six feature films, with three of these projects showcasing his screenwriting talent as well. While he holds a special affinity for the Western genre, he has also delved into horror and other film styles. Now venturing into the realm of literature, *A Prayer for the Damned* marks his official debut book as a fiction author, with a promise of more novels to come.

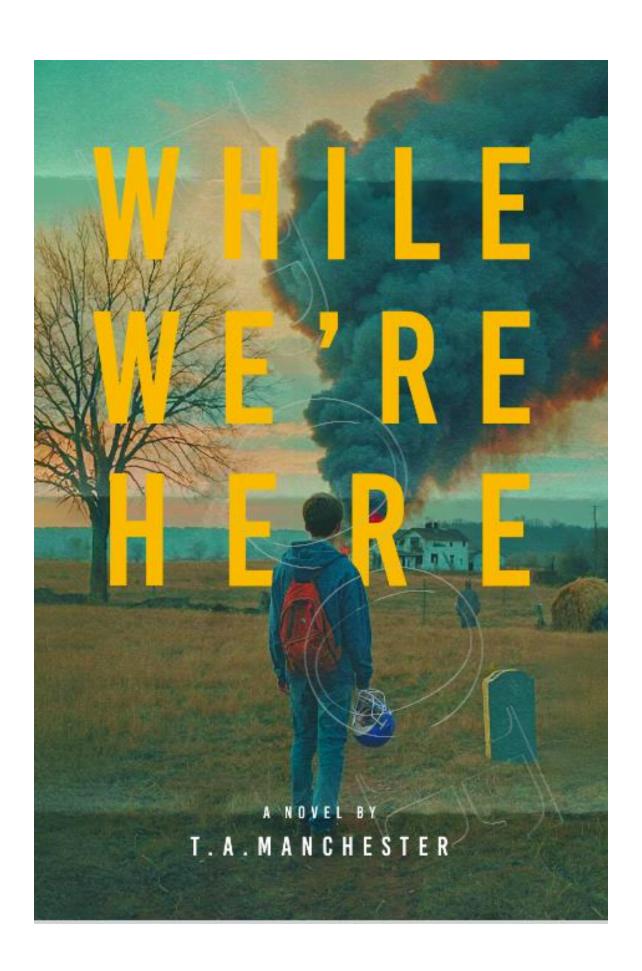
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WHILE WE'RE HERE

A NOVEL

T.A. MANCHESTER

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Genre: Young Adult (YA) Contemporary, Family Drama, Inspirational Sports Fiction

Seventeen-year-old Morgan Browdy's world collapses in just eight seconds when a tragic accident kills his brother—blaming himself, he retreats to his estranged grandfather's farm, where football, family fractures, and a fledgling romance offer a chance at healing and redemption.

The worst days arrive disguised as ordinary ones-eggs over easy, crisp bacon, and a family of four at County Line Café. When the Browdys slide into their familiar corner booth, the vinyl seats creak beneath them. Ten-year-old Murph races a small Matchbox car across the table's grimy surface, its tiny wheels leaving trails in the crumbs. The sight draws a laugh from his mother, Ailea, her eyes crinkling at the corners and filling with warmth.

"Our speed demon right here," she comments, messing up Murph's unruly hair. The texture reminds her of dandelion fluff, soft and wild. Across the table, her husband Wilke's leg brushes against hers as he scans the menu. A half-smirk works its way across his five o'clock shadow.

Their server, Jessie, appears, snapping her gum with a pop. "Let's get some grub for the early birds," she says. Her voice carries the rasp of too many late-night shifts. "The usual for everyone?"

"Figure that'll do it," Wilke confirms, his deep voice rumbling with contentment. "Two pecan waffles, extra syrup. And Junior here will have his dippy eggs and bacon. Right, buddy?"

Murph, absorbed with racing his toy, doesn't respond. Ailea recalls when Murph was a baby and how quickly he would become occupied by the simplest things as his tongue pokes out in concentration. She steps in. "Let's scramble those soft for him. White toast cut small, please." There's a hint of protectiveness in her tone, born from years of having to step in and be the boy's voice.

Jessie turns to sixteen-year-old Morgan, who's gazing out the rain-streaked window. The patter of raindrops forms a quaint backdrop to the diner's hustle and bustle. "And for our quiet one?"

Morgan turns, pulled from his daydream. The cool glass against his forehead had lulled him into a trance. "Oh, uh...just chocolate chip pancakes, I guess. Thanks."

His attention drifts back to the window as they wait for their food. He spots Emma, a girl from school, leaving the corner store across the street. The sight of her sends a flutter through his stomach. She catches him leering through the window and gives a slight wave.

Moments later, she appears at their table, greeting the family. Her strawberry shampoo wafts over, stirring something in the teen boy's heart.

"Spying on my secret hangouts?" she teases, sliding in beside Morgan. Their knees touch under the table, sending a jolt through him that causes his throat to catch.

The bell above the diner door chimes, and a few of Emma's friends enter, waving her over.

"Shoot, I gotta go, we're gonna be late," she groans, jumping up faster than she swooped in.
"But I'll see you at the game," she calls, her voice carrying the hint of a promise that causes hormones
to fire uncontrolled in Morgan's gut.

As the door swings shut behind her, Morgan realizes the sudden silence at their table. He risks a glance up, only to find Wilke and Ailea exchanging loaded looks. A sly grin tugs at the corner of Wilke's mouth as he cocks his eyebrow. Ailea's eyes dance with contained amusement, her lips pressed together as if holding back an obvious secret.

Heat creeps up Morgan's neck, flooding his cheeks. He hunches his shoulders, wishing he could disappear. His fingers fidget with the paper wrapper from his straw, shredding it into tiny pieces as he avoids meeting their eyes.

"So," Wilke drawls, breaking the calm. "She seems nice."

Morgan groans, sinking lower in his seat. He'd give anything for the floor to open up and swallow him whole. The knowing looks and poorly concealed smiles are all too much. He mumbles something unintelligible in response, his ears burning as red as the ketchup bottle on the table.

Ailea reaches across, patting his hand with affection. "Okay, we'll drop it," she chides, but her eyes sparkle with motherly interest. "We remember what it was like to be young and sweet on someone."

The mood shifts when Ailea notices Morgan's expression change to something dark. "What's eating you?" she asks, her intuition prickling. "You've been quiet all morning."

Morgan shrugs, his shoulders heavy. "Coach said I'd be off JV by now, but here I am at another Saturday game." The words taste bitter in his mouth.

"With A.J. out, doesn't that mean there's an opening?" Ailea probes, trying to find a silver lining.

"Yeah," Morgan replies. "And I'm still riding the bench." The frustration in his voice is palpable.

Wilke's jaw tightens. "Morgan, we've talked about this. If you don't step up, maybe you should quit." His words cut like a knife.

"That's not it, I—" Morgan starts, but Wilke cuts him off, his patience wearing thin from a discussion that's graced the table several times.

"Nobody's going to hand it to you."

Murph, oblivious to the undercurrents, pipes up. "Hooky, he's a hooky!" His childish voice breaks through like a ray of sunshine.

Wilke's eyes narrow, his gaze sharpening. "You've been skipping practice?"

Morgan tries to explain, but he's been outed. An uncomfortable quiet descends on the table, broken by the clink of cutlery and the distant sizzle of the griddle.

Wilke sighs. "Listen, I know you've got a lot on your plate. But you've got to have faith that if you keep putting in the work, your moment will come." His words are tinged with the wisdom of experience.

"Yeah, great pep talk from the Pancake Provider," Morgan retorts, half regretting the sharpness of his words. "Not like you know what it's like."

"No, I'd have no idea what it's like to be an angry teen-" his father laughs, dropping his hand on Morgan's head and giving him a playful shove. "Eat up before you disappear."

2

The crisp autumn breeze bends the tall grass outside the hulking football stadium, its massive concrete walls looming over the deserted parking lot like ancient monoliths. The Browdy family walks across the asphalt expanse under a slate-gray September sky, their footsteps echoing in the vast emptiness as they head toward a weathered Ford pickup after the game.

Ailea walks, shoulders hunched against the biting cold, her breath forming white clouds. The wind whips strands of her hair across her face, and she can taste the metallic hint of approaching winter. Wilke lumbers beside her, his face flushed crimson from the chill, the creases around his eyes deepening as he squints against the wind. Morgan trudges along, gaze fixed on his phone, thumbs flying across the screen.

Murph skips beside his mom. His sneakers squeak on the damp asphalt with each bouncing step. He looks up, messy brown hair falling into his eyes-those bright green orbs that seem to absorb every detail of the world around him, good or bad, with the same fascination he shows when playing with his beloved cars at home. In unfamiliar settings, he's rather quiet. But here, surrounded by family, he chatters about the intricacies of a V8 versus a Supercharged Turbo.

Wilke presents Murph with a vibrant team pennant, its colors a defiant splash against the monochrome day. "Stay close to your mom," he says as he guides the boy towards Ailea. Morgan trails behind, his football gear slung under one arm, the pads clanking with each step.

Ailea turns to her older son, trying to catch his eye. "Maybe you'll get to play next week," she says, injecting hope into her voice even as she sees the disappointment on the set of his shoulders. Morgan doesn't look up, just smirks at his phone and mutters, "Yeah, right..." His voice carries a bitterness that makes Ailea's heart ache.

She nudges Murph, desperate to lighten the mood. "Bet they'll put you in, won't they, brother?" Murph's face lights up, his grin wide and infectious. "Right, brother!" he shouts, his voice carrying across the empty lot as he skips along, the pennant fluttering like a bright ensign in the cold, stormy wind.

3

Wilke's calloused hand envelops Ailea's, the rough texture a familiar comfort against her skin. He pulls her close, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth, his eyes crinkling with affection and desire.

"Been thinking bout tonight," he murmurs, his voice low and husky, sending a shiver down Ailea's spine despite the chill in the air. His aftershave causes a flutter in her stomach, a mix of anticipation and nervousness. "Not in front of them," she whispers, pulling her hand away. Her cheeks flush, and not just from the cold.

Wilke, undeterred, persists with a playful glint in his eye. "No one's watching," he says, his arm snaking around her waist. Ailea squirms away, her fingers combing her wind-tousled hair.

"Let's see who can spot the truck first!" she calls out to the boys. She taps Murph on the shoulder, and he takes off like a shot, the pennant streaming behind him like a banner of joy.

"Not too far!" She calls after him, her voice tinged with worry.

"Morgan!" Wilke barks, his voice sharp enough to cut through the wind. "Go with your brother. Get him to the truck."

Morgan stops, his shoulders sagging with teenage annoyance. He drops his gear on the grimy asphalt with a dull thud. "Fine..." he huffs, trudging after his brother with the enthusiasm of a prisoner on a chain gang.

"Stay with him!" Ailea adds.

He responds with a vague wave, his eyes never leaving the glowing screen of his phone.

Wilke's frustrated shout of "Hey!" registers a reply.

"I know, I know," Morgan mutters, more to himself than anyone else. His distracted compliance is automatic, ingrained from years of half-listening to parental instructions. He follows his brother's path, but his mind is miles away, engrossed in the drama unfolding in his text messages.

4

With the bright pennant in his hand fluttering like a beacon, Murph races on, skipping around parked trucks and SUVs. The family's old, rusty truck looms into view at the far end of the lot.

"Get in the truck," Morgan mutters, his voice flat. He gives Murph a push, his eyes never leaving his handheld.

"Dad said, Dad said—" Murph's singsong voice carries on the wind, a melody of innocence and excitement. His words bounce off the nearby cars.

"Just get in!" Morgan snaps, his irritation palpable.

Murph, caught up in his own world, ignores his brother's command. "Look!" He waves the pennant side-to-side, nearly hitting Morgan in the face.

Morgan swats it away, his patience wearing thin. "Stop, you're so annoying!"

"Am not!" Murph retorts, sticking out his tongue. He dances away, waving the pennant even more dramatically.

"I said stop!" Morgan lunges for the pennant, but Murph dodges, laughing.

Frustration boils over, and Morgan snaps. He shoves Murph hard, intending to push him toward the truck. "Just get in-"

The push is harder than Morgan intended. Murph stumbles backward, losing his grip on the pennant. Wind gusts, awakening the world. It tugs at the pennant, now free from Murph's grasp, scooting it further into the lane.

Murph cries out, his words punctuated by hiccupping sobs. Without warning, he lurches forward, arms outstretched towards the escaping pennant, his focus solely on retrieving the bright object that had moments ago been a source of comfort and fascination. Morgan's eyes widen in horror as he realizes what's happening.

"Murph, stop!"

At that moment, a sedan comes tearing by, its engine roaring with abandon. The screech of tires on asphalt cuts through like a knife. There's a horn blast, followed by the shriek of brakes.

Wilke takes Ailea's hand as they make their way toward the car. His lips find the soft curve of her neck. Her perfume mingles with the crisp autumn air. This time, Ailea doesn't pull away; instead, she leans into his touch, her body relaxing against his without the fear of getting caught by their children.

"Where's this sweet talk been all this time?" she laughs. Her voice carries a note of surprise and pleasure as if rediscovering a part of herself long forgotten. The warmth of Wilke's body against hers feels like coming home after a long, cold journey.

A terrified yell shatters their moment of intimacy. Wilke's body goes rigid, every muscle tensing as if preparing for a fight. The faint, desperate cry of "Mom!" reaches their ears, carried on the wind from across the way.

Ailea's eyes dart across the parking lot, her maternal instincts kicking into overdrive as she tries to make sense of the unfolding chaos. Without hesitation, she takes off, weaving between parked cars, her heart racing from a primal fear that claws at her insides.

Wilke follows, his face a mask of terror as he struggles to keep up with Ailea's frantic pace. His breath comes in ragged gasps, years of sedentary life catching up with him in this crisis.

The world around them seems to blur; the once-peaceful parking lot transformed into a nightmarish landscape of obstacles and shadows. Each passing second seems like an eternity as they hurry towards the origin of that heartrending cry, their minds imagining worst-case scenarios with every stride.

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About the Author

T.A. MANCHESTER

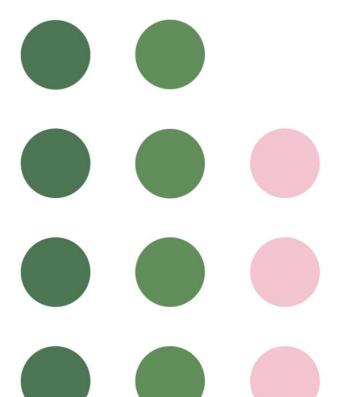
T.A. Manchester is an author and filmmaker known for his evocative storytelling. In 2013, he co-founded Atlas Film Studio alongside fellow creatives from The Illinois Institute of Art-Chicago. The following year, their short film *Melancholic* gained national recognition, reaching the Top 200 Finals in HBO's Project Greenlight competition. This early success laid the groundwork for his transition into long-form storytelling.

Manchester wrote and directed his debut feature film, *The Things We've Seen*, in 2016. A gripping, character-driven drama, the film earned critical acclaim on the festival circuit, securing nine awards and four nominations. Notably, it won the Gold Remi Award at the 50th WorldFest-Houston, joining past winners like George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. His screenwriting also received distinction at the Angaelica Film Festival in Los Angeles, further cementing his reputation as a writer with a unique voice and a keen eye for human complexity.

Beyond film, Manchester's literary work continues to explore themes of fractured relationships, redemption, and the weight of the past. His storytelling is often marked by a melancholic beauty, drawing comparisons to the works of auteurs like Kenneth Lonergan and Jeff Nichols. Whether on the page or the screen, his work resonates with those who appreciate grounded realism and deeply textured character studies.

While We're Here is his first novel.

Rejected



essays on belonging

Michelle Fiordaliso

Rejected essays on belonging



Michelle Fiordaliso
with Photographs by Lindsay Morris

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Genre: Memoir, Essays, Humor

A unique collection of witty and insightful essays about identity, family, and trying to find one's place in the world.

For anyone who has suffered rejection or who craves a sense of belonging.

Introduction

The essays in this book have all been rejected, some of them multiple times. Over the years, I've seen my work published in some of my favorite publications, including some of the most reputable. But the essays herein were either passed on or ghosted completely. As my fellow writer friend Tara says, "No answer is still an answer."

The essay is one of my favorite mediums. Essays can be short. They're often timely. And for me, they demand to be written. An unwritten essay nags at me like a toddler until I sit down and pay attention. It keeps me up at night until I turn the light on and

grab a notebook or go to my desk. Sometimes an essay comes out in one complete piece, like the shed skin of a snake; other times, it takes years to craft.

No one tells you when you first start wanting to write that becoming a writer entails distinct phases. The first is believing you have things to say. The next is granting yourself permission to put those things down on paper. The third is writing and rewriting and rewriting again until the things on the page are close enough to the things you see in your head. And then, there is the part that really sucks—maybe not if you're Joyce Carol Oates or Roxane Gay, but for most of us—the part where you must convince editors that your piece belongs in their publication.

Weathering frequent rejection is integral to being an artist. There will be so many we're-gonna-pass-on-this-one's that you won't be able to count them. I think the film Whiplash isn't so much a story about an abusive teacher as it is an allegory. The industry beats you down, and you have a few choices: change careers, kill yourself (quickly, with a gun; slowly, with some addictive substance), or rise to the occasion, albeit with bloody fingers.

In 12-step programs, they say *rejection is redirection*. Enough friends and colleagues have asked me, over the years, to read and reread and pass around these essays for me to decide to collect them in one place. In some way, they are all about belonging. Belonging to one's home or country. Belonging to oneself. And now I've created a place for them to belong. They were rejected and therefore redirected into this book you hold. I trust it's where these words were always meant to be.

Scout



I never understood the whole *girls* and horses thing. I didn't have a horse-themed tenth birthday party. I didn't take riding lessons. I never saw *Black Beauty*. Given my background, I wouldn't have expected to learn about romantic love from a horse.

Years ago, I was asked by a friend to attend a Human-Equine retreat. Equine-assisted psychotherapy programs have been shown to be effective in treating everything from autism to eating disorders. It was going to be a weekend of communing with, interacting with, and learning life lessons from horses. As a responsible single parent, I had long ago said goodbye to the skydiving and motorcycling adventures that came before the birth of my son, but this was one adventure I could safely undertake. And the operative word for me wasn't so much "horse" as it was "retreat." Quiet time on a farm sounded delightful.

Horses weren't completely new to me. The summer prior, I had spent a weekend with the friends who would later invite me to the retreat. They had moved to the suburbs and bought a horse named Scout, and I helped them groom him. I also got to recline on the grass reading *Middlesex*. And I watched them practice cantering and galloping.

Though I knew their horse was going to be at the workshop, I wondered if I would recognize him among the herd. But when I walked down the hill, I couldn't mistake him. It was like recognizing my own child among a group. The horse is a gigantic Clydesdale with amber eyes.

As I approached Scout's pen, another workshop attendee was already standing there. I wanted to give them their space, so I walked quietly along the side of the corral toward one of the other horses, but Scout was quick to follow. He caught up with me like a dog greeting his owner. Ebullient and excited, he put his lips against my face. Playfully, he removed the name tag from my shirt with his nose. Tears flooded my eyes. How could I doubt whether I mattered to friends and family, when this creature I'd spent two days with remembered me so fondly?

The idea that I was forgettable didn't materialize out of nowhere. My son's father had had an affair with someone at work when our baby was two months old. After that, feeling secure with romantic partners didn't come easily to me. I didn't have a track record of picking safe people, so it's no wonder that I didn't feel safe. I chose people who, for one reason or another, weren't sure about me. And then I made their ambivalence a reason to feel unsure about myself.

When the leaders asked us which horse we wanted to work with one-on-one, my answer was clear: Scout. I would set my intentions with a counselor, and then spend twenty minutes in a round pen with him. The counselor and the rest of my group would observe and comment.

As a perpetual caretaker, my intention was to learn how to receive. I was tired of feeling like I was only worthy of love based on things I did or gave, rather than on who I am. As I thought about this, I noticed that Scout walked towards me. I entered the pen. For our previous interaction, we had been on opposite sides of a fence. This time, I was alone with a horse that was seventeen hands tall and two thousand pounds. The reality was that he could charge me, kick me or buck me. But would he? Was this a lesson in trust?

I didn't approach Scout right away. I waited for him to come to me, something I don't usually do with people. And he did come towards me. Slow. Gentle. He took his time. We breathed together. I waited until I felt safe and comfortable before I reached out to touch him. I reached out to pet his nose, and he let me. He even let me hug him. He didn't move once. He didn't startle me in any way. He was constant—and in the face of that, I decompressed. So much of the anxiety I walk around with each day vanished.

When it was time to go home, I went to say good-bye to Scout, who was chewing on hay. Upon seeing me, he left the food behind, and approached. He planted what felt like a kiss on my face. I thought about relationships I'd had. It's so easy to keep working away at our desk or keep washing the dishes or talking on the phone when our partner walks in after work. Scout showed me how different it feels when someone stops what they're doing

and takes the time to greet you. What if we got up from our desks and met our lovers at the door, the way dogs do? What if we took them in our arms and kissed them? I'm so happy you're home. I've got a bit of work to do, but I can't wait to have dinner with you in an hour.

I left the weekend knowing something I hadn't realized before. What I was looking for was not a particular person, not a particular set of physical characteristics or personal traits. What I was looking for was a specific feeling. It was a feeling of calm and love in the presence of someone else. I had gotten glimpses of it in my life. There was the married man I'd met on a summer vacation in Sicily. We sat next to each other on the beach for a month and watched our kids play in the sea. Something happened to me when I was with him. I felt safe. I wondered if it was because he was the only one with an umbrella that never blew away, or because he always had cold water and gum. Or if some alchemical connection was at play. Neither one of us crossed any boundaries, but meeting him changed me. I would never have swiped right on him on a dating app, but being around him gave me the feeling I'd like to feel from a husband someday. That feeling of safety allowed me to be my truest self. It helped me find both laughter and serenity.

Since I was a kid, I've carried a list of traits I want my person to have—things like intellect and humor, wit and worldliness. But I've been in a relationship with someone who possessed those qualities and still felt agitated in his presence. I can ascribe that agitation to the fact that he would forget to lock the door before coming to bed. Or to the fact that he'd lose his wallet all the time. I could say it was because life scared him more than it scares me. But it wasn't really any of those things—it was the lack of a certain feeling.

For me, love is about being seen, remembered, and recognized. It's about receiving. It's about being with someone big-hearted, who uses their size to protect rather than to intimidate. Scout gave me a reference point for what love should feel like. I trust that, now that I've felt it, I'll be able to recognize it when it comes.

Michelle Fiordaliso



Photo Credit: Cory Rice

Michelle Fiordaliso is an author, essayist, and screenwriter who started her writing career as a playwriting fellow at Uta Hagen's HB Studio and was the recipient of a PEN Center USA award for literary fiction. Her work has been published in *The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Ms.,* and *The Washington Post.* The non-fiction break-up book she co-wrote, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Ex*, established her as a relationship expert on *Today, KTLA* and *Oprah Radio* with Gayle King.

For more information, visit https://michellefiordaliso.com/ or follow @michellecarmelafiordaliso.

Lindsay Morris



Photo Credit: Self-Portrait

Lindsay Morris is a photographer known for documenting events in her personal life and surrounding community. She is a 2023 TED speaker and a regular contributor to *The New York Times*, including two *New York Times Magazine* cover stories. Her work has been featured in renowned publications and her exhibitions have been showcased worldwide. Morris produced the 2016 BBC documentary *My Transgender Summer Camp* and published *You Are You*, a monograph about a camp for gender-expansive children. She lives on Long Island.

For more information, visit https://www. lindsaycmorris.com/ or follow at @lindsaymorrisphoto.

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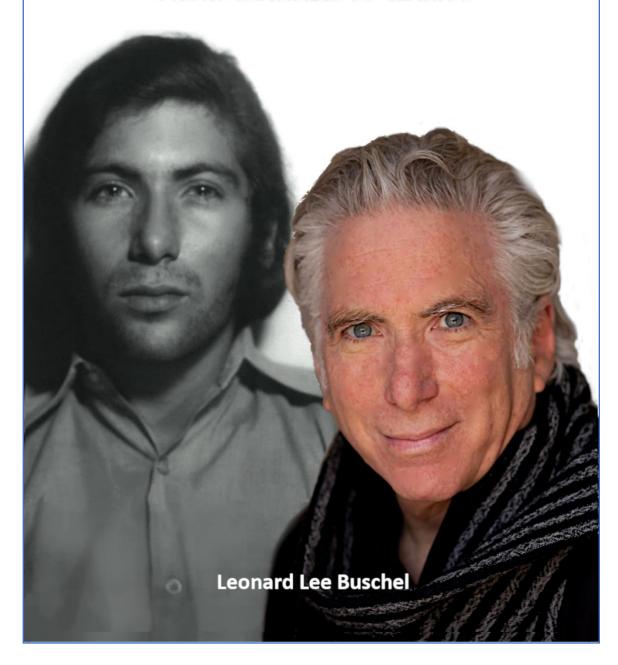
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FROM CANNABIS TO CLARITY





Confessions of a Cannabis Addict

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HOW NOT TO DIE

Around people if I feel I'm gonna die I excuse myself telling them "I gotta go!" "Go where?" they wanna know I don't answer I just get outa there away from them because somehow they sense something wrong and never know what to do it scares them such suddenness How awful to just sit there and they asking: "Are you okay?" "Can we get you something?" "Want to lie down?" Ye gods! people! who wants to die among people?! Especially when they can't do shit To the movies—to the movies that's where I hurry to when I feel I'm going to die So far it's worked

— Gregory Corso, Herald of the Autochthonic Spirit

Keep your face always toward the sunshine -

and shadows will fall behind you.

— Walt Whitman

Preface

If this were a movie, it wouldn't be a Woody Allen film; there are no nerds or molesters. Not a Sam Peckinpah film; not enough violence except for a few choking scenes. Not a Scorsese film; not enough sleazebags, but a lot of drug dealers, gamblers, and loose women. And criminal behavior on every page, because whenever you spend untaxed income, it's an illicit purchase.

François Truffaut. That's who I feel should have been directing my life—lots of lovemaking and characters as cool as iced espresso and hot and smoldering like a Gauloises.

However, none of them French. Actually one, but she was French Canadian, and that affair went nowhere. I don't think Parisian street walkers count. On second thought, let's face it, it'd be more Barry Levinson. There's way more *Diner* in me than *Shoot the Piano Player*.

I think of things in terms of movies a lot. They seem to be markers for events in my life. Films are my newest drug of choice. That's why in 2008, I started the REEL Recovery Film Festival & Symposium with Robert Downey Sr.

At the REEL Recovery Film Festival & Symposium, we showcase filmmakers who make honest films about addiction, alcoholism, behavioral disorders, treatment, and recovery. We started in Los Angeles and expanded to seven other cities over time, including Ft. Lauderdale, New York, and Denver. We are still adding other locations. During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, we went online with our own REEL Recovery Film Channel, available nationwide to anyone in any state.

I like a good movie, and I worship a good foreign film, like the 2019 masterpiece *Portrait* of a Lady on Fire. I was transported back to the 1700s in this somber French tale.

My friend Steve Seid was a curator at the Berkeley Art Museum's Pacific Film Archive for 25 years. He revered film as an art as much as I do. In 2021, in response to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art closing its Film Program, he wrote the following on Facebook:

"I propose that Cinema, the seventh art, be promoted promoted to the first art because it contains aspects of each of the "lesser" arts. Cinema encapsulates aspects of its lesser brethren and though Cinema was formulated after the assumed perfection of Painting, Architecture, Sculpture, Literature, Music, and the Performing Arts (theater, dance, symphony, opera), the medium in its many forms arrives at a cumulative impression that is greater. Cinema can mesmerize as it transits upon a whited screen or delight and absorb as it engulfs its environs with dazzling abstraction. Cinema can be encountered as a language-based experience or absorbed as non-verbal recitation. Cinema can dance upon the architectural space or illuminate a multitude of dancers. Cinema can tell vast stories or reduce experience to a pigmented utterance. Cinema can depict the world with photographic insistence or astound with graphical departures. Cinema can occupy complex interior spaces or reflect back your colorful claustrophobia. Cinema can dazzle the impatient ear with mellifluous sonorities or flow frantically forward with an airy musicality. Cinema can be painterly, sculptural, literary, theatrical, architectural, musical, simultaneously."

Movies are about telling stories, and they've done so beautifully for well over a century. Showcasing films about addiction and recovery is deeply personal to me because, as of the writing of this book, I have lived the last 27 years sober . . . without a drink or a drug (except for some Dilaudid after open-heart surgery and Percodan after brain surgery).

For 25 years, I dealt drugs, got high every day, and lived under the daily specter of arrest, incarceration, and violence. I travelled the world, met brilliant charismatic men and women, ate in fine restaurants and had orchestra seats for plays by Tom Stoppard, Sam Shepard and every Sondheim musical on Broadway. I avoided the cops when it counted, welcomed poets and musicians into my life regularly.

Since December 12, 1950, I have been floating down the stream of life in a rowboat that could have sprung a bad leak at any moment. Too often, I was gasping for breath (fucking asthma). Breaking the law. Worshipping nature, art, literature, and females. Getting high as a kite. Being funny, because if you can't play an instrument, you better make people laugh. And always looking for love, sex or the Benjamins. I spent my whole life climbing to the top of the mountain, and when I got there, I realized, *oh fuck!* Wrong mountain.

Welcome to the world of a five-foot, eleven-inch Jewish Sagittarian dilettante's drug-addicted life. No one would ever guess this edge-of-the-cliff dance ends with a most miraculous miracle and recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. I don't know if my story can help anyone. I hope so. Maybe there is someone reading this who only smokes pot every day because it seemed like a good idea 40 years ago. No, it's because you're addicted. The highest you can be is when there is nothing between you and reality. Reality, the ultimate natural high, is more exciting than any drug-induced roller-coaster ride.

Marijuana is often called the lazy man's way to enlightenment. It can also be called a lazy man's way to creativity. And it is, until it's not. If you think there can be heaven on earth with a joint in your mouth, then it must be very good weed. No, that's bullshit. Drugs wear off. Reality never does. My son often reminds me of what Timothy Leary said: "The goal is not to get high, but to be high."

The idea of writing a memoir never occurred to me until I was taking classes at Los Angeles Community College to get my certification as a substance abuse counselor. The classes were pretty much made up of recovering drug addicts, rappers, and ex-cons. I felt right at home.

The teacher wore sweaters every day probably bought on sale from Banana Republic. The class worked from a paperback textbook called *Did I Really Have a Choice?* Every week I had to write an essay about my formative years and the "choices" I made along the way.

Discussing "free will" with a 10-year-old is a moot point. I was programmed to be me by my environment, mother, brother, and the cataclysmic death of my father. The actual dying was not cataclysmic (quiet heart attack in his sleep while being driven home from the night shift at the post office) but the effect on my breast feeder and my sibling were life changing, shattering, and a fucking bummer.

When I was young, around 17, after just having been introduced to the works of Henry Miller, I read several volumes of *The Diary of Anaïs Nin* (Miller and Nin were *very close*) and was blown away thinking I'll never lead such an interesting life, such an introspective life, or be able to write like her. Yet here I am . . .

My brother has always been the writer in the family. Brother Bruce wrote lots of great magazine articles for *GQ*, *Forbes*, *Medium*, a column for the *New York Times*, his own memoir for Simon and Schuster in 2007, *Walking Broad: Looking for the Heart of Brotherly Love*, and in 1973, he co-wrote the pre *-All the President's Men* exposé on the Nixon Watergate breakin, *The Watergate File: A Concise, Illustrated Guide to the People and Events*.

I think there are a few well-known Jewish writers hanging around on our family tree—the editor for the *Forward*, a legendary newspaper founded in 1897, and the author of *Famous Jews in Sports* (a very slim tome). *Famous Jewish Chess Players* was more substantial. If any readers are about to throw this book into the fireplace because I seem to be bragging about the innate and superior intelligence of Hebraic peoples, *stop*. Achtung, halt, STOP. I promise you there are some pretty idiotic tales to come.

"A book lying idle on a shelf is wasted ammunition. Like money, books must be kept in constant circulation... A book is not only a friend, it makes friends for you. When you have possessed a book with mind and spirit, you are enriched. But when you pass it on you are enriched threefold."

— Henry Miller

Part I

What It Was Like

"REALITY is what you can get away with."

- 1. Rehearse successful outcomes in your mind's eye.
- 2. Expand your ability to feel gratitude and appreciation.
- 3. Don't demand all or nothing answers: accept partial solutions.
- 4. Interrupt your negative chains of thought by forcing yourself to visualize the crazy sweet adventures you plan to enjoy someday.
 - Robert Anton Wilson 1932 2007

Chapter 1

Grief Like a Torn Dress Should Be Left at Home

I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become.

-Carl Jung

OPENING MONTAGE: Camera descends through the delicious mists above a pot of simmering chicken soup at 4639 N. 10th Street—the house where I grew up. There I am, having just been born into an idyllic Jewish family unit smack-dab in the middle of the twentieth century, with a working father, a beautiful, house-wifey mother, and a strong handsome three-year-old brother. I started life in the North Philadelphia neighborhood called Logan, in a row house with mortgage payments my parents considered affordable.

When Mom and Dad brought home their bouncing baby boy from St. Joseph's hospital, my mother pressed her tender ear to my tiny chest and heard a heartbeat that was anything but regular.

The next day my mom called the delivery doctor and told him she'd heard something strange when she put her ear to my chest. The doctor had already detected a loud murmur associated with a bicuspid aortic valve disorder. The doctor didn't want to tell my parents right away about my defective heart and ruin the family's first night home with their new beautiful baby boy.

There was an operation available to repair said defect, but in the 1950s, 1 out of every 10 kids who went under the knife to repair the errant valve never made it back home to watch *Howdy Doody*.

In those days, there was no heart-lung machine. The surgeon would have had only three-and-a-half minutes to replace the little piece of shit valve in my heart. Mom was not about to play *Beat the Clock* with a life-threatening experimental surgery. But she was willing to bet that operating room technology would advance

faster than my valve's health would retreat. Mom was certainly right on that estimation.

Three weeks after I took center stage, my daddy dropped dead of a heart attack on his way home from working the night shift at the post office. He was 34 years old. Suddenly there was a gaping hole in our lives. No husband, no father, no breadwinner.



Mom was a grief-stricken and frightened widow. Shock prevented her from breastfeeding, so at three weeks old, my first bartender eighty-sixed me. Mom had no job and the mortgage became unaffordable. She was now confronted with a new reality: How was she to have the time to raise my brother and me into men when she needed to get a nine-to-five job? How would a 100 percent woman manage to raise two sons without a father around? Could her instinct and intuition carry her through? The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care by Dr. Spock was not in her library.

I was a particularly large drain on family emotions. Before I could even walk, I was faced not only with a lifethreatening heart condition but with a gnarly breathtaking case of severe asthma, which ultimately led to numerous emergency room visits.

My lucky brother's life started with daddy's gentle masculine push. Over theyears, I've seen 8mm home movies of my brother Bruce, being pushed by my father on a swing and another home movie shows him being held above the cresting waves in the Atlantic Ocean off Atlantic City by the proud, strong hands of our daddy. Others called him Morris. I called him deceased.



What Me Worry?

For my brother, our father's death was much more of a loss than it was for me.

I'm sure on an unconscious level, I must have been devastated. Though at the time I probably didn't notice, being so focused on Mom's fountains for youth. Who was going to hunt for food, gather wood, and keep our row home supplied with heating oil to stay warm at night? At three weeks old, I had to metaphorically stand on my own two feet while actually only able to lie on my back or stomach, as newborns do. I was already starting a new chapter in my life, as I did again 44 years later when I got sober. It's not like I was on one uninterrupted trajectory from infancy to the Betty Ford Center. I did stop at nursery school, public schools, weddings, fatherhood and racetracks. But at three weeks old, without realizing it, I was pretty much faced with having to fend for myself.

Being brought up by a single mom is like being an electrical plug with only one prong. The energy is not a balanced flow. A missing father is a missing prong. A missing father short-circuits a child's learned response to stimuli. As a man, he may overreact to everyday problems as if he were from Venus and not from Mars.

How would I learn the aplomb a father uses to smoothly carve a holiday turkey? Or repaint the bedroom or change a flat tire? I would never know how to safely experience the fear and unsteadiness that come when Daddy takes off the training wheels to unleash the careen of the bike on the asphalt. Or feel his love, assistance, acceptance and protection at the same time. When I had my own son, I told him the first thing to learn when riding a bike is how to fall over (on a grass field), and the second thing is how to get up and keep pedaling. Somehow, I managed to master this life lesson without a daddy of my own.

When I started to attend elementary school, I heard kids in the playground talk about their fathers and the jobs they did. I would slink away embarrassed that I didn't even have a father. Heretofore, I never really knew what I did not have. I did have some older guys in the neighborhood who took me under their wings from time to time but never like a father would.

One of the best realities of my life was that my family lived in the same house for 20 years. I felt secure in the Brigadoon-like neighborhood of Logan in North Philadelphia. I say Brigadoon because to me Logan was like the mythical village in Scotland that rose out of the Scottish mist once every 100 years, for only one day of joy and splendor.

Logan, built on top of a buried creek, existed as a middle-class Jewish ghetto for about 50 years, before three square blocks (including my house) sank into the mud, disappearing off the face of the earth forever. There is no old block to go back to visit. Except through memories, and in family photos, 10th Street will remain forever a shimmering universe of childhood adventures and fantasies. And where my creation story started off with a death and a wheeze.

My mother, Rose, only drove a car twice in her life; once for a lesson and then to get her driver's license. She really didn't need one because she usually only travelled with her boyfriends or took public transport. We never owned a car. As a kid, the only modes of transportation I ever knew were buses and subways, walking, riding my bike, and hitchhiking. I hitchhiked to Olney High School every day for three years. When I was late, the teachers understood that I didn't get a ride fast enough to be on time.

I grew up self-reliant, with two bus stops a block from my house and with only a 20-minute walk to the Broad Street subway. Our station was the Wyoming Avenue stop. From here, for a five-cent token, I could travel up and down the spine of this city of neighborhoods or to where the Declaration of Independence was birthed and to the home of comedian W. C. Fields. One story has it that Fields had the following words engraved on his tombstone at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California: "All things being equal, I'd rather be here than in Philadelphia."

School was a challenge to my developing ego. I attended a big school that had three floors and two elevators. My heart problem, a bicuspid aortic valve that should have been tricuspid, got me a special elevator pass (like a seat on the "special" bus).

I was never allowed to participate in the regular gym class, so I took remedial gym where the only equipment was a Ping-Pong table. And there wasn't always someone to play against. I became bored with boredom.

My special pass to use the elevator was necessary all winter, when my ridiculously bad asthma caused me to wheeze like an out-of-pitch accordion. That wheeze embarrassed me greatly. I didn't want the other kids to know I had any physical defects, so I would wait for everyone to go into their classrooms before I slipped into the elevator. Self-stigmatization. If a guy saw me and asked what I was doing taking the cripple's elevator (kids are cruel)—because they all saw me playing basketball and other ball games at lunch and recess—I would make up a story (lie).

I got along with pretty much everyone in the neighborhood, a skill that would eventually help get me through some of life's biggest challenges. Luckily I was born in the Chinese year of the chameleon.

I grew up playing sports on neighborhood streets every day and was able to do more than my doctor advised. The rules for street games weren't set like in Little League. The guys would have to renegotiate the rules and boundaries every day. One day, first base was the black Chevy, second base was the old Fairlane, and third base was the blue Caddy. We debated every little disagreement but not for long. We wanted to get on with the game.

Whatever game we were playing became the most important thing in our otherwise dull lives. Physical exertion and competition made us feel more alive than any homework assignment or family chore. We knew our dream game would be cut short when someone's mother called them in for dinner, or the darkening sky would call the game.

The first time I needed emergency medical attention was at age 10 in Rockaway Beach, a neighborhood in Queens, New York. Almost dying in Rockaway Beach prior to puberty is a depressing and enervating concept, especially for someone whose entire life consisted of just one decade.

The cast of characters leading up to my potential last gasp consisted of Mom, Brother Bruce and the relatives we were visiting on December 25 to celebrate the birth of that famous Jewish stuntman who is probably rolling over in his grave because he didn't get credit for teaching Houdini everything he knew. Uncle Larry, Jewish, married Mary, Catholic and very Italian. Aunt Molly, the spinster, was there too. So were Larry and Mary's two sons, both real rednecks.

Much like the Three Wise Men arriving at the manger, we three managed to make it to Rockaway Beach, with Mom and Brother Bruce carrying the gifts. I arrived with a deadly cat allergy—a "gift" I would have gladly returned with no refund. Italian Aunt Mary and Uncle Larry had two cats. I don't remember their names, but I will always think of them as Sacco and Vanzetti. Except these little fuckers were guilty.

I'm sure my aunt and uncle didn't acquire them with nephew-murder in mind, but as we sat down to an authentic Italian feast, my breathing became somewhat labored, short and difficult.

Wheezing is what it's called. Mine was louder than a cat's purring.

Not one to draw attention to myself, I refrained from mentioning my lack of oxygen for as long as possible, until I was compelled to rasp out, "Mom, I'm having an asthma attack."



It's Howdy Doody Time

"Relax," she whispered to me, "just try to get through dinner."

By now, my wheeze was quite audible, and they all probably heard me, even if their gazes never lifted from the authentic homemade lasagna on their plates. "Relax," Mom said. Relax my ass. I wasn't having a fucking anxiety attack. I was having a cat-dander-provoked major asthma attack.

Not a hard time breathing. Not breathing.

Mom didn't want to be embarrassed by her little Lee, not after being so embarrassed losing her husband 10 years before. After all, hadn't we taken the train from Philly to New York, the subway all the way from Penn Station to Far Rockaway, and hadn't our relatives bestowed upon us a duffle bag full of Christmas gifts?

Ironically, the gift I most needed was a new pair of lungs, but I wasn't holding my breath.

I told her again, which wasn't necessary because my wheezing was now louder than the Mario Lanza album on the Victrola. Eventually, I was given the only ingestible remedy at that time: a noxious slime of liquid. Aminophylline in a vulgartasting pink colloidal cocktail. The taste always made me gag and occasionally, throw up. An even more unpleasant intervention was my mother giving me Aminophylline

suppositories. To this day, that's why I'm only comfortable with fingers in my ass and never cocks or dildos.

I kept the vile medicine down and was taken to my Aunt Molly's apartment nearby to wait for the wheezing to diminish. All through the night, I had to sit up and fight for every breath. In retrospect, I think that if someone, such as a loving family member, had gently rubbed my back and put their warm soothing hands on my shoulders, the breathing would have calmed down.

Such was not the case. Swedish massage or the laying on of hands were not among my family's established healing practices. Many Jewish families don't touch. For the Hassidic, they are afraid a woman might be on the menstruation cloth, and a man might have Hep C. This is perhaps a cultural trait. Indians put their hands together and say *namaste*. The Japanese don't shake hands. They bow to your aura. They just ignore it altogether.

Mom and Aunt Molly waited till sunrise to make an emergency call to Molly's general practitioner because no one should bother a doctor in the middle of the night. Arriving in his obligatory Buick, black bag in hand, the good doctor whipped out his somewhat sterilized reusable syringe, filled it with adrenaline, and poked it into my arm.

I'm sure it hurt, but I was too busy struggling for my next shallow breath to notice the pain. Within minutes, I was out of danger and suddenly aware of the three facts leading to one unasked question. The three facts: (1) the black-and-white television was on; (2) I was very hungry; and (3) I could breathe again. The unspoken question: "Why the hell didn't any of you take me to the emergency room?" I think I knew the answer. It was bad enough to bother a doctor in the evening and even worse to inconvenience an entire hospital.

Asthma was my constant companion. I was 10 when Brother Bruce had his Bar Mitzvah. Mom wanted to make sure Brother Bruce and I knew how to dance for the occasion, so she hired a very attractive, tall, buxom instructress to teach her little men to cha-cha. I think the big hit at that time was *Moon River* by Henry Mancini.

Brother Bruce and his face stood exactly chest high to the big-breasted dance teacher. It was in that well-cushioned environment that he experienced the reality of erections. Weeks later, when he finally intoned, "Today I am a man," it was true with intention, if not in consummation. I made it through the Bar Mitzvah and the chacha sessions without becoming breathless—a glorious accomplishment in those days.

Not breathing is also exceptionally inconvenient and potentially life threatening. Oxygen deprivation is known to cause irreparable brain damage and can lead to erratic and bizarre behavior. I am still capable of both with a perfectly healthy brain.

A few years later, while playing touch football in the street, I had to quit the game because I was having an asthma attack. My brother got pissed off because the game had to stop until a new player showed up. What Brother Bruce didn't know was that wheezing might be hellish and scary, but I really didn't want to take that truly vile pink shit, the Aminophylline, with its ammoniacal odor and a bitter taste.

Shortly thereafter, a miracle of modern medicine occurred. Our family physician, Dr. Doodies, made a house call to see about the heavy wheezing. Sitting next to me on the sofa, he reached into his black bag like a magician with his hat. Instead of pulling out a live rabbit, he pulled out one of the first albuterol asthma rescue inhalers in America.

My life changed forever when my doctor gave me that inhaler.

"Hold it in your hand and press here and breath in, then do it once more," he said with the confidence of a confidence man.

I pressed it in and breathed in as deeply as I could and then did it again. Thirty seconds later, I wanted to get back into the game—the game of football and the game of life. The attack stopped on a dime. It was a miracle. It saved my life, many times, and gave me a mobility I would have never had if I needed to be rushed to a hospital for every difficult bout of wheezing. However, as I was perpetually abusing myself with pot and coke, the Ventolin inhaler didn't always work. As it is, I have been 911'ed and ambulance driven to ERs about a dozen times in my life. After all, take away someone's breath and what do you have? A corpse.

I can easily sum up my youth. Defects of the heart, problems of the lungs. That sentence fragment, although grammatically incorrect, is absolutely true in characterizing my life. It wasn't until a little later that compulsive gambling became my favorite problem.

#

Growing up my home routine was just that—very routine. Every day, Mom went to work, and I went to school. After school, I was alone for a few hours, and if I couldn't find a ball game to join, I would set fires, steal things, shoot sparrows in the backyard with my dead father's .22 single shot Remington rifle, hang out at Cooper's (the corner candy store) or watch TV. The shrinks call that acting out. I called it solving loneliness, boredom and existential angst.

When I was 12, I was addicted to Classics Illustrated comic books, such as *Moby Dick, Treasure Island*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and they were my constant companions. While Mom thought I was sleeping in the next room, I was actually counting Robinson Crusoe's footprints in the sand or wondering whether Captain Nemo was still 20,000 leagues under the sea.

My favorite day was Tuesday, not for the television shows that were airing but because that's when the *TV Guide* came in the mail. It was like receiving a new lease on life every week. Other people's lives to watch every day. My life was focused on TV, what was on, and what was on next. I would underline (no highlighters back then) all the shows I didn't want to miss, like an executive whose entire life is chiseled in their day planner. The *TV Guide* listed all the TV shows I wanted to watch and couldn't live without.

On cold winter afternoons, *The Three Stooges*, *Boris and Natasha*, and *Sally Starr* were my only companions. One day, many years later, I turned on the TV and had a neurobiological revelation. Just as the TV was starting up, making its usual crackling sounds, I could feel my brain turning off, see my brain cells dimming, shutting down thoughts and feelings, suddenly stuck in time, like in suspended animation.



My First Love

Looking back, I realize that every time I came home to an empty house after school and turned on the television, it helped assuage my burgeoning youthful existential angst. I didn't feel so alone. Of course, all these shows were interrupted every 10 minutes by commercials. Childhood brainwashing. In 2013, children saw an average of 40,000 commercials a year, and many more if you include the Internet and social media. If you see enough advertisements, you eventually stop existing as an original human being. You are now no longer you. Now, I try not to have the TV on. My fear was that, when I die, it won't be my life passing before my eyes but Jerry Seinfield's.

In 1965, when I was 14, my mother took me to the Locust Street Theatre (on Locust Street) for a matinee performance of *The Roar of the Greasepaint—The Smell of the Crowd*, by Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse. Much of the cast was my age, except for the leads.

This singular stage show helped me to understand love, politics, hope, oppression, war and nonviolence all in one afternoon. At 14, I was just waking up to politics. John Kennedy was offed just the year before. I agreed with Dallas D.A. Jim Garrison and didn't think the assassination was just the efforts of a lone lunatic with the best aim ever. The show's dramatically powerful portrayal in music was one of

those magical experiences I have not forgotten to this day. Resembling a music hall production more than a sitcom-style musical, the plot examines the maintenance of the status quo between the upper and lower classes of British society in the 1960s. My 10-second summary boils down to this: The play is about the tension and class disparity between two characters—a rich man and a pauper, Sir and Cocky, the oppressor and the oppressed. It was an allegorical plot with characters named for who and what they are; Sally Smith played the Kid, the Girl was played by Joyce Jillson, the Negro was Gilbert Price, where he introduced the world to the classic of classic songs, Feeling Good, recorded by dozens of artists but made most famous by Nina Simone.

When I realized that Anthony Newley wrote the show, composed the music, and lyrics (with Leslie Bricusse), directed the production, sang, danced and acted in it, my admiration for him was set forever. Years later, my friend Jesse Jones worked for Mr. Newley as his personal concierge. Jesse told me that after Newley's divorce from Joan Collins (yes, the Joan Collins of film, TV and theater fame), his entire tour entourage consisted of only one person—his mother. This, I could relate to. Jesse also assured me that Mr. Newley was the sweet and classy gentleman I imagined him to be. This brilliant artist and perfect gentleman died on April 14, 1999.

All of the shows that I had seen before had many set changes. When I realized the set of *The Roar of the Greasepaint, The Smell of the Crowd* was not going to change, I was focused on every aspect of the production. Anthony Newley, Cyril Richard, and Gilbert Price gave performances that blew my 14-year-old mind. The memory remains so fresh that listening to the original cast recording still moves me to tears.

I had the pleasure of introducing my son Ben to the score by playing "A Wonderful Day Like Today" on many mornings before school. Once I came home to find Ben listening to the CD on his own. I was proud and happy that I could pass something on to him that meant so much to me. And I don't even think he was getting high yet. And he wasn't going gay. If I had caught him listening to "Cabaret" or "Funny Girl," I may have thought otherwise.

In sixth grade, my homeroom teacher, Mrs. Forman, brought in a record player one day and put on "In the Hall of the Mountain King," from the *Peer Gynt Suite*. I was moved in a way that Sinatra (the most listened-to artist at home) never did move me. I could feel dormant parts of my little brain start to come alive. I also felt my heart skip a beat, in a good way. My teacher told us about a place called Norway. Never heard that word as Mom didn't sit around the dinner table discussing Scandinavia. I ended up loving Björk.

Mrs. Forman put on "Morning Mood" from the same suite. I needed to hide my face because I didn't want my girlfriend, Jeanette Jekel, to see me cry. Hearing the two superb musical masterpieces exposed me to the alpha and omega of emotions that classical music inspires. (Facebook being what it is, I sent this chapter to an old friend from the same elementary school I attended to see if she had similar memories of Mrs. Forman's class. She sent back this note. I will let it speak for itself: "I hope you include in your memoir that Arlene Marinoff sat behind you in sixth grade and scratched your back with a ruler in exchange for pictures of Ben Casey and Dr. Kildare that your mom got from Perfect Photo. I would have done it for free as I had a crush on you. You were adorable.")

A similar experience happened 10 years later, in 1969. I was with Brother Bruce, in his Opel Kadett, a fairly nondescript vehicle. It takes some living to know what kind of car you should be wearing. For years I drove a Volvo. The automobile most favored by pot dealers. Big trunk, low profile. No cop ever stopped a professor in his Volvo mistaking him for a pimp or drug dealer.

Brother Bruce and I decided to use the East River Drive to get home. We were cruising along the Schuylkill River when Brother Bruce turned on Temple University's full-time jazz station, WRTI. What was about to happen in that Opel Kadett was anything but nondescript. The song that came on was like a psalm, a chant, a prayer, a beseeching voice, like a shot of caffeine that percolated into a frightening cacophony. We drove home in silence and sobs for exactly 37 minutes, until we parked in front of our row house on 10th Street. The music? It was "The Creator Has a Master Plan" by Pharoah Sanders and vocals by Leon Thomas. You

probably think I was high? No shit. I was high every single day of my life from the age of 18 to 44. But the piece sounds as good today sober as it did 50 years ago. I'm listening to it right now, not high, not stoned, just in tears. It's about the horrors of slavery . . . freedom and enlightenment.

Years later I would often see Mr. Sanders hanging out in various jazz clubs around San Francisco. It was like having royalty in the room. His countenance was truly regal. It was as if on that afternoon in 1969, God came down and gave unto me the world of jazz, a world that makes life worth living. Although really good jazz makes you feel as if you might be dying.

Before music CDs, we collected vinyl discs. There were 45 rpm (revolutions per minute) singles, and 33 1/3 rpm long-playing albums—LP for short. I ordered my first 33 1/3 rpm record player when Columbia House advertised a very special offer in a magazine: a real stereo, long-playing record machine with detachable, extendible speakers, plus six "free albums," for only \$14.99.

Being a bit flippant, I ordered it without asking Mother whether it was okay, because she was after all going to get the bill when the stereo arrived. Which reminds me of a story told by Marie-Louise von Franz sometime in the '80s, a story that has guided me all through my life ever since. She tells about a friend on the subway platform in Prague, looking down and seeing a lot of cigarette butts. Feeling like lighting up herself, the woman asks the nearby station master if it's okay to smoke there. The station master responds very emphatically, "No, it is VERBOTEN."

"What about all these butts?"

"They didn't ask."

So I got an Andy Williams LP, some Frank Sinatra (we share a birthday, 12/12), and the Dave Brubeck Quartet's *Time Out*, which included the jazz standard "Take Five." Also, the life-changing *Judy at Carnegie Hall*. Maybe I was gay after all. (Not that there's anything wrong with that! Thank you, Jerry Seinfeld.)

Soon after I received the LPs, I traded *The Andy Williams Christmas Album* for an LP by someone named Bob Dylan. Brother Bruce got very angry because he had never heard of Bob Dylan, and he loved *The Andy Williams Show*. Then Brother

Bruce smokes his first joint while listening to the Dylan LP. Moved to such intense emotions never felt before, Brother Bruce went into the basement and masturbated.

If Mr. Dylan (a.k.a. Robert Zimmerman) reads this, I hope he takes Brother Bruce's response as a compliment. Lord only knows how Brother Bruce handled himself after accepting Dylan as the troubadour of our generation.

#

I don't ever remember doing any homework on my own volition. I did as little homework as possible, just enough to get C's. That's because A's didn't matter much to my mother. She was more concerned with me being street smart than school smart, like she was.

At the end of a long day at work, Mom would come home and prepare dinner. She had a very special way of lifting the foil off the Swanson TV dinners. We ended the evening watching TV and eating Breyers vanilla fudge ice cream. In fact, I had a horrible sugar habit. (It's only a moderate problem now.) I would buy cases of Coca-Cola with my own money and drink up to six small bottles a day. They were only a little more than a dime each. Sugar. The cheapest antidepressant on the planet.

I was one of the only kids in the neighborhood with a charge account to go into the corner grocery store and get whatever I needed—or wanted. I could also do that at Jack Parrish, a classy men's apparel store. I never abused the privilege. I knew we only had the money my mother earned at Perfect Photo, a photo-finishing plant, where I got my first job in the eighth grade. Looking back, I'm sure my strong independent decision-making powers came from those shopping experiences without Mom.

When Mom sent my brother (age seven) to boarding school, I felt like an only child. Really, I was a lonely child. Brother Bruce would come home for the weekend every Saturday morning. I would be waiting for his bus at the corner, unless he called to tell us he was in trouble at school and not allowed his weekend pass. Sadly, that happened a lot.

When the Number 75 bus rolled down the street, my anticipation would be gleeful or painful. Because when the door swung open, Brother Bruce wasn't always

on the bus. So, I would wait, almost in a trance, another 20 minutes for the next one. When he finally arrived, the weekend began, like the beginning of a great buddy movie. That's how I learned to love waiting. The anticipation was so delicious I was in heaven, not thinking about anything mundane, knowing my Jesus had arrived again.

We would play sports, fight with each other, pal around, and go to the movies. On Sundays, the bus that delivered him would take him away.

When Brother Bruce wasn't visiting or on the 75 bus, he was at a boarding school/orphanage called Girard College. Founded in 1833 and opened on January 1, 1848, Girard College was created by provisions in the will of Stephen Girard, the fourth richest man in America at that time. He saved the U.S. government from financial collapse (loan shark?) during the war of 1812. He also envisioned a school for "fatherless and poor white boys." Yep, that was the Buschel boys.

Girard wanted to educate boys who might otherwise be lost, whose mothers would be forced into prostitution or waitressing, to prepare them for useful, productive lives. I was exempt from this heartfelt act of ego-driven and racist social generosity because I had a loud heart murmur only spoken of in quiet whispers. Exempt isn't the right word. Rejected is more accurate.

They didn't want me there, and my brother didn't want me to go there. At the time, I did not know why. He later said he wanted to spare me the unpleasant (horrible) experience, which he revealed in his memoir, *Walking Broad*, 2007.

Brother Bruce advised our mother not to send me (for my own good).

It's highly likely that the officials at Girard feared that I wouldn't withstand the nightly buggering that so traumatized my elder brother. He later spent a small fortune on Freudian therapy—good money on bad memories.

Girard's painful initiations into the world of unwanted intrusions allegedly softened considerably and withdrew completely when this educational facility went coed in 1984. The anticipation of midnight rides having nothing to do with Paul Revere are, as far as we know, no longer a concern.

But I was desperate to be near my brother. And family members made Girard College sound like an excellent opportunity to get a fine education at a private school, at no cost! I did not go to that hideous place but instead hit the Oedipus jackpot. I got to stay home with Mom, watch TV, eat Breyers ice cream, and hang out at Cooper's candy store.

Still, on weekends when the fatherless boys' orphanage kept Brother Bruce grounded for some infraction and kept him from coming home for the weekend, my boredom would set in. At around 10:00 a.m. I'd start looking for something to do or for trouble to get into. One noncompetitive game I played was called step ball. Sort of the equivalent to solitaire. It wasn't a very complicated game. The player (me) would throw a rubber ball against a flight of steps and then the other player (me) would catch it in the air. Over and over and over. It was like having a catch with yourself.

One of my favorite escapes was to go to the cinema. I lived within walking distance of three movie theaters, and I was at one of them at least once a week. When I heard about Saturday matinee double features (and I could cross the street by myself), I walked there to be immersed in three hours of total stimulation and escapism.

Sometimes, a friend and I would go for the Saturday matinee and then afterward hide in the balcony playing gin rummy and parsing out Raisinets to sustain us until the evening features. We saved money by not paying another admission fee and enjoyed watching the more sophisticated films at night meant for grown-ups. Those were some of the happiest days of my life.

The correlation between happiness and cinema is forever linked in my consciousness. The first movie theaters were referred to as "dream palaces" not only for their ornate architecture but for the altered state achieved by patrons for five cents. I learned to love the movies, except the time my mom took me to see Psycho (child abuse), and it scared the crap out of me.

A mama's boy, one competition for my mother's affection had died and the other was packed off to boarding school. Father dead... brother excommunicated... and she

was all mine. For years it made me a very possessive and jealous lover. For years? Bullshit! Forever.



Bruce, Rose, Lee

HIGH FROM CANNABIS TO CLARITY

Find it on Amazon:

https://tinyurl.com/2enywvut

Find it on Barnes & Noble:

https://tinyurl.com/y7prchku

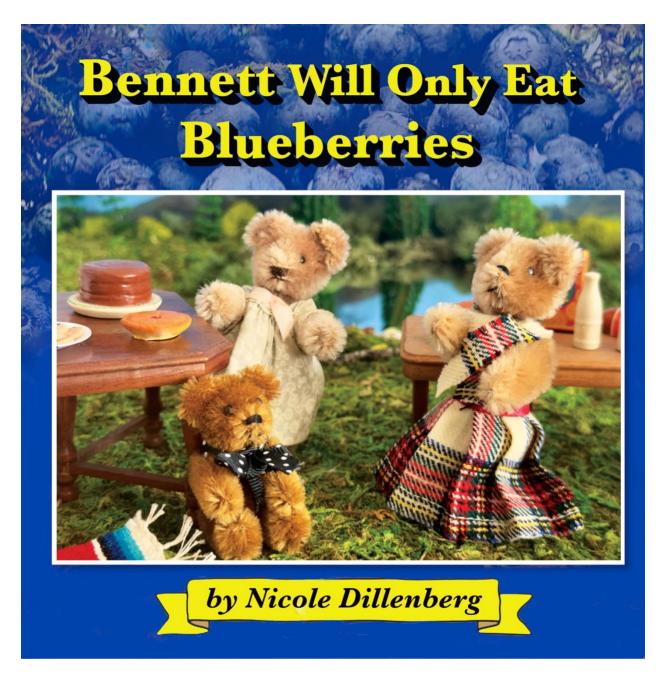
About the Author

Leonard Lee Buschel is a California Certified Substance Abuse Counselor with of years experience working people struggling with addiction. He attended Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. Mr. Buschel is the founder of Writers In Treatment, whose primary purpose is to promote "treatment" as the solution best first-step for addiction, other alcoholism and self-destructive behaviors. For fifteen years, Leonard



was director of the REEL Recovery Film Festival & Symposium, which he founded in 2008, and the editor/publisher of the weekly Addiction/Recovery eBulletin. He also produces the annual Experience, Strength and Hope Awards in Los Angeles. He's been clean and sober for over 30 years.

www.leonardbuschel.com
www.addictionrecoveryebulletin.org
www.reelrecoveryfilmfestival.org
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Buschel



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story & photos by
Nicole Dillenberg



Meet Bennett, a little bear who lives with his family in a cozy den in the bear village. One night, when his grandmother serves mashed potatoes for dinner, Bennett refuses to eat them, declaring, "I only like blueberries!" He's sent to bed with a rumbling tummy. But as he drifts off to sleep, Bennett knows that he's right to be so obstinate. After all, he only eats blueberries!

The next day, Bennett's family takes him to a fun village picnic with other bear families who join in music and games and share lots of yummy foods like salmon, bananas, and chocolate cake. But though his friends and family try to get him to try something new, Bennett is insistent-he only eats blueberries!

But there's one thing he hadn't expected—his grandmother's chocolate cake, which smells sweet and tasty. Will this finally tempt Bennett to taste something besides just blueberries?

Find out in **Bennett Will Only Eat Blueberries**, a delightful picture book for children ages 2 to 6.







Oma Rose had just served Bennett a steaming bowl of mashed potatoes, with melted butter on top.



"Blueberries won't grow until Summertime," said his Papa, Ezra.



"I only like blueberries!" declared the bear.



"Hmmpf!" snorted the little cub. He sulked in his chair.



about Bennett...

"Bennett the Bear came into existence when I was missing my grandmother and the miniature bears we collected long ago. The bears were willing to be photographed, so I began to create dioramas of their adventures. Bennett is a rising star within this fine family of bears."

- Nicole Dillenberg



Also available in a Spanish language edition!

BENNETT WILL ONLY EAT BLUEBERRIES

Find it on Amazon:

https://tinyurl.com/mr22frha

Find it on Barnes & Noble:

https://tinyurl.com/2hpxe2e9

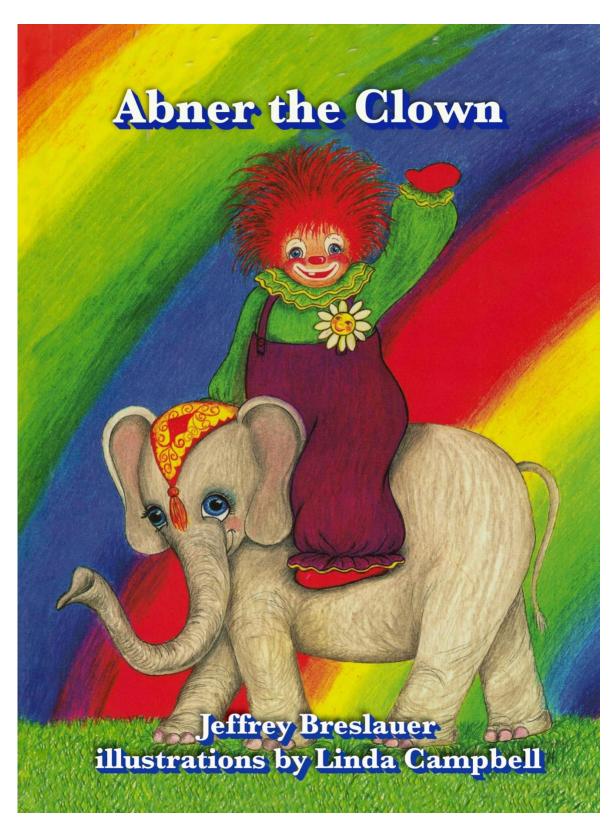
BENNETT SOLO COMERA ARANDANOS

Find it on Amazon:

https://tinyurl.com/cw2pckyx

Find it on Barnes & Noble:

https://tinyurl.com/42sbdhta



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Abner the Clown

Jeffrey Breslauer



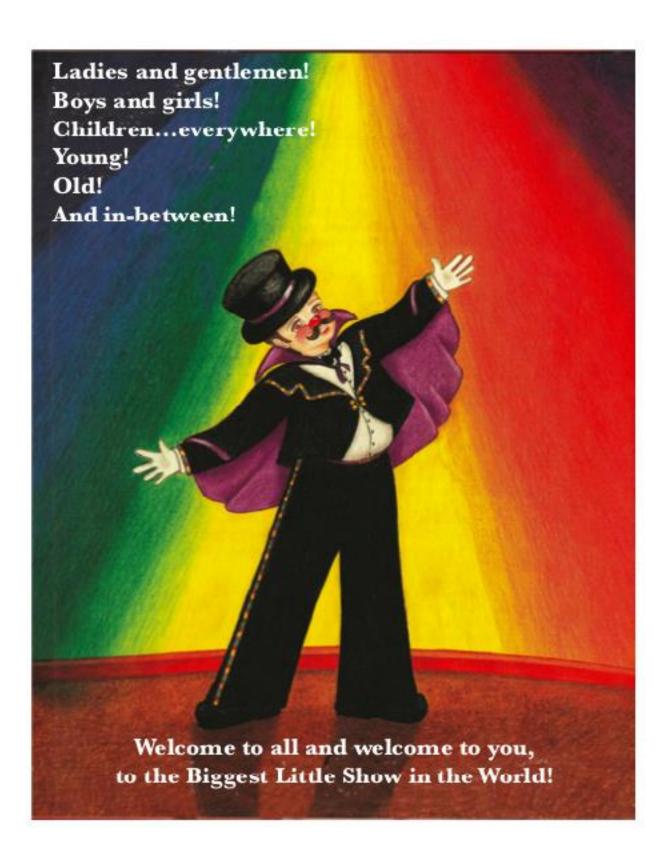
Abner, a young clown, does not like his name.

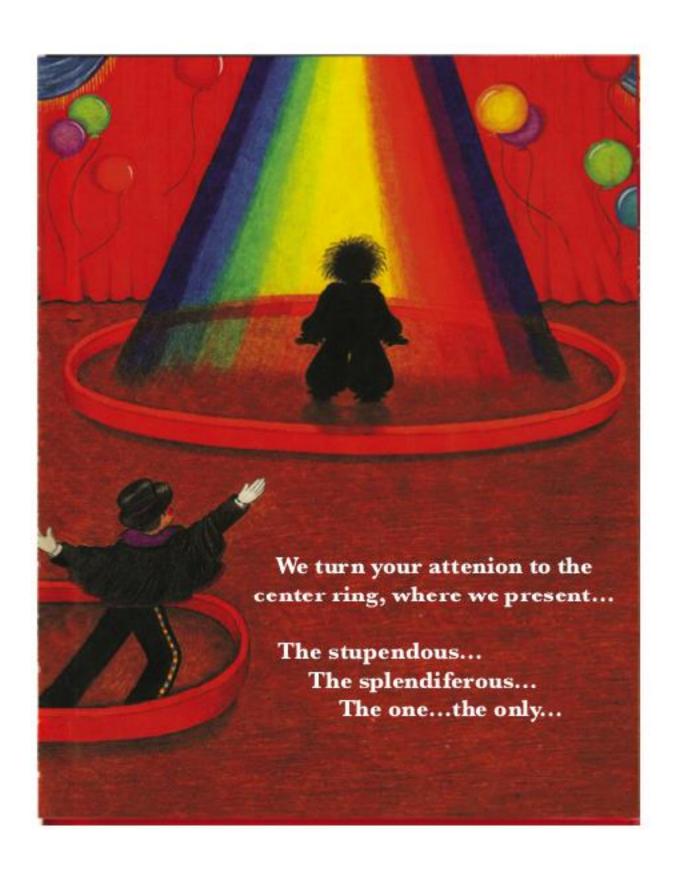
It's not as flashy as other clown names, like Zany or Fizzy or Chuckles or Cricket.

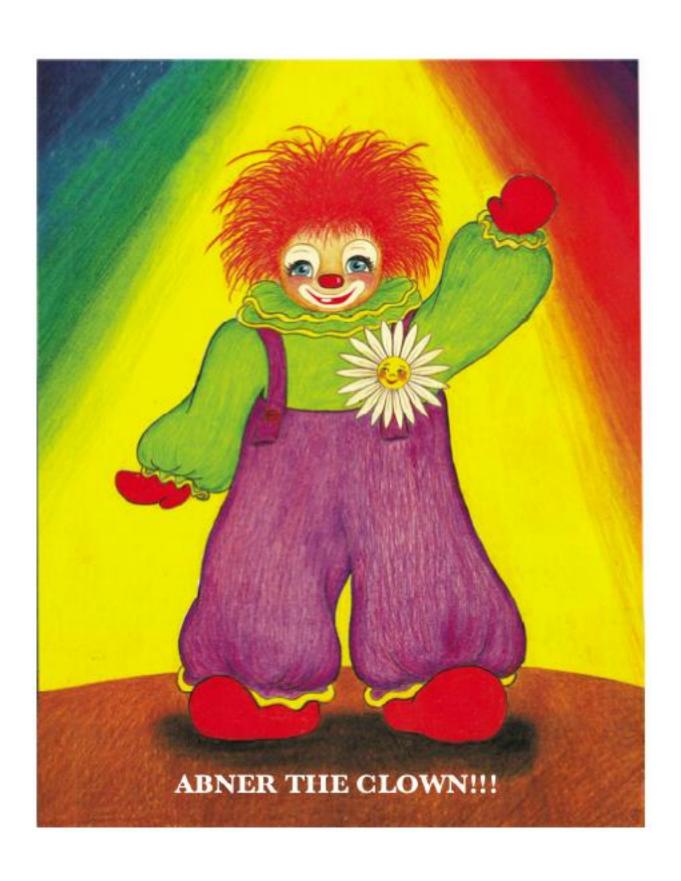
Having such an awkward name makes him feel sad, until the other clowns come together to throw a party called "Abner Day" to show him they love him for being himself, and that they would all be proud to be called Abner.

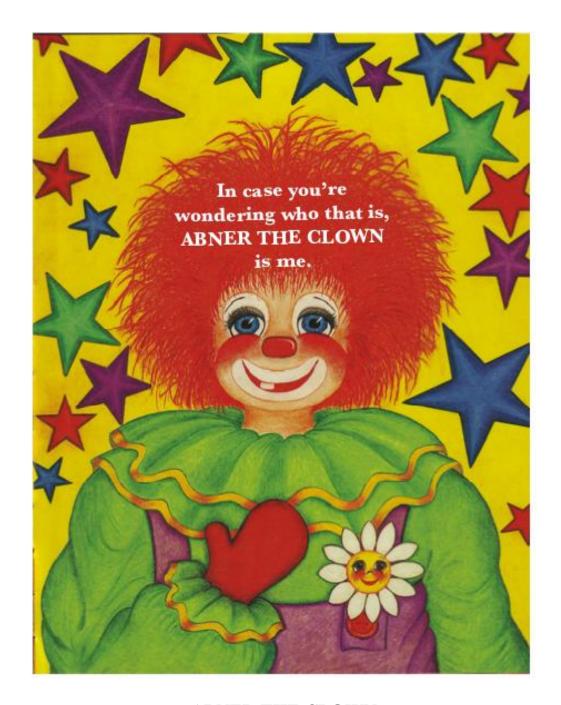
Written in rhyme by performer/puppeteer Jeffrey Breslauer, with full-color illustrations by Linda Campbell, Abner the Clown is a heartwarming story of friendship and acceptance, including acceptance of self, for young children.











ABNER THE CLOWN

Find it on Amazon:

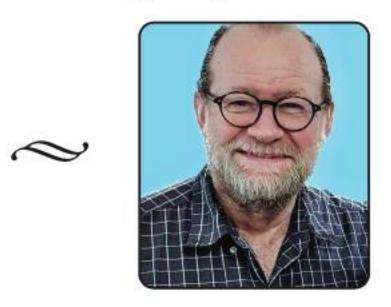
https://tinyurl.com/4tds4ff7

Find it on Barnes & Noble:

https://tinyurl.com/4bz2s8ru

about the author

Jeffrey Breslauer





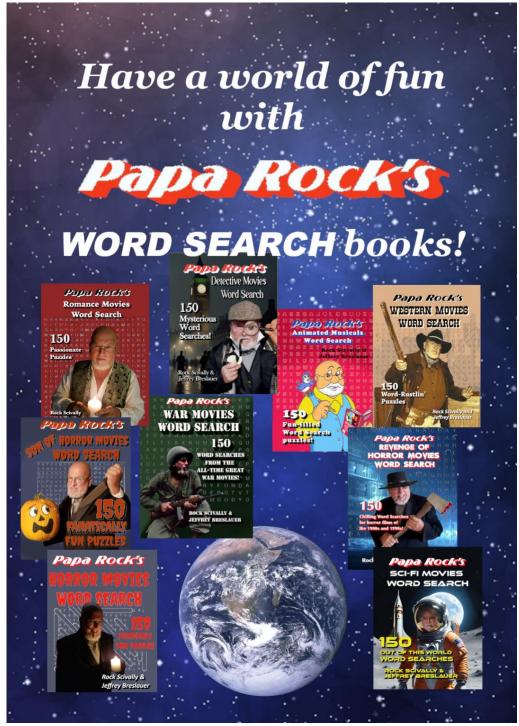
Jeffrey Breslauer began his career in New York with a Broadcasting degree from Hofstra University. He is a professional actor, writer, puppeteer and voice-over artist.

His voices are heard in various venues, from a termite on a radio commercial to The Joker in the Batman Stunt Shows at Six Flags. Jeff created voices for the audiobook versions of Glenda Finkelstein's sci-fi novels, *The Edge of the Universe* and *Nemesis Rising*, as well as Chris Jackson's sci-fi comedies, *Cheese Runners*, *Cheese Rustlers*, and *Cheese Lords*. He also created several voices for the Podcast production of Steven Kobrin's *The Picture of Lana MacKenzie*.

His puppeteering roles include *The Muppets Take Manhattan, The Muppets at Walt Disney World*, and the Spider mascot for Scholastic's video series of *Math Place Programs* for grades one and two. He also portrayed The Dreamfinder, manipulating Figment, the little purple dragon at EPCOT.

In addition to acting on stage in such plays as *Breaking Legs* with Frank Gorshin (TV's Riddler on the 1960s *Batman* TV show), Jeff's on-screen work includes *Superboy, Swamp Thing, Trade-Off, Matinee, Recount, From the Earth to the Moon,* and *Police Academy 5*.

Jeffrey currently lives in California.



Papa Rock's WORD SEARCH BOOKS by Rock Scivally & Jeffrey Breslauer

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Papa Rock's Horror Movies WORD SEARCH

122. INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE (1994)

K D O N T B E A F R A I D J I M K I R S T E N D U N S T J K L O S A N F R A N C I S C O O B O R P N U M O C D Z S U X Z U Y N T Y E B V A U L L S T M R R Q G A L W J N B R R A O D G Y N I E L Y O L F E X K F U U W J A N D S B R A D P I T T O D I R L T F T K L Y F G Z W G G G I S I E O U D E Q W T L K D K Y N A S R R R L A I O O Z E B M S X Y T V D N Q N P W K Y A S F M E G C I E E V S K X Z U H O T M T T Z E A D T O M C R U I S E A G J X W T F C W Z D T G Z H Q R T H G Y H T E Q G S T I L W H I N I N G S

Brad Pitt
Louis
Tom Cruise
Lestat
Kirsten Dunst
Claudia
San Francisco

Journalist
Interview
New Orleans
Mortals turned
"Don't be afraid"
"Still whining..."
"...I longed for death"

Papa Rock's ROMANCE MOVIES WORD SEARCH

114. Dirty Dancing (1987)

TIMEOFMYLIFEMTRRN TNKNDDTLL HAJOIVMGJ OKMLISMPYA NZBYFSLRRL TFOANI EGBMHUATECANUECAL NURQVSKSTJKMYSROMDTW GXDQEOIEHSDCA TAKAACJI H M W T A T R N E REIACNOEGJAYS ULHJTAMVAMYNT TRUKPPZL RTHEFOUNTAINHEADS TWZPCQBJERRYORBACHKI PUTYOURHEELDOWNE

abortion
Baby Houseman
"...baby in a corner"
Catskills resort
dance instructor
"Don't put your heel down"
false accusation
Frances Hoffman
"...gotta hold the frame"
"I carried a watermelon"

Ivy League
Jennifer Grey
Jerry Orbach
Johnny Castle
Kellerman's Resort
Patrick Swayze
"She's like the wind"
"Spaghetti arms"
The Fountainhead
"The Time of My Life"

Papa Rock's <u>WESTERN MOVIES</u> WORD SEARCH

146. TOMBSTONE (1993)

C D O C H O L L I D A Y Q Z L Q
E V F J U V A L K I L M E R D D
P D M W N T O M B S T O N E P U
U K B S A M E L L I O T T O C E
O M O R G A N K I L E D A L S
R P G J W C S X B B N B P L Y A
T C U R L Y B I L L H W E T S S
E Z P S R W A D X F I S U N Q S
R E Q Y E H Y T K S S G O X P A
T G V O D J L D T U R T W B C S
A P L B S G O H R E N X Q B Z S
E F B W A C N T G A A M T X B I
H Q C O S Q R V L V R R I A B N
T K N C H U L C E G V C P S I S
J P J J K J O H N N Y R I N G O
I J S A W N T P X S F Q G Y M U

Kurt Russell Val Kilmer Sam Elliott Wyatt Earp Doc Holliday Cowboys Curly Bill Clantons
theatre troupe
red sash
Morgan killed
Tombstone
assassins
Johnny Ringo

Papa Rock's ANIMATED MUSICALS WORD SEARCH

7. Bambi (1942)

PHLOVEISASONGPUA TAHUQSUYQB UZWJRTVCRE REUAHRE WPHDDZQMWPTHUM SEAOBOQAWE CSBY FYRUPYUVRT BLQZP TQXI JZZFLOGLARE Y S V QDCHLE ZKNTHUMPE R O DRUNNI NGWE ZJNSLI PSONICEE ZPAORCKJKUZTKRNV

Bambi
Thumper
Flower
Great Prince
Friend Owl
possums
slips on ice

mother's death
April shower
forest fire
"...twitterpated"
"I'm thumpin"
"Keep running!"
"Love Is A Song"

Papa Rock's WAR MOVIES WORD SEARCH

74. THE GREAT ESCAPE (1963)

F Z T N B K H E N D L E Y T X I G K H O J F E N B O A T S U C R H Y I S Y T S E Z U C K H N W E M F L N S P C E Z H L Q Q N S N T N T O N Q A U G L L I Y E R R S I S R I M P Q R N K R N L E A M J O B A E E C A O M A L D W G O M L S R L A M L T L I N I O S T N M E T L R E L P P W P R T E O T Q L S L T V I B M M K T A M R B T R X P I E E J B O F K D A C X D A F H S T D B D A N N Y J Y F M H C X T S P U M G T Q C T C U Y C X N S R O B C K K S O D L Z M Z H A L Z W M O I Q G O J E P P O U Z H N S P G P H W L W

Steve McQueen
Hilts
James Garner
Hendley
Charles Bronson
Danny
Allied POWs

Escape artists
Tunnel dirt
Planes
Trains
Boats
Towers
Motorcycle

Papa Rock's SCI-FI MOVIES WORD SEARCH

84. Star Trek: The Motion Picture (1979)

P T U K I T H E Y G A V E H E R E J I G M U H R M M J D W T B U R B F J R S S E O U O V B V V G S Y A X G S F N E W N E X C G U I O F C F E T T E B A C L A W O S M B P K N W A R M C A V R U Y K I E E A T V H N I L P N R L D H N P G A E O S J F U T G H F E A D R H I R R M W Z V K O A Z E M R O D L P Y A E O M I I N N N N B A B Y I R A I G S Z R P I K I A N E L O I J L R Z C K W L G S T O S X S S I L Y R G O T O Q E T E U X Z E R I Y V N W T K Q N A L S P O C K W S S I O H T H O V G E R M U S T E V O L V E Y B

William Shatner Capt. Kirk Leonard Nimoy Spock Persis Khamba<a Ilia probe Kolinahr
Vulcan
USS Enterprise
"They gave her..."
"...back to me, Scotty!"
"Bones...I need you!"
"V-Ger must evolve"

Papa Rock's DETECTIVE MOVIES WORD SEARCH

105. Chinatown (1974)

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Jack Nicholson J.J. Gittes Faye Dunaway Evelyn Mulwray John Huston Noah Cross Los Angeles drought
new dam
cut nose
"She's my sister!"
"She's my daughter!"
"Forget it, Jake..."
"...it's Chinatown"

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



JEFF 'ROCK' SCIVALLY is a talented musician, artist, performer, raconteur, designer, and Jack-of-all-trades who spends his days finding creative solutions for unusual conundrums. And now, he presents conundrums for others to solve. His Papa Rock's Word Search book series debuted with Papa Rock's Horror Movies Word Search, which was soon followed up by two other horror volumes, Romance Movies Word Search, Western Movies Word Search, War Movies Word Search, and now this present volume. He lives in Plevna, Alabama surrounded by grand-young'uns who know him as PAPA ROCK.

JEFFREY BRESLAUER is an actor, writer, voice artist and puppeteer. He played "The Dreamfinder" in EPCOT's Journey Into Imagination exhibit, voiced and manipu-lated the Spider mascot for Scholastic Publishers' Math Place video series, is the voice of the Joker in the Batman ride at Six Flags Amusement Parks, and has appeared on stage with Frank Gorshin and on movie and TV screens in Police Academy V. Matinee, Wiseguy, Superboy, Swamp Thing, From the Earth to the Moon, and others. He's also the author of the children's book Abner the Clown, and now, puzzle master for Papa Rock's Word Search books!

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